

Mary Was a Lay Woman Who Lived in Community

by Carol P. Ramey

Summary

This paper addresses three components of Marianist spirituality: empowerment of the laity, Mary, and community. The historical relevance of the establishment of lay groups in Bordeaux is compared in two major biographies of Father Chaminade, and the characteristics of the early communities are presented as a model for today's Church. Mary is described as a person who teaches us pondering, hopefulness, and compassion—stances we assume as we join in her mission to bring Christ to the world. Some troubling aspects of how community is lived in Marianist circles in North America are considered.

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1. Introduction

Marianist spirituality holds, at its core, the fact that Christ was born of Mary. God entered the world as one of us through an intimate relationship with Mary. God continues to be in the world through intimate relationships. We are brothers and sisters of Christ; we are sons and daughters of Mary, and we journey to union with God by paying close attention to and replicating the relationship between Jesus and Mary. The journey to God through Mary is the type of journey we choose; it is not the only way to make the journey, of course. Some criticize that it is not the most direct journey, but it is the journey that beckons us. It is a journey we have confidence in, even though it is still in progress; the map for the journey changes a bit in different times and cultures, and the destination is only promised us.

Four goals for the Symposium have been set out for us:

- * to describe our personal synthesis of the classical elements of Marianist spirituality in our lives,
- * to compare and contrast the Marianist worldview with contemporary spiritualities,
- * to notice the adaptations that are made because of cultural context, and
- * to speculate on how the wisdom of the charism will be taken up by the Church and the world.

In short, what's the journey looking like these days? How's the walk down the various roads going? Can we undertake this journey in new ways? (Maybe we're carrying too much baggage, or not the appropriate baggage to the section of the journey we're now on!)

A formidable task, indeed, for a paper. A friend has counseled me that those goals are the goals of the Symposium; the papers are to “prime the pump.” So here's my turn at the pump!

2. A Personal Synthesis

My life, my spiritual life, has been influenced and formed by many things: my family and my Catholic education, experiences in prayer, life in community, exposure to persons or movements that inspired, Scripture. I have convictions and commitments that my spirituality sustains; I have convictions and commitments that my spirituality challenges. To say how the classical elements of Marianist spirituality interweave with all the other influences is a complex charge. I can only choose certain components and tell some stories that will hopefully exemplify the synthesis.

The most important elements of Marianist spirituality in my life are Mary, community, and empowerment of the laity.

Those elements were what first attracted me to the Sodality at the University of Dayton; they are the elements that drew me to take a vow to live within the Marianist Family; they are the elements that, as I look at the Marianist enterprise today, remain gifts of the Spirit to our world, to our Church.

3. Empowering the Laity

Father Chaminade first started lay groups. Upon returning to France after his exile, he accepted only those roles in the church's bureaucracy that permitted him to develop Sodalities. His writings indicate to us that he wanted to reproduce the earliest Christian communities, where faith, hope, charity, and apostolic zeal were bountiful. He knew France was a drastically altered place because of the Revolution, and that the indifference that resided in most hearts could not be overcome by the piety or practices of the past, so, he discarded rebuilding the Church by resurrecting old structures. The “people” now valued equality, liberty, and fraternity, and the “people” had shown their power to change society. He wanted to reject the rationalism and terrorism of the Revolution, but he could not pretend nothing had happened. *Nova bella...*

Debate goes on over whether the lay groups were simply a means to an end; I've heard persons say religious institutes founded under Mary's banner were Chaminade's real inspiration during his hours at the Pillar in Saragossa. Others posit that he was a discerning pragmatist; that once lay groups were founded, he saw the need for a “director who would never die,” and he knew he must respond to those persons who would be called to religious life because of their experience in the Sodalities. In reading two biographies of Chaminade, *William Joseph Chaminade: Founder of the Marianists* by Father Joseph Simler, SM, and *Chaminade: Another Portrait* by

Father Vincent R. Vasey, SM, I find each promoting different stances. Father Simler, who lived at a time that lay branches of the Marianist Family did not exist, is unequivocal.

Providence prepared him [Father Chaminade] by a mysterious call at Saragossa, urging him to work not only at the revival of faith in his own country, but also at the restoration of the monastic institution. His ultimate mission was to train religious.¹

And in another passage, Simler states:

For Father Chaminade the religious life was the embodiment of “complete Christianity, the hidden treasure one finds on leaving all and purchased by holding back nothing for oneself.” He knew that this type of commitment was indispensable to the life of the Church so that the Gospel might be implemented in its integrity. He was convinced that the reestablishment of religious Orders was of prime importance to the vitality of France as it emerged from the ravages of the Revolution. One of Chaminade's disciples observed, “He believed that Christianity would take root again in France only after the religious Orders were restored. For him the context of the religious profession provided the optimal conditions for the practice of Christian virtues....”²

Father Vasey cites many examples from Chaminade's writings and actions to demonstrate his interest in and commitment to religious life, but Vasey also entertains the notion that the lay groups were valid in and of themselves, not just as seedbeds for vocations. In 1814, Chaminade and Adele were in communication about founding an institute of women. Vasey says:

At this moment what Adele had in mind was a religious family that would practice the counsels in common and give itself to the alleviation of physical and moral misery. Father Chaminade had in view rather the purpose of his Sodality to multiply Christians by means adapted to the times.³

Vasey does continue:

...he dreamed of continuing and extending the action of Sodalities. Such an apostolate demands a moral person, that is, religious communities, that will not die.⁴

The most compelling example of Vasey's openness to the more complex nature of Chaminade's vision comes when he describes situations that arose after Lalanne and Collineau became two of

¹ Joseph Simler, SM, *William Joseph Chaminade: Founder of the Marianists* (Dayton: Marianist Resources Commission, 1986), 318.

² Lalanne, *Notice historique*, pp. 3 and 4, quoted in Simler, 225.

³ Vincent R. Vasey, SM, *Chaminade: Another Portrait* (Dayton: Marianist Resources Commission, 1987), 142.

⁴ Ibid.

the first members of the Society. He quotes Lalanne's *Notice* to point out that the Sodality “suffered more than enough at the creation of the religious community.”⁵ And Father Vasey tells of a letter to Adele, as early as 1814, warning her of “the danger of weakening the Sodality in promoting religious life.”⁶ Chaminade says that the “inspiration to live in religious community ought to be followed, but care must be taken not to vitiate the nature of the Sodality; on the contrary, the religious community should serve the Sodality.”⁷

Vasey concludes that the deepening faith life within the Sodality would “inexorably move some to desire religious life in community,”⁸ but he does not take the position that the development of religious institutes was the primary goal, nor was its achievement to be the “crowning glory of all his other works.”⁹

Why is the issue of the historical relevance of lay communities so important to me? It is because it was the empowering of the laity and the existence of a “Church” I had only dreamed of (the mix of states in life, social classes, men and women) that first sparked my interest in Marianist spirituality. The history is fascinating to me; I think a gift for today's Church and the future Church is there in those dusty cahiers and letters written so long ago by persons most people in North America would call obscure.

My own experience with the Marianists began at the University of Dayton on the heels of Vatican II. I was studying the documents of the Council in theology class and read about “the people of God” and about the “universal call to holiness.”¹⁰ As I reflected on the documents, I believed that the laity was being called into adulthood. “We were no longer to just pray, pay, and obey.”¹¹ The laity had the right and responsibility to make spiritual decisions. The laity's influence in the evangelization of the world was recognized. Showing up to be counted at Sunday Mass and enrolling our children in the parish school weren't enough. We were pondering the whole of society: looking at the institutions and seeing how Christ would be present throughout; seeing where justice was needed and seeing how Christ would become incarnate—through us.

The unleashing of the laity was the fresh wind through the “open window” for me. I was saddened (and still am) when others saw the role of the laity as a threat. “If laity make decisions, soon they'll be challenging authority” seemed to be the greatest fear. What I wanted so desperately for the church's leaders to see is that it was not authority that was being challenged, but control. True authority comes from God—to author something is to give life. I felt, as I later articulated from comments made by Brother Thomas Giardino, SM, about Gordon Cosby's views on authority of gifts, that the Church at Vatican II was saying the laity had authority at the point of their contact with the world. We bring holiness to the world by living fully in the world.

⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Simler, 84.

¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, 39-42.

¹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, Address to Women-Church Conference, Oct. 9-11, 1987.

All that was very exciting theory. Then I met the Sodality. All I had been reading about and thinking about was being lived by these people. Here were young adults taking responsibility for the statement “we are the Church.” Here were commitment and passion for justice in the world. (Here were great parties!)

I had attended several retreats and participated in numerous social action events sponsored by the UD Sodality before anyone mentioned the name of Chaminade. But once someone put a book into my hands that described the Madeleine Sodality, I thought only the names had been changed to protect the radicals! We learned gradually of Chaminade's wisdom for organization, his respect for the power of the laity (men **and** women), his insight into how faith life is best nurtured through day-to-day association and camaraderie of community members, and his belief that the Gospel would be spread, not so much by preaching, but by the witness of vibrant, diverse communities.¹² The roots were being tapped and the nutrients from the heritage were being drawn up into the part of the living organism visible to the world (well, at least the campus). I felt Father Chaminade's vision of the Church was as relevant to the world in the late 1960s as it was to post-Revolutionary France. The Sodality became “church” for me. It was there that I felt part of the body of Christ's followers. I committed myself to an enduring relationship with it because it was the place I could be what I felt called to be—a lay woman, a disciple, an adult.

It still is “church” to me. Chaminade's vision continues to impel me because here, in the family he created, I feel able to exercise my gifts, lay perspective, and the “feminine” — things the institutional Church often blocks or undervalues. Today, lay people, at least many I know in North America, look for a spirituality that encompasses the whole person. (Just look at the statistics on numbers of people who join self-help groups looking for community/healing/integration.) I find Marianist spirituality does that.

Marianist spirituality, with its emphasis on the **incarnational**, the **relational**, the **developmental**, the **interior**, the **feminine**, gives me and others a prayer life, an image of God, a way of living in the world, a call to compassion that pulls us deep into the mystery of our humanness, into the mystery of Christ's life in us.

However, the Marianist Family has not reached the Parousia yet. All too often, I am surprised at the perception that the charism is deposited within the SM/FMI, and that lay people share Marianist life only in a derivative sense. A number of people in the religious institutes of the Marianist Family do not understand what lay people are doing within the tradition other than supporting the religious in their works. Some lay members define themselves within that role. Some among the religious and lay even take umbrage at the lay calling themselves Marianists. I do not think the foundational materials or current ecclesiology support that mindset.

Whether or not Father Chaminade had religious institutes in mind all along is something we may never know. I think he needed both; one would not accomplish the tremendous task of

¹² Timothy Phillips, SM, *You Will Be My Witnesses: William Joseph Chaminade and Christian Witness* (Dayton: Marianist Resources Commission, 1974), Monograph Series, Document No. 15, September.

rechristianizing the world without the other. As for today, I know that I, a lay person, place my life squarely within Marianist spirituality; there are many communities situated in the heritage; both myself and those groups are in this setting for the “long haul.” If the charism of Chaminade did not include empowering the laity, I think it has been what Hugh Bihl, SM, calls an “authentic development: something there in seed, something that grows,”¹³ perhaps, in response to the “signs of the times.”

I think that if Marianist spirituality is to have meaning in the Church and world of tomorrow, we must look hard and long at Chaminade's instincts and actions. In creating Sodalties, Chaminade organized first around aspects of everyday living; groupings were based on occupations or family circumstances. The gatherings, as I read the accounts, were a masterful combination of the sacred and the secular with instruction, celebration, and fellowship. He entrusted administrative and spiritual leadership to the lay; he depended on multiplication occurring by making the meetings open to friends of members who had been exposed to the “contagion of good” within the home, the workplace, the parish. Chaminade seemed to act out of the knowledge that to permeate the world he would work with those in the midst of it — just as God did when, by the action of the Spirit and the willingness of Mary, the Son was incarnated. The Church in many parts of the world is organizing into or from small ecclesial communities of lay and religious. We might have something to offer this phenomenon both from our charism and the accumulated wisdom we've gleaned from our experiences over recent years. I feel Chaminade's principles hold wisdom for our Church's journey into the next millennium.

The empowering of the laity and the interdependence of lay and religious cannot come into place simply because of the shrinking numbers of the ordained and/or members of religious institutes. That seems like doing the right thing for the wrong reason — which may hold the clericalism of the past in an underground reservoir that slowly, but surely, will leach back toward the surface. Let's make the mutuality we speak of in the Marianist Family real, ordinary, visible, and translatable to other cultures where more traditional roles are held by clerics and lay.

4. Mary

Mary plays a significant role in my thinking about lay empowerment. The title of my paper says she was a lay woman. That's important to me. The fact that God enters human history by impregnating a woman who was filled with faith and hope, and trusted that Jesus would be prepared to reconcile us to God by growing up in a fairly ordinary human family is a tremendous happening. It convinces me that God will continue to enter the world in fairly ordinary ways, if the humans who carry the life of Christ within them can be filled with faith and hope and ponder the ways of God — just as Mary did.

Mary, though, is important to me beyond the commonality of us being lay persons. My upbringing was relatively free (or lacking, some might say) of the pre-Vatican II piety. I did attend Catholic schools and so had participated in May crownings and Friday afternoon rosaries, but my family rarely prayed to Mary together and religiosity was not expressed in the Marian

¹³ Hugh Bihl, SM, presentation at a Jubilee celebration, May 3, 1987.

rituals current at that time. My image of Mary was based in my experience of my own mother and the pictures I formed in my mind while reciting the mysteries of the Rosary (the Joyful Mysteries were my favorite; these mysteries seemed to be presented to us from Mary's point of view). I envisioned her as a person of quiet strength: loving (in a motherly way), protective, prayerful. Once involved in the Sodality, I heard others speak about images very new to me: the new Eve, the woman of the *fiat*, the singer of the Magnificat. She was a woman of power (not power **over**, but power **to**, as Marilyn French describes it in *Beyond Power*).¹⁴ People were speaking of her mission and how we shared in it. I am still learning about all this. Mary has always been a potent model for me; to know her mission has taken some work.

Recently, I read *Our Knowledge of Mary, Our Gift from God*, and *To Know, Love, and Serve Mary*, as well as bits and pieces of Neubert's *Mariology* (sic) and passages from *Marian Writings*. The *Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839* has come across my desk a lot because of my work at NACMS. I'm trying to synthesize how Father Chaminade and the interpreters of his thought on Mary affect my way of acting now, in this culture. The writers I've read all say Mary accepted "spiritual" maternity as well as "physical" maternity at the Annunciation and that we were born to the state of child of Mary at the foot of the Cross. They say she will "form" us as she did Jesus; they say she is engaged in an ongoing activity in the world, an apostolic mission, an action that continues to bring Christ into the world.

What does that mean? I think it means she is very present to me, and someone with whom I can form a relationship. I can open myself to her influence, her wisdom, her strength. I will receive grace, not just inspiration, through her. It means that as I read Scripture, I can reflect on the relationship between Jesus and Mary, and I will learn something of how to continue bringing Christ to the world.

Pondering is a powerful stance that Mary teaches us to bring to the North American culture; it's a virtue seldom seen in today's world of FAX machines and microwaves, managers with training to act swiftly and decisively, bottom-line mentalities where product or short-term profit are premier. Waiting in a discerning mode gets harder in today's culture. Waiting in a discerning mode is countercultural. We are encouraged to do what feels good, with relative disregard to its effect on others, and to "just do it." Chaminade pondered, nearly to the point of driving his friends and followers crazy. But, he did it because he said he was waiting for signs and providential moments. My experiences in the Marianist Family have taught me to honor Mary's and Chaminade's pondering.

Over the years, I have watched communities discern, and I think Mary's stance is one that helps us through the process toward decisions based in Gospel values and imbued with a spirituality we call Marianist. Let me give some examples of what I've seen.

Sometimes the community has an "archangel" appear. Someone from outside the community comes with a challenge. In the case of my community, Anawim, it was a Marianist brother who said the Marianist Volunteer Service Community needed to be established in Cincinnati. He wanted us to do it. It was an undertaking unlike any other the community had previously

¹⁴ Marilyn French, *Beyond Power* (Ballantine Books, 1985).

accepted. But we prayed, and came to an understanding that this brother was, in fact, carrying God's voice. Like Mary, we asked, "How can this be?" (Lk 1:34), "We're all busy people with too much to do as it is." But, by recognizing the angel and responding with our own Fiat, the MVSC did begin in the Cincinnati area.

Often, a community will enter into a specific discernment process: I think of it as Mary watching the wine running out at Cana and trying to figure out how to help save the family from embarrassment. Choices are laid out; benefits and risks are assessed; in the end, one picks one of the choices, but there is a sense of being asked to leap off a cliff. Reason brings us to the edge of the cliff, but where we'll land once we leap is always, at best, an educated guess. Through prayer, we decide to risk. Mary risked telling the servants to "do whatever he tells you" because Jesus did say first, "Why come to me? My hour has not yet come" (Jn 2:4). But we act, after pondering God's faithfulness in the past, and trusting God will be with us again wherever we land. Anawim is over twenty years old now, and we've gone through many phases when the wine seemed to be running low. Pondering has become habit at times like that. Occasionally, we've had what seemed like a miraculous intervention to save the day.

Sometimes discernment is forced upon us through sudden and painful conflict. Recently, our community entered a very difficult discernment process about confronting one member over some inappropriate behaviors. The risks to our community life and to the individual concerned were substantial. But we took our time pondering and praying, obtained professional help, and, in the end, jumped off the cliff: the confrontation was held. Only through the pondering did we resist the temptation to just ask this person to leave. After the intervention, the person left the community, angered by our "perspectives" and refusing any offers to find ways to solve problems caused by the behaviors. Why didn't we just ask the person to leave if, in the end, separation was the result? The pondering led us to understand how we wanted to act in accord with our values about inclusiveness and forgiveness, and revealed to us ways we had let the situation grow to the proportions it had. I felt Mary's presence very strongly through that whole time. I remembered Mary losing Jesus in the crowd when he was young and finding him among the teachers at the temple. How confusing and heart-wrenching that must have been! How hard to resist the temptation to say, "Why can't you act like a normal kid?" or "If this business of your Father's is so all-fired important, you can just leave Nazareth for good!" But, they confronted him about their concern, took him home, and probably learned a great deal about themselves and their son.

We've also had the experience of having events synchronize in such a way that we are led fairly quickly to know where God is acting among us in our community. An example of this was our looking for a service project to join efforts around. Very soon after we started discernment, one of the members bought a house to use for families who were homeless, another member was looking for a way to invest some money toward easing this same problem, a third member worked at a social service agency near the house and was able to provide connections between the services at the agency and the families we could house. Lastly, a couple moved to our city who had lots of energy and time to devote to something new. We prayed and decided that the only way all this would have come together was God. Had we not set out into discerning our future in a justice activity, all these individual acts might never have been connected. Mary might have had a sense of this when she was told about Elizabeth. How are these two things

related? What is being set in motion here? Why are these two things related? I think Mary pondered those questions; I think we have to step back when we are tumbling forth with cascading events and ask those questions.

Asking hard questions, watching for patterns, opening ourselves to things beyond our usual course, lining decisions up against a set of values and beliefs, all flow from our spirituality. Mary and her stance of pondering are a profound gift to our culture.

Another place I look to Mary when trying to deal with the culture is her hopefulness. The most dynamic image of hope for me at the present time is the Woman described in the Book of Revelation 12: 1-6: the woman giving birth as a dragon awaits to devour her child. I think Mary is the Woman of the Apocalypse.

Charis Kabat said recently in a presentation, “I have known the horror of working hard to sustain and nurture life in the children I teach, only to have the dysfunction of their families, or the unresponsiveness of the educational system, or the evils that their life of poverty thrusts upon them, waiting to end it all.”¹⁵ Haven't we all had some experience of that kind? And yet, the Woman gives birth, and the child and she are taken to a place of safety. I think that being in the world as a Marianist means facing the dragon without despair. The dragons keep coming in various forms. Wars are fought in faraway deserts with weapons that mimic video games and isolate us from the death they cause, the earth's resources are depleted by a greedy few, diseases spread and kill because people judge those who have contracted them as getting what they deserve — just to name a few of the biggies. Those things can come very close to home: my sons are of draftable age, and a dear friend died this year from AIDS. I experienced hopelessness during a separation with my husband when many well-meaning people told me there was no reason to “hang-in” if I was in pain. Working to create a healthy family can be exhausting and lead to hopelessness; many people think it's normal to never eat dinner together as a family, and over half the marriages in the United States end in divorce. But Mary continues to sing her Magnificat and give birth to Jesus in joy and hope in the midst of horror and struggle.

Mary's Magnificat has become a centerpiece of the faith life of the communities to which I belong. The spirituality proclaimed in this particular prayer, with its emphasis on God's faithfulness and mercy and the compelling call for justice, has been embraced and incorporated into our struggles to live in right relationship to the earth and the peoples of the world. The prayer expresses the conviction that compassion for the oppressed and solidarity with the poor will be empowering, that the new creation visioned in this song is worth spending one's life for, that commitment and acts of justice can flow from taking Mary's stance with the *anawim*, the lowly and the humble.

Recently, women's issues within culture and church and discussions about the incompleteness of images of God as male have focused attention on Mary. Often, in an attempt to bring the masculine and feminine into balance, people have continued to refer to God as male and turned to Mary as his feminine sidekick. I think that is poor theology. This issue could be a whole paper on its own, but let me say briefly where I have placed Mary in this context.

¹⁵ Charis Kabat, Presentation to local State Community, March 14, 1991.

Rosemary Haughton described the discussion this way: “We are not talking about masculine or feminine qualities in God (which is theological nonsense) but about the ways in which people experience God in their lives and in all creation.”¹⁶ I agree. I’m looking for ways to connect my experiences and approaches as a woman into the liturgical life, the decision making, the language, the theology of the Church. I look for ways we all — men and women — can be whole in our psycho-social selves, in community, in membership in the Church, in all aspects of life. God is genderless, but as humans we can rarely transcend human constructs to imagine God. Just as Jesus used images for the reign of God that came from common and familiar objects, like a mustard seed, so too do we use common and familiar relationships or things to think about or feel about God. The psalms are filled with these images. The injustice has come because one set of understandings has been used primarily: masculine understandings. “God is not male, but we experience God as masculine.”¹⁷ The images are wanting, about one half of the population of God’s creatures don’t relate, and, worse, “God’s presumed masculinity has functioned as the ultimate religious legitimation of the unjust social structures which victimize women.”¹⁸

Asking Mary to bear the weight of representing “the feminine aspects” of the divine is inappropriate. “Mary’s life and the wonders wrought in her by God will facilitate an understanding of the feminine in its historical and eschatological expressions alike,”¹⁹ but Mary is not God. We must continue to struggle to give value to all experiences of God.

Mary and her relationship to God does become a model of the right relationships pictured in the Magnificat. She is honored, not for her relationship to a man, but because of her being, her faith, and her discipleship. She is an actor, not just a reactor. She made choices in the face of great uncertainty; she accepted responsibility with great courage. She is described as a person with intelligence, power, and initiative (masculine traits), but also as a person with tenderness, compassion, and intuition (feminine traits).²⁰ She is a model for the wholeness we seek. Read the Pax Christi litany to Mary to see how vivid the stories of her life are for people in today’s world. And, probably most important for Marianists, she is critical to the movement of creation toward unity with its Maker.

Marianists, in North America, often use the gentle, feminine qualities of Mary to explain our instincts around hospitality and nurturing, or her faithfulness through terrible injustices to her son to model a steadiness and comforting presence to those who suffer. Those are not bad things to be inspired to. But, should they eclipse the anger and passion we hear in Hannah’s prayer, or the initiative at Cana, or the courage to come to and go out from the Upper Room? If the charism is to speak to the Church, we must present **all** we know of Mary, not the most familiar or the most comfortable.

¹⁶ Rosemary Haughton, “There Is Hope For a Tree: A study paper on the emerging Church.” Unpublished, June 1981.

¹⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Women and the Word* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ Leonardo Boff, OFM, *The Maternal Face of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 253.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

5. Community

I have now lived in Marianist communities for over half my life. One would think I could easily articulate its significance, but I find it difficult.

I know that the community to which I belong is probably the most formative element of my adult life. I mentioned earlier that the community became local Church for me in a very real sense. It has served as spiritual director, confessor, teacher, and friend. I have been stretched beyond my personal propensities; been challenged to deeper faith, hope, and compassion; raised my children in its bosom, tried to strengthen my marriage under its wings. The community has offered support to take Mary's stance.

I once had a job at a place where the administration treated the staff very poorly. Lies and deception were commonplace; quality work was rarely rewarded as highly as “loyalty”; fear was the standard tool of motivation. But, the service provided by the organization was innovative and really helped people. Many of the staff and many of the people served were good, caring individuals. Whether to continue to work in such an environment was very difficult to discern. By staying, was I enabling the “sickness” of the administration? By leaving, was I running away from important work just because the personal rewards were minimal? It was the community that often became a sounding board for the frustrations, but also the spiritual director who encouraged me to move away from the wallowing self-pity toward decisions that were based in my values. Other people in the community taught me a great deal about healthy alternatives to the management style I was being trained in at work; there were times when I succumbed to the “politics” of the place, and the community heard my confession. The ability to move beyond my tendencies to “not make waves” and to muster courage to confront my bosses and the system came from the knowledge that there were people of compassion and faith behind me. I ended up leaving the job after several years, but I feel good about how, with the strengthening care of the community, I was able to survive and even make some small changes despite the oppressive situation. The community deserves the credit.

There are days when I think the whole Church must become a “community of communities.” Its ability to speak to me on the level of my experience, and yet call me into wider thinking about the larger Church and the planet, has never been paralleled in any other situation.

I believe Father Chaminade and Adele were inspired to bring people into association around matters of spiritual life. I believe a major component of the charism for the Church is community. I hope that the Church recognizes the gift of community and lets it flourish (better yet, reorganizes in ways to nurture its growth and development).

But, there are some troubling aspects to community as it is lived in the Marianist Family in North America:

- a. We cannot easily integrate our life in community with life in the broader Church, and there are losses—like the fullness of the sacramental life of the Church. If we avoid the

temptation to exist as an “underground” Church, the stress to stretch time and energy to both community and parish can be great. How do we bridge the two experiences? How does one enrich the other?

b. The communities tend to be very homogeneous, even more so than some parishes. My vision of Church, be it parish or community, is one in which diversity thrives. Of course, Father Chaminade knew the benefits of like-groupings; he spoke of “union without confusion.” But, too often **union** is translated **uniformity**. Can we find ways to open ourselves to others unlike us and find ways of incorporating the differences into common life? In North America, the absence of Native Americans, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and anyone other than the middle class — even when our communities are located in areas where large populations of these people reside — is noticeable.

c. We often find community very comfortable, a “safe port in the storm,” and there is a tendency to rest with our friends and shield ourselves from the needs and evils of the world. Isn't justice a strong component in communities that are authentic expressions of Christ's life in the world? How do we Marianists express justice?

d. We have relied on the religious communities heavily for service. The Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary have provided us with retreat speakers, facilities to meet, money for projects, spiritual directors, etc., etc., etc. The numbers of the religious are declining, and so, too, are the number of works in which they can be engaged. Where will the lay groups find themselves if the religious institutes can no longer provide the support to which we've become accustomed? Can we become truly interdependent, thus providing a combination of forces that can continue some of the important involvements of both lay and religious communities? Are we willing to raise funds among ourselves to pay for things previously subsidized by the SM or FMI? Have we the resources and confidence to take on the formation activities so ably supplied by the religious? Can we stay connected to the larger Marianist Family without the network in place for the religious?

e. Some Marianist lay communities include non-Catholics. What does that experience mean for the way we live within the tradition and how we move into the future?

f. Can we accept that there will be Marianists who will not live in community? Life circumstances (study, employment, marriage to someone who doesn't participate in the Marianist Family, or even personal temperament and disposition) may dictate living outside Marianist community. How do we stay connected? How can both experiences be valued and seen as building up the Marianist Family?

g. Can we Marianists stop being the dining car on the train of the Church's life in the world and become the locomotive? When might we use the power of our numerous and geographically diverse family members to take leadership in the culture or the Church around something of deep concern or exciting possibility? Do we practice the consummation virtues to know ourselves and engage ourselves without fear or faulty expectations?

h. Our communities are commonly referred to as faith-sharing communities. Sometimes that is very descriptive; faith is shared. The daily incidents or choices of our lives are often discussed in light of the Gospel. Some are asking, though, whether the language we're using is comprehensive enough (shouldn't all the virtues be embodied?). However, the questions go deeper than terminology. Language should describe the reality. Are we buying into the American cultural attitude that white middle-class Americans can do anything and, therefore, hopelessness and hope are not realities for us? Do we assume that faith is always the **first** bond among people? What if hope or justice is the bond, and common faith grows later in the relationship? Language is also formative. If we include only faith in our vocabulary, do we include only faith in our spirituality? What might happen if, for a while at least, we called ourselves justice communities or communities of hope?

It is my opinion that we need to address these difficulties in earnest. To promote community life as a utopia is to hold out a false god. We need people willing to open up about the struggles, and we need people willing to take some risks. Latin America seems far ahead of us in understanding the dynamics of small Christian community. What can we learn from that experience? Who can help us translate it to the North American situation?

6. Conclusion

Mary, empowering the laity, and community, as I said at the start of this paper, are elements of our spirituality that I am convinced are given to us so that we may give them to the world and the Church. The richness of the gift is still being revealed; the limits of the gift are being taught to us. These are frustrating times, when so much about the Church is changing, and our role in helping make the transitions from old to new is unclear. How are we offering the gift in the midst of ambiguity and uncertainty?

I was recently given a reading from Teilhard de Chardin that I have used in personal prayer, but I think it has meaning for the times the Marianist Family and its spirituality are going through:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are, quite naturally, impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on-the-way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stage of instability and that it may take a very long time. And so I think it is with you. Your ideas mature gradually — let them grow. Let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on as though you could be today what time (or grace and circumstances, acting on your own good will) will make you tomorrow. Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give our God the benefit of believing that the hand of God is leading you and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

I have imagined this as part of the conversation between Mary and the messenger of God at the Annunciation. Mary was able to say, *fiat* (Lk 1: 38) in the face of great ambiguity and uncertainty. She was able to leave shortly to go visit her cousin and share the “greatness of the Lord” (Lk 1: 46). She was able to sing out a hymn of praise and a call for justice although her personal situation could have turned her inward, looking only for personal understanding and solace. She suffered throughout her Son's life, seeing him mocked and killed for his love, but joined with a community of believers to “go forth and teach all nations” (Mt 28:19), and although we know very little of her life after Jesus's death, I imagine she was constantly among the disciples encouraging them to go out into the world and nurture goodness and hopefulness wherever they found it. She is truly our “total reason to hope”²¹ and the “Incomparable Woman”²² that Father Chaminade and Adele strove their whole lives to know, love, and serve.

We, the descendants of the family Adele and Chaminade created, can take on Mary's mission, read the signs, await providential moments. When we get a reading and see a moment, we can act with all the faith and power of Mary.

We, like Mary, live as co-creators. Christ's life, within our lives as humans, transforms our realities; we, in our life in Christ and our membership in the body of his followers and our interaction with the world, are what bring forth the reign of God.

The ideas presented in this paper are mine in the sense that I have lived through the experiences on which I have based the thoughts and conclusions, and I will take responsibility for them. However, the ideas are not totally mine in the sense that many of them came to me or were clarified or enlarged through associations over the years with members of the Anawim Community and the State Community. Special gratitude is expressed to those in those communities who reviewed the paper and gave me feedback; to Brother Hugh Bihl, SM, who has taught us, prodded us, and encouraged us on this journey; and to Brother Tom Giardino, SM, who kept telling us there's wisdom for the journey in stories.

²¹ Lawrence J. Cada, trans., *Chaminade's Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839* (Dayton: Cincinnati Province of the Society of Mary, 1989), 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.