

# Importance of Lay Leadership in the Marianist Movement

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**M**arianist Movement

I hope to address this topic through three assumptions on my part:

1. Lay leadership is intrinsic to the Marianist Movement, and it's important to remember that;
2. The Marianist Movement, with its heritage of lay leadership, can be an important gift for the wider Church;
3. Lay leadership is particularly necessary; therefore, it is important for the Marianist Movement at this point in time.

## **Intrinsic, potential gift, and necessary.**

Before I launch into these three areas, I would like to say a little about the term "Marianist Movement."

The first time I heard the term was in 1992 at a Symposium on Marianist spirituality. One of the symposiasts was a young woman—a sociologist by training, an activist against the repressive regime in her country of Chile, a Marianist to her marrow, and a wife and mother. She was in Dayton for the Symposium and on her way to Madrid to seek funding for the first International Convocation of Marianist Lay Communities to be held in Santiago. In her paper and presentations, she used the term as her way of integrating Marianist spirituality with her deep commitment to and work for justice in not only Chile, but also throughout the world. Of course, there was some reaction. At that time in South America, movements were often inspired by Marxism, and there was a cautionary tone about accepting the term, ever fearful that the name "Marianist" might be hijacked for political and ideological ends.

I was intrigued by the notion that the Marianist Family could have impact beyond what I was familiar with . . . a network of small faith-sharing communities—some with a sense of external mission, but most focused on the internal mission of creating ways of deepening faith and supporting members during the ups and downs of life. It was an epiphany for me. However, I admit I was reluctant to use it after I heard it because it seemed arrogant to use it when I had never stood up against someone like Augusto Pinochet.

Brother Ray Fitz, SM, recently promoted the term as a way to capture the dynamism and mission-oriented basis for Marianist life—a term, perhaps, better suited for our future than the metaphor of “family” we so often use.

In his presentation, Brother Ray said, “As I have been listening to these conversations, it is becoming clearer to me that the impact the Society of Mary, Province of the United States, would like to have on the Church and the larger society should come through the Marianist Movement.”<sup>1</sup> (This means not only the SM but also the Marianist Sisters and lay folk within communities and Marianist institutions.)

Brother Ray continued:

In focusing this conversation I will be trying a thought experiment—I will be using the term Marianist Movement for what is normally called the Marianist Family. I am doing this for two reasons: 1) As I will explain later I believe looking at the lay and religious communities in the Catholic and Marianist Tradition as a social movement is closer to what our Founders envisioned; and 2) I believe it can help the Marianist Province of the United States respond to the call of the Holy Spirit that is coming through our strategic planning conversations.<sup>2</sup>

I understand this to mean that a change in language would be important to actions needed—language cannot only reflect reality, but it also can shape it.

So, I find it easy to agree with Brother Ray’s notion that Marianists are called to “move” as well as to be “family” in the best sense of that term. I will use the term, “Marianist Movement,” but perhaps down the road it would be good for many people to talk about the shift from “family” to “movement” and assess what is gained and what is lost. (For example, a family’s healthy traits of mutually supportive relationships and presence do not necessarily have to be part of movements.)

## Intrinsic

Now, on to what is intrinsic . . . what was and is fundamental and built in, if you will, about lay leadership both at the start of things Marianist and now. One caveat: for now, I’m talking about lay people in Marianist communities, not institutions. I’ll get to institutions later! And, as I go through this, I think I need to discuss both lay people and lay leadership, and I hope I do not retrace too much well-covered territory. I would ask that you try to notice the vision and intent of what I describe as well as the history.

I will start with further reference to Brother Ray’s presentation. He talked about the Marianist Movement “as an emergent social and ecclesial movement founded during the French Revolution by our Founders and other pioneers.”<sup>3</sup> And, he defined a social movement as “a loosely organized effort on the part of a significantly large network of people and groups to change the existing social order in a manner that the participants of the social movement believe is beneficial to the larger society.”<sup>4</sup> I would add that these networks and movements

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Fitz, SM, “The Marianist Movement and the Challenge of Urban Justice and Reconciliation: An Interim Report on a Conversation,” p. 1. Presentation at the University of Dayton, Feb. 2, 2009. Available at [Marianist.com/articles](http://Marianist.com/articles)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

are usually made up of ordinary folk—not the elite or recognized “leaders” within the society—and that the leadership is provided by those with vision and capacity to engage others in that vision.

Brother Ray presented a summary of how both Blessed Chaminade and Father William Ferree, SM, shaped the social movement called “Marianist.”

As for Chaminade, Brother Ray spoke of how Chaminade wanted to recreate the fervor of the first Christian communities in which all were seeking to be disciples of Jesus in the fullest sense. And what is discipleship in its fullest sense? It is a discipleship in which people would “grow in faith and then connect that faith to action for change in the world.”<sup>5</sup> This would best take place within a missionary project (or movement) that is involved in building an alternative milieu—i.e., communities that would support and challenge its members to the goals of deepening faith and transforming the world.

Brother Ray affirms that we have models in our heritage to draw upon—the “Sodality movement” for addressing the needs of restoring Christianity in France which was to form huge numbers of lay—men AND women—to be Church in a new way, not the reconstitution of the clerics, religious, parishes, etc.), and Father Ferree’s demonstration of adopting “methods of Catholic Action—a lay ecclesial movement—which Ferree joined with principles for apostolic action developed by Chaminade.”<sup>6</sup> To the point, both the success of the Sodality movement and Catholic Action depended on lay and lay leadership. Their participation was critical, assumed, and intrinsic.

Brother Ray also pointed out that Chaminade’s wisdom was not just for nineteenth-century France or for those of us now under the Marianist umbrella. Brother Ray reminded us that “Pope John Paul II said at Blessed Chaminade’s beatification he was an apostle of the laity.”<sup>7</sup>

I take this designation of “apostle of the laity” to mean that even the larger Church recognizes that lay leadership, as structured and fostered by Chaminade and Ferree, is important, no matter what the “times.”

I have held this conviction for a long time. I have spent the last twenty-one years as a lay leader at a Marianist institution through my role at NACMS. I receive counsel from an Advisors Group that is comprised of both lay and religious. I report to the Provincial Council, and I have a designated liaison from the Council for regular consultations. I have experienced a great deal of trust and autonomy—more than I expected when I first entered the position. However, this job/ministry is just a third of my life. Two-thirds of my time on earth has been spent as a lay Marianist, in various Marianist communities. I’ve held positions of leadership within those communities, some of which had vowed religious members, while others did not. All were completely lay led, although vowed religious often played vital roles as what was called “moderators,” and now is often called a role of “spiritual accompaniment.” Beginning in the early 1960s, the vowed religious were responsible for getting the lay communities going in the United States and in many locales throughout the world, but the brothers and sisters followed the model of Chaminade’s first foundation—the Bordeaux Sodality—fostering lay

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

leadership and serving the communities, not directing them.

The Marianist communities to which I belonged tried to be as much about “movement” as about “family.” Mission orientation was a hallmark of the communities before phrases like “mission-integration” or “mission-driven” were in the common lexicon. Through these experiences and through my studies into Marianist history and Marianist spirituality, I have come to believe that lay leadership in the Marianist Movement is not primarily about a response to a personnel crisis. It is not just about declining vocations or aging membership in the religious orders and clerical ranks. No, it is intrinsic.

But, a few more glimpses into Chaminade’s intentions.

He wrote in a letter in 1830, in which he explained his sense of mission, “God has deigned to inspire me, now some years ago, with the desire of working for the maintenance of religion in our unhappy country.”<sup>8</sup> He was called to revivify faith life and the Church throughout France—no small undertaking!

He returned from exile in Saragossa to find a country alienated from religious faith and practice. His approach, as Father Joseph Lackner, SM, has written, was to “replicate primitive Christianity” as it could “respond precisely to the new situation, the new wars, in which the Church found itself.”<sup>9</sup>

Father Lackner explains how the early Christian Church, with small communities focused on the story and words of Jesus, with missionaries sent out to spread the Good News, as well as with practical care for those in need, provided the model Chaminade needed to create an organization for the masses—he needed to involve large numbers of people to accomplish the huge vision he had been given. He saw this as an extension of Mary’s work: Christ born into all places and all times. And, as you have probably heard a hundred times, he knew new times called for new methods. “Who does not see that a new fulcrum must be found for the lever that moves the modern world?”<sup>10</sup> Chaminade acted out of the instinct and inspiration that to permeate the world he would work with those in the midst of it—the laity. It was an incarnational method, following the example of Christ coming into the world through Mary. Its success depended on lay people and lay leadership.

Chaminade was so successful that he had to face the jealousy of pastors in the area who had tried to rebuild the Church with a pre-Revolutionary approach. In the Letter of 1824, called Answers to Objections that Are Ordinarily Made Against Sodalities Established on the Plan of the One of Bordeaux, on the Form Given Them, and on Their Relations with Parishes, Chaminade said:

Among the persons who join a Sodality, there are necessarily all kinds. Some are newcomers, whom the zeal of some [current] sodalist has gained to religion; some are just ordinary people who, until lately, avoided the parish church and perhaps would not dare to go there now, but attend the services of the Sodality with pleasure and regularity. They are on their way to returning to God. Still others are fervent Catholics,

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<sup>8</sup> Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 523, to Count Noailles, May 14, 1830; vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 364.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Lackner, SM, *William Joseph Chaminade, His Apostolic Intent and His Engagement with Schools, Instruction, and Education: An Historical Portrait*, Monograph Series, Doc. 42 (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 1999), p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> William Joseph Chaminade, *Spirit of Our Foundation*, “Letter of 1824,” p. 235. For more information on the fulcrum quote, visit the open access resources on the NACMS website: [www.nacms.org/fulcrum](http://www.nacms.org/fulcrum).

true and tried sodalists, who take charge of the highest duties and fill the principal offices of the Sodality. [Highest duties and principal offices=leadership] It is to them we look for good example, to them for the guidance and maintenance of the meetings.<sup>11</sup>

Chaminade was pragmatic about how best to reach the masses, but he also knew theology and had a profound respect for the sacrament of Baptism. Simply put, we are all Children of God; although we will play various roles in living out the Gospel, each role is honorable and important because of our common Baptism. Chaminade believed we are all responsible for bringing about the Reign of God.

Another writer who helps us understand the importance of the lay to the Marianist Movement from the foundations is Father Eduardo Benlloch, SM. In the introduction to *Chaminade's Message Today* he states that, contrary to some commentary, the sodalities—the lay groups—were not stepping stones to instituting religious orders. He says we cannot understand the richness and generativity of Chaminade's message unless we understand the specific circumstances in the "development of the Sodalities that gave rise to the foundation of the two religious orders."<sup>12</sup> He says, if we were to separate the two orders from the Christian lay groups whom they were to serve, "we would find ourselves with a Father Chaminade who is perpetuated, but reduced to sterility. Where would his pastoral plan and his missionary project be?"<sup>13</sup> (Note: He says the role of the religious is to "serve," not "lead!") There also are numerous citations from letters between Chaminade and Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, the Founder of the Marianist Sisters, in which he counsels her to worry more about the growth and health of the lay groups than with the religious community.

During the first 60 years of the twentieth century, when the religious orders were very large in number and educational ministries were experiencing a golden age, the image put forth for the different sections of Marianist life was a series of concentric circles with male religious the closest circle to the core of the charism; religious women in the next circle out; lay were in the outlying circle. (See Appendix 1.) During the foundation and today, the image is more a Venn diagram, with the overlapping circles and a shared charism and spirituality in the center. (See Appendix 2.)

So, Chaminade's foundations never would have taken off without laity. How about leadership in the foundation period?

It is clear that the Marianist Movement, from the outset, valued lay leadership. Leaders were identified, developed, and empowered throughout the organization. Chaminade provided the direction, but he was convinced that the lay were up to the task of overturning indifference to religion and forming a new model for Church that would incorporate, in authentic and appropriate ways, the equality, liberty, and fraternity of the Revolution. He trusted lay people and their leadership. Lackner quotes Henry Mintzberg, a management scientist about this design. Mintzberg said that organizations such as Chaminade's sodalities, "hoped to change the world indirectly, by attracting members and changing them."<sup>14</sup> Attracting others ("recruitment") happened primarily through a "contagion of good" spread by current members among those they came into contact with every day. Once in the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 238.

<sup>12</sup> Eduardo Benlloch, SM, *Chaminade's Message Today*, Monograph Series, Doc. 45 (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2001), p ix.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. x.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Mintzberg, *Mintzberg on Management* (New York: Collier MacMillan Publishers, 1989), p. 231.

communities, people were “organized” into various groups—common interest in particular good works or internal service to the community, such as job training, academic courses, free legal counsel, etc. Each small group had a leader; each section had a leader; the entire Sodality had a prefect who, working with Father Chaminade, provided leadership.

This is a bit of a digression, but I was tickled when I read it. Developing leadership didn’t always go well. Sister Marie Joëlle Bec, Superior General of the FMI, just released a circular letter<sup>15</sup> in which she addresses some difficulties among the sisters in turning over great responsibilities to newer community members without adequate training. Sister Marie Joëlle does not make light of preparation or formation, but she quotes a letter from Chaminade to a priest “discouraged by his community that lacked experience.” Chaminade said, “Why do you not place all your confidence in Jesus and Mary, my dear son? Do you think that St. Peter established the apostolic seat in Rome by his education, by his science, his wisdom, and his natural qualities? Do you not believe that this occurred by the confidence that he had in the Master who had sent him?”<sup>16</sup>

We, too, should remember that we can count on God’s presence to our efforts.

The point is lay people and lay leadership were important to the Marianist enterprise from the beginning. Chaminade’s inspiration or instincts about all this were overshadowed for many years, but “it’s back!” And by reading Church documents since Vatican II we can see what Marianists have to offer from our heritage and from the resurgence of the lay branch of the Marianist Family.

## Gift for the Church

As Scripture says, “The gift you have received, give as gift” (Mt. 10:8-9). I think of that passage as I describe the Marianist Movement. Can we give a gift we’ve been given?

Again, time does not permit an investigation into all the key points found in recent Church documents, but the dominant focus is on a universal call to holiness and lay life as vocation, equal to and with unique and critical responsibilities beyond the “pray, pay, and obey” times of old. Vatican II says lay have an apostolate to “evangelize and sanctify.”<sup>17</sup> Dialogue about the formation of the lay apostolate and descriptions of a specifically lay spirituality have been advanced. Lay are to renew and perfect the “temporal order.” We are going about this work with charity and through giving witness, in families, in parishes, with youth, in our professions, in the civic arena, and on national and international levels. We are to do this as individuals, in associations—and here is the tricky part—under the watchful eye of the hierarchy. Of course, problems abound. The conversation since Vatican II has sometimes been situated in the story of the vineyard . . . all who labor in the vineyard are equally compensated. However, the question arises about who has better access to or influence over the owner of the vineyard—authority and power, voice at the table, money, etc., are still being wrestled with at all levels of Church life and Church-sponsored ministries. Lay vocation and lay leadership are progressing, but not without bumps in the road.

I have to smile when I read these documents because I see that the Church appears to

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<sup>15</sup> Marie Joëlle Bec, FMI, *Circ. 24*, May 25, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 725 to Chevaux, Feb. 7, 1834; vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 240.

<sup>17</sup> *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI, Nov. 18, 1965.

have just invented all this, and we know that Marianists have been ahead of this curve for more than 200 years, if not always in practice, certainly in its sense of roots and in the interest in the charism's incarnation in today's Church. Within Marianist organizations and ministries, issues that the Church faces over power and authority surface, for sure. Although I could never say that Marianists have solved these issues, I do think we are on the cutting edge of looking seriously at the problems and may have something to say to the wider Church.

For example, most units of the Marianist Family now have national or regional Family Councils where collaboration and communication between lay and religious occur. Many take on common projects. There is a World Council of the Marianist Family that meets every year. Its membership is the General Council of both the SM, the FMI, the Alliance Mariale, and the International Organization of Marianist Lay Communities (IO/MLC) Leadership Team—one representative elected from each language group and a leader-at-large. Leadership of these groups, at all levels, rotates among members, so lay are "in charge" according to the cycles determined.

Also, in 2000, the IO/MLC applied for and received designation of a "Private Association of the Faithful" and now meets regularly with the Pontifical Commission on the Laity. So what? Well, it means that lay Marianists have been invited as representatives to several important discussions—among them a gathering for the Church in Latin America on Ecclesial Movements and a conference in Rome called *Woman and Man: Humanity in Its Entirety*. Attendance at these meetings gives us the opportunity to offer our gift—our organization, our spirituality, our experience,

our know-how. Professor Guzmán Carriquiry, the undersecretary of the Pontifical Commission on the Laity, in several meetings with the IO/MLC Leadership Team, has commented on how intrigued he is with the international organization that includes all the branches and how unique and important the model of inclusive conversations around mission and ministry are for the whole Church. Not many other groups with priests, vowed religious, and lay members have such a dynamic. (There are not even many orders with priests and brothers in equal relationship within the same religious institute.) Most affiliate groups (the common term for the lay branches of religious orders) have not been in existence anywhere near the time there have been lay Marianists, and they are clearly dedicated to living the spirit of the religious order and supporting its works. It is a derivative experience, not a collaborative one. And, we all know that parish councils operate at the pleasure of the pastor. They are advisory, not true partners.

We do have within our vision the makings of a gift for the Church—where interdependence and collaboration are "givens" and each branch exerts power FOR the movement, not power OVER the movement.

### **Necessary Now!**

Finally, some comments on why lay leadership is really important now . . . why it is necessary. Here we have to make a leap: institutions are not communities. While communities have the long history of lay leadership, institutions are in the throes of the transition. Institutions have far wider diversity in populations, faith traditions, cultures, etc. So, not everything I have said about the heritage and current experience of lay leadership can be transferred. But, I think there is enough to be

of benefit. Many efforts are underway to ensure mission integration, and this does have to do with a personnel shortage. The issue has taken on an urgency because the historic reservoir of Marianist leadership is lower.

Back to Brother Ray's talk for some insight. In his presentation, Brother Ray agreed with Peter Steinfels, in *A People Adrift*, that both the Church and the Marianist Movement are on the verge of either an "irreversible decline or a thoroughgoing transformation." Brother Ray went on to say that "If we in the Marianist Movement are to undergo a thoroughgoing transformation then we, in my judgment, are going to have to do things quite differently than we are doing them presently."<sup>18</sup>

Key to Brother Ray's scenario of how things "would be done quite differently" is the participation of the lay—not just as "boots on the ground" but as full partners with the religious orders in terms of vision, investment of time and money, planning strategies, implementing action plans, and "owning" the success or failure. He recommends we study other contemporary lay ecclesial communities that "have been able to marshal resources to advance these important projects of the Church for the world."<sup>19</sup>

And, right now, we need to look at how we prepare and support good Marianist-saturated leadership among the lay for institutional missions based in Marianist spirit to survive. It is about creating not only a cadre of people who can articulate the elements of the charism, but also creating a milieu so that the current Marianist environment is solid and that the future of such an environment is assured.

Leadership has been valued and fostered, but we find ourselves thinking now,

more than ever, about how leadership is executed by Marianists, lay or religious. Do we have any special characteristics that differ from or add to the philosophies and best practices offered in an ever-growing array of leadership literature? About two years ago, NACMS drew together a writing team<sup>20</sup> to help us develop a course on Leadership in the Marianist Tradition. It has run, mostly successfully, through several cycles. Although the readings and case studies need tweaking for various audiences, the five elements of Marianist leadership that were identified seem to hold up. Leadership by Marianists strives to be purposeful, developmental, responsive and adaptive, collaborative, and transformative. I think we could take Brother Ray's scenario for a way to address urban injustice and find all five elements. Sure, these can all be found in the leadership literature to some degree, but there is a sense that to sustain and improve Marianist institutions, the elements must be grounded, not only in effective and value-based methods, but also in pursuit of the virtues of Jesus and Mary and a deepening in a spirituality that holds the mystery of the Incarnation at its center—God in our midst—and, of course, consistently manifesting the special characteristics of our charism.

The importance of lay leadership for the Marianist Movement is pretty simple: There would be no Marianist Movement without the laity (because of the mass movement aspect), and it will not be incarnated to the fullness of its inspired vision without lay leadership steeped in the intrinsic commitment to interdependence and shared responsibility for the mission of any Marianist entity. The question, I think, that is at the heart of ensuring lay leadership for the

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<sup>18</sup> Fitz, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Fitz, p. 15.

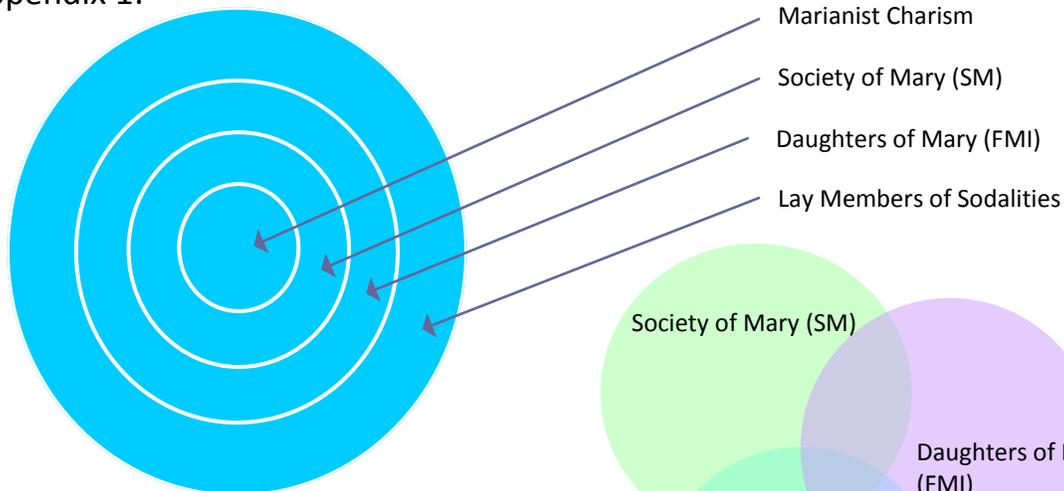
<sup>20</sup> "Leadership in the Marianist Tradition," virtual learning community course through the University of Dayton's Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation. Developed by Dick Ferguson, Gerorge Lisjak, and Kathy Reece.

Marianist Movement is this, Can it be sustained? Will there be stability in a system depending on lay leadership? Even Blessed Chaminade faced this question. He knew he would die and because of the vicissitudes of lay life, ongoing direction for the nascent organization was an issue. He saw religious life as the “director who never dies.” Religious Marianists have well provided a corporate memory, training and formation in the Marianist spirit and apostolic approach, a lifestyle that allows flexibility to respond to various changes, the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability that focus and intensify a long-haul commitment to the enterprise.

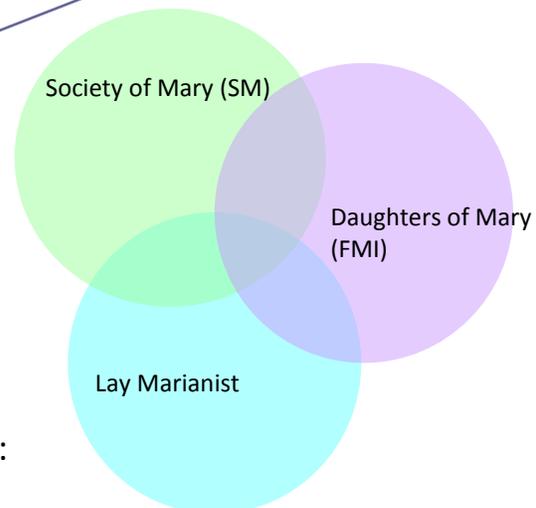
Fairly soon, lay leadership will need to think about how the memory, the formation, the flexibility, and the stability will be built into the system. And Brother Walter Oberster, SM, points out that these will not only be administrative decisions but also spiritual concerns. If the Marianist Movement survives, it will be not only through our efforts but also from the Spirit blowing its breath through us. In the meantime, we can live in the hope Brother Walter expresses at the end of his article.

“Being a Marianist leader is a challenge, but having such a call from a community (or institution) is to receive grace from that call. God will work together all things for the good of that community if the leader will be faithful, Marian, and prayerful. God does keep promises, and Mary will never abandon her children.”<sup>21</sup> △

Appendix 1:



Appendix 2:



<sup>21</sup>. Walter Oberster, SM, “Marianist Leadership: Some Spiritual Aspects,” *Marianist Soundings* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, Spring 2004), vol. 8, no. 2, p. 24.