

## ***Aggiornamento, Ressourcement, and the Development of the Marianist Charism***

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In *A New Fulcrum: Marianist Horizons Today*, published in 2014, Father David Fleming, SM, forthrightly declared: “Today Marianist life is at a crossroads. To me, it seems the spark of vitality among us needs rekindling.”<sup>1</sup>

While new opportunities to advance the Marianist charism present themselves on the horizon, and the charism could never be more relevant to addressing the needs of our contemporary ecclesio-social situation, advancing the Marianist charism in the years ahead faces significant challenges.

In our time, the Marianist Family here in North America finds itself facing a coincidence of recession and emergence. Indeed, we may speak of double recession and double emergence.

For the male professed, it is a time of receding from what has been a flourishing and fruitful school ministry that has organized Marianist focus in North America since 1849. Characterized by an aging and decreasing number of religious, it is also a time of recession for both congregations, the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (Marianist Sisters). Along with these recessions, there is a striking emergence.

Witness, in our era, the increasing number of Marianist lay communities and, with their increase, the emergence and unfolding development of the North American Lay Marianist branch.

With this emergence, there has also developed an increasing recognition of our Marianist Family identity, the essential relatedness and interdependence that calls all the branches to a more collaborative engagement in pursuit of the common mission we share.

Summoning the Family to rise to the challenges and opportunities of our time, Fleming, the former Superior General of the Society of Mary, called for the development of “a new vision,” which he went on to name explicitly, “a common missionary vision.” While it might be readily acknowledged that we are standing at a “crossroads,” and increasingly aware of the tenuousness of our situation, more than ten years since the

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<sup>1</sup> David Fleming, SM, *A New Fulcrum: Marianist Horizons Today* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2014), 177.

appearance of *A New Fulcrum*, the articulation of a clear and credible common missionary vision for our Marianist Family future is a task that I believe yet remains to be fully engaged.

Here and there, however, things are churning. A tentative search for a way to advance the Marianist charism in the years ahead is sometimes expressed in a provocative question: Does the Marianist charism develop?

Development is, of course, a fact of life. But then there is development, and there is development. For us, as Marianists, what is the relevant notion of development that is obtained when we inquire about the development of the Marianist charism? What is it about the charism that may be said to develop?

The shared ecclesial context of the Marianist charism and Cardinal John Henry Newman's treatment of the development of doctrine in the life of the Church<sup>2</sup> invites us to seek cues from Newman for approaching an understanding of the development of the Marianist charism.

Simply put, Newman understood the development of doctrine to be the fruit of a natural process of deepening understanding and appreciation of our central Christian beliefs, as we reflect on them over the course of time. While the influences of history and culture help us to refine our understanding and give rise to the appreciation of new implications, genuine development is not mere change. Core beliefs endure. In a nutshell and ecclesially situated, *development means a deeper understanding relevantly expressed for a given time and place.*

If the development of the Marianist charism is analogous to this understanding of the development of doctrine, then I believe that the development of the charism basically entails two interrelated dimensions: 1) appreciation of the emerging implications of activating the charism in our time and place, and 2) an appreciation rising from a deepening grasp of the Marianist core itself.

Understood in this light, the development of the Marianist charism, it may be emphasized, means advancement in continuity with the foundational Marianist reality. Development, in this regard, it may be suggested, begins with recovery.

Approaching what the Marianist charism is all about calls initially for observing that we are employing a post-Vatican II term that serves as a summary rubric referencing

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<sup>2</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1885).

the fundamental Marianist thing, i.e., a reality which precedes by 200 years the latter-day introduction of the “charism” term into contemporary Marianist parlance.

This situation presents us with an immediate challenge. A term used so frequently these days, in so facile a manner and often without any additional elaboration, its fundamental meaning is not often made clear or relevant to the context in which it is invoked.

A widespread, adequate understanding of the Marianist charism’s fundamental intelligibility is not to be presumed. Expressed in a way relevant to our time and place, it needs to be more often explicitly named and clarified.

To begin with, it must be kept in mind that the Marianist thing did not arise in a vacuum. It arose in response to, and to address, the consequences of the French Revolution.

Emerging as it did then, in the context of massive ecclesio-social devastation, foundationally understood, the Marianist thing/charism is Chaminade’s Providentially inspired, Marian *spirit*-animated *mission*, the promotion and animation of the Sodality, oriented to his *vision* focused on the reanimation of the French people’s faith and Christian life and the rebuilding of the Church in France.

For the Marianist Family today, consideration of what it is about the Marianist charism that develops has to do with the deepening understanding of Chaminade’s fundamental *vision*, *mission*, and animating *spirit*, along with their implications as may be relevant to the ecclesio-social situation of our time and place.

Development of the Marianist charism does not, of course, begin with us today. Here in North America, we may observe a process of development that has been underway for a long time, especially during the last 75 years.

When Marianists came to North America in 1849, they brought with them Chaminade’s animating spirit, but not his foundational vision and mission. Their context had completely changed. They brought what they knew. They brought with them their gift for promoting primary education, and they put it to the service of preserving and passing on the faith among recently arrived Catholic immigrants.

Some years later, Simler would bring the *school sodality* to Dayton when he visited as Head of Instruction. Many years on, then, in the 1950s, a developing appreciation of our having lost connection early on to *Chaminade’s Sodality* would spark efforts to begin to reengage with his foundational mission. This effort would then become eminently manifest in the 1960s in the pioneering work undertaken by John Dickson,

SM, and Hugh Bihl, SM, to resurrect what were then spoken of as young adult sodalities. This was development beginning as recovery.

While initially employing some of Chaminade's nineteenth-century categories, the emergence of what would soon be referred to as Marianist lay communities was not simply a matter of replicating Chaminade's Sodality. Acknowledging its enduring relevance, however, it was the beginning of translating the centering point of Chaminade's *mission* for a new time and place.

Recognizing the resonance of the situation of increasing religious indifference and secularization in North America with that of nineteenth-century France, as well as resonating with Chaminade's response to a fraught ecclesio-social situation, the development of those initial "sodality" communities was likewise understood to be about drawing people into faith-sustaining communities rooted in a shared appreciation of Chaminade's notion of the particular need for community serving to promote and support conversion-by-contagion.

It was this developed understanding of community as the primary instrument of the apostolate that was being recovered. In time, this recovery has surged into the increasing numbers of what are named today Marianist Lay Communities (MLCs). These MLCs have now been organized into what has become the developing lay branch in North America.

This recovery of focus on the formation of communities of faith represents development: an initial deepening grasp of the Marianist charism adapted to our time and place.

Already in the 1960s, there was more that was developing. However incipient, with the recovery of the young adult "sodalities," there was also emerging the recovery of the fundamental missionary character of Chaminade's apostolic project. Focused as it was on drawing in the masses, Chaminade required sodalists to become active members of that mission.

Not being a self-referential community, one of those young adult "sodalities" from the 1960s embraced its identity as a State community (State of Religious Living in the World). In doing so, this community was embracing its predecessor's mission, appreciated in its time as the preservation and advancement of the missionary Sodality, focused on drawing in the masses.

Thus, we speak today not just in general terms of the "formation of communities of faith," we speak specifically of "the *multiplication* of communities of faith." Recovery

of Chaminade's notion of community as the container and crucible for promoting and sustaining conversion is one dimension of the developing appreciation of the Marianist charism. Speaking of "the multiplication of communities of faith" represents recovery as a further level of developing appreciation of the charism.

That which remains to be said about continuing to develop the mission dimension of the charism in terms of multiplication will be addressed below.

We consider now the development of the Marianist charism in terms of the Marianist spirit. The development of appreciation of our Marian spirit is a particularly splendid illustration of the development of the Marianist charism.

"The spirit of the Institute is the spirit of Mary," declared the Founder.<sup>3</sup> The spirit of Mary, we understand, is the spirit of faith. This is a principle that embraces the Marianist Family as a whole.

For Chaminade, this animating spirit was expressed in terms of a militant, *nova bella* spirituality centered on the image of Mary, the Incomparable Woman, defeating the forces of evil, crushing the head of the serpent with her heel. Marian consecration meant alliance with her in that mission.

While allied with the Incomparable Woman, we contend still, indeed as never before, with forces of compounding evil; we are oriented today by the enriched ecclesiology and Mariology that led to and issued from the Second Vatican Council.

From the insistence of the Council fathers that its treatment of Mary be situated within the document on the Church, and not as a separate document, we live from the appreciation of a more ecclesologically embedded Mariology. Mary does not stand over and apart from the Church but takes her place within it.

The fruit of a more biblically focused renewal, this development has given rise to a rich range of meaning to be engaged when our Mariology is fully grounded on a scriptural foundation. In considering Mary in the gospel, we begin not with an eschatologically imaged Mary, but with the historically grounded Mary. We move with Mary of the Annunciation to Mary of Pentecost. This is the journey with Mary, the first Christian, to and with Mary, the Mother of the Lord, associated with the mystery of his life, death, and resurrection, to and in alliance with, Mary, Mother of the Church in her mission of forming the Church ever more fully into the body of Christ given for the sake of the world.

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<sup>3</sup> William Joseph Chaminade, *Marian Writings*, vol. 2 (Dayton: MRC, 1980), § 765, p. 305.

Accordingly, we have the development of the Marianist charism in terms of an enriched appreciation of our Marian spirit.

Having addressed the development of the Marianist charism in terms of *mission* and *spirit*, it remains to consider the charism's development from the perspective of *vision*. If, however, we have been treating our *mission* and *spirit* in terms of their having "developed" or as "developing," treatment of our *vision* will be considered as "development-in-waiting."

Marianists today readily recognize that, gripped by the circumstances of ecclesio-social devastation, Chaminade returned to Bordeaux from Saragossa with an acutely focused sense of mission. It was a mission focused not on promoting a merely piety-sustaining Sodality, the likes of which existed previously; it was to be a missionary Sodality, aimed at drawing in the masses oriented to a large vision concentrated on the reanimation of the people's faith and Christian life and the rebuilding of the French Church.

Thus, it may be emphasized that, while coupled with keen concern for the social and moral reconstruction of France, Chaminade was focused, in the first place, on a mission explicitly oriented, not to the larger world, but to the Church itself.

Some two hundred years later and witnessed to by the generous involvement of both lay and professed in multiple fruitful ministries, Marianists today pursue apostolic lives of great dedication. At the same time, the overall vision that guides us has become more constrained, more diffuse than that of Chaminade. We operate today with evangelical zeal certainly, but with more modestly articulated expectations. While Marianists today speak of our *mission* and our *spirit*, we speak less in terms of our *vision*, or when we do, in our language about mission and vision, the meanings of the two tend to blend. One is not the other. Mission has to do with what we are concretely and specifically about. Vision has to do with the horizon toward which we are oriented. Focused on a more limited Marianist horizon than that of the Missionary Apostolic, we seem to operate with a more generalized sense of mission/vision, expressed broadly in terms such as "the multiplication of Christians," "formation in faith," "the promotion of a more Marian style of Church," or "bringing Christ to the world."

When spoken of today by Marianists, these expressions, pointing to the sweep of the overall ecclesial mission, and altogether appropriate on their own terms, lack the clarity and breadth of Chaminade's vision. They lack the concrete specificity of his foundational mission oriented to that vision. In sum, Marianists today tend to conflate

mission and vision. When this happens and when we are engaged simply in the generic ecclesial mission, the foundational Marianist vision and mission recede from view.

We need to distinguish more clearly between the ecclesial mission and the Marianist mission. Involvement in general ministries directed to the world is by no means irrelevant. But, and at the risk of it sounding as if Marianists are simply concerned with the ecclesially self-referential, the Marianist mission is not directed in the first place to the world; it is to be directed to the Church.

Operating today with a *diffuse* sense of the Marianist mission and a *narrow* sense of Marianist vision, to contribute more adequately to advancing the ecclesial mission today, Marianists need rather to operate with a more *tailored* sense of our proper mission and a *broader* sense of Marianist vision.

As Christians, Marianists are, of course, to be deeply concerned about the ecclesial mission, but as Marianists, it is not our mission to simply pour ourselves into general ministerial activities. We are not meant to be ecclesiastical general practitioners; we are meant to be ecclesiastical specialists. As Marianists, it is our role to pursue a centripetal/centrifugal mission focused on helping to enable the Church to pursue the ecclesial mission to the world more effectively.

There is a big “why” that calls for a big vision and a circumscribed mission. As with Chaminade’s vision, mission, and spirit, the Marianist charism today does not exist in a vacuum. It has a context. The correlation of Chaminade’s vision with the situation of devastation in which he found himself is so strikingly resonant with the ecclesio-social situation of our own time, so as to suggest that his vision is as relevant to us in our time and place as it was to his own. This is the warrant for Marianists, lay and professed, needing to serve as ecclesiastical specialists.

Clearly, we find ourselves in a situation of acute ecclesio-social crisis. We live in a challenged Church in a challenging culture. The Church in North America is enmeshed in a culture infused with “isms”: individualism, consumerism, and relativism, to name a few. They insinuate themselves everywhere, which leads to an increasingly fractured, chaotic, and even violent society.

Implicated ourselves in these “isms,” North American Catholic Christians also live in a threatened and divided Church weakened by acute diminishment. Challenged from without and within, wounded internally in ways of our own making, we are often ridiculed, even vilified, by the world around us. Speaking for many, Friedrich Nietzsche once bellowed, “If you want me to believe in your redeemer, you might look a little more

redeemed.” Point taken, but fueled by crass cynicism, this is an attitude that endures and a spirit that continues to infect the air all around us.

Given that the situation of the Church in North America in our time resonates in so many ways with that of nineteenth-century France, reanimating our people’s faith and Christian life and the rebuilding of our Church is as much a task today as it was in Chaminade’s time.

To wit, it is the task of developing an adequate Marianist response to the circumstances of the Church in North America today that summons us to recover the breadth of vision that focused Chaminade’s project, as well as his sense of urgency that propelled its pursuit. This would be development beginning as recovery, a reappropriation of our foundational roots with a view to moving forward relevantly in our time and place. This is a development-in-waiting.

Reorienting the Marianist mission to the large vision calls for an additional dimension of development. This has to do with engaging the implications of multiplication when we speak of mission as “the multiplication of communities of faith.”

Chaminade’s Sodality, we understand, was a missionary Sodality. While sodalists were engaged with a range of ministerial activities in the city of Bordeaux, they were engaged as well, of course, within the Sodality itself; then its mission, “the multiplication of sodalists,” was clear. When mission was understood as ministry, “the multiplication of sodalists” stood as *first ministry*. However construed, with mission being oriented to the big vision focused on the Church, the Sodality’s mission was consistently understood to be prior to ministry.

Focused on the multiplication of sodalists, the Sodality grew to about a thousand members within its first ten-year period. The fruitfulness of the Bordeaux Sodality was linked to its ability to emerge as an impactful ecclesio-social, mass movement in a local place. Such was a necessary condition of possibility for it to begin to approach the realization of the grand vision to which it was oriented.

While the Bordeaux Sodality’s mission was focused on drawing in masses in a local place, our contemporary approach to multiplication is more diffuse. Our sense of vision and mission is more limited. Rather than being focused on the multiplication of masses of ecclesio-social, impact-oriented communities of faith in local places, we develop singles and some multiples in a range of places, in addition to forming individual lay Marianists spread here and there across a continent and even beyond.

Observing this scattered approach to multiplication is not to lay fault at the foot of the lay branch. Consideration of the conditions that have given rise to this situation is critically important, but attempting to discuss them here would take us beyond the scope of this essay. Let it be simply said here that realizing a vision of reanimating our people's faith and Christian life and the rebuilding of the Church in North America requires the collaborative engagement of the branches of the Family to develop a joint strategy and tactics focused on the multiplication of masses of communities of faith oriented to ecclesio-social impact in local places.

This being said, Marianist lay communities today, as were Chaminade's sodalists, will also be engaged in a range of ministries in the larger Church and world; but also, as with Chaminade's sodalists, the mission—contemporarily understood as “the multiplication of communities of faith”—remains prior to “the multiplication of ministries.”

These reflections on engaging the contemporary implications of *multiplication as mission* may be regarded as a related extension of what has previously been described as *development in waiting*. That earlier discussion anticipates the development of a transposed reappropriation of Chaminade's vision for the sake of addressing the situation of our time and place. These multiplication-related reflections, then, are connected directly and precisely to maximizing the realization of this transposed vision.

And so, the discussion of the development of the Marianist charism thus far may be summarized. Understanding the development of the charism in line with Newman's terms as a deepening understanding of core beliefs and their new implications over the course of time, in concert with impinging historical and cultural influences, we have considered the development of the Marianist charism in terms of the key dimensions: mission, spirit, and vision.

Recognizing development beginning as recovery, we have observed “developed” dimensions of mission and spirit.

With respect to the Marianist mission, we have observed the emergence of MLCs, including the State community, along with the subsequent emergence and development of the lay branch as a recovery of the need for community as support and container for promoting and sustaining conversion by contagion. This recovery of the role of community has also been accompanied by the reclamation of a missionary sense expressed generally as the multiplication of communities of faith.

With respect to the Marianist spirit, we have observed the development of a richly gospel-grounded and ecclesologically embedded Mariology oriented to and empowering the Marianist mission. While treating mission and spirit in terms of accomplished developments, we considered the Marianist vision in terms of development-in-waiting.

With respect to Marianist vision, the resonance of our contemporary ecclesio-social situation, with that of Chaminade's, points to the enduring relevance of the Marian-spirit animated mission being oriented to Chaminade's overarching vision. This recognition grounds the warrant for regarding the reappropriation of the big vision focused on the reanimation of our people's faith and the rebuilding of the Church in North America as the next major step in our embodiment of the Marianist charism in and for our time and place.

Having spoken of the Marianist charism in terms of development and development-in-waiting, we may add another level, development-emerging.

In the emerging appreciation of the interdependence of the branches of the Marianist Family, we see the additional development of the Marianist charism straining for a full flowering. However tentative, there is a momentum at work in the Marianist Family tending to the development of that "common missionary vision," which Fleming suggests will lead to the rekindling of vitality among us.

Recognizing it as arising in the context of, and in response to, the ecclesio-social devastation of the French Revolution, the Marianist thing was described earlier as: Chaminade's Providentially inspired, Marian spirit-animated mission, the promotion and animation of the Sodality oriented to the reanimation of the French people's faith and Christian life, and the rebuilding of the Church in France.

Situating North American Marianists today in the context of our acute ecclesio-social crisis, a developed sense of the Marianist charism responding to the contemporary crisis may be described now as follows: By the grace of God, our inheritance of Chaminade's Providentially inspired, Marian spirit-animated mission, the multiplication of communities of faith oriented to the reanimation of our people's faith and Christian life, and the rebuilding of the Church in North America.

This is development of the Marianist charism beginning as recovery. This is the gift we have to offer to the Church in our time and place. This is what fidelity to the Marianist charism entails today. Empowered by our Marian spirit, in *our* alliance with

Mary's mission as Mother of the Church, and in *her* alliance with us, we may be confident that we can embody and advance the Marianist charism for the years ahead.

At this point, our Newman-related consideration of the development of the Marianist charism might be profitably complemented and completed by taking note of the Vatican II-related notions of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*.

To promote the renewal of the Church and to advance its mission in the modern world, John XXIII called for *aggiornamento*, an updating of the Church, an opening of the ecclesial windows to the world. This was not, however, a matter of indiscriminately embracing the world, leaving the Church and foundational beliefs behind.

Neither a house nor a Church is renovated in the air. Both are grounded. They are built on their foundations. *Ressourcement*, a return to sources, has to do with reconnecting with foundations. *Aggiornamento*, arising from *ressourcement*, means responding to the needs of the world from a deepened faith and a renewed ecclesial life that springs from connecting more deeply with our Christian core. This is a reaching out from a deeper understanding of what we have to offer the world as a people of faith.

Marianist *aggiornamento* begins with what precedes, with what comes before. The more fruitful offering of the gift we have been given for the sake of the Church and the world begins from a *ressourcement* that connects us more deeply with our foundational roots. Authentic *aggiornamento* issues stem from a deeper understanding of our foundational Marianist vision, mission, and spirit.

If, for the Church, *ressourcement*-powered *aggiornamento* means reaching out to the world from a deeper understanding of what Christians have to offer the *world* as a people of faith, for Marianists, *ressourcement*, leading to updating, means reaching out precisely to the Church from a deeper understanding of what Marianists have to offer to the *Church*.

With that said, it may be reiterated that together the following set the Marianist Family's joint agenda for advancing the Marianist charism in the years ahead: 1) the relevance of Chaminade's vision to the ecclesio-social situation of his time, to the situation of the contemporary North American Church; 2) the enduring aptness of his concrete missionary response/project for our time and place; and 3) the import of engaging its contemporary implications for multiplication.

Finally, given that it relates quite directly to our consideration of the development of the Marianist thing, some particular attention is called for—not simply to

the term, “charism,” itself—especially to its biblical context and its function in the life of the Church.

Not a term ever used by Chaminade, “charism” is a word that has come into use in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, in particular in association with the call for the renewal of religious orders/congregations, in accord with the Spirit of the Council and in light of the Providential inspiration that moved and directed their founders.

Having long since understood the Marianist thing as the fruit of Providential inspiration experienced by Chaminade, especially at Saragossa, the notion of charism itself as a “gift of grace” adds nothing in particular to our appreciation of the Marianist thing that was not always understood to be there from the beginning. Given its relevance to our treatment of the development of the Marianist charism, however, something significant about the function of charism in scripture and the life of the Church needs to be noted.

Thematic to Paul (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11), charisms are not generic gifts situated in a vacuum. They have a context. Speaking of believers as members of the body of Christ, Paul names “gifts of grace” (prophecy, ministry/service, teaching, exhortation, etc.) as given for service, for the service of building up the body of Christ.

Thus, understood as a charism, the Marianist thing will be appreciated, as it was by Chaminade himself, given his overarching vision, to be a “gift of grace” given for the sake of building up the Church.

Recognizing with Paul that charisms are given for the building up of the Church, our contemporary use of the term may serve to challenge us to take the next step of development-in-waiting and reclaim for ourselves the foundational vision focused on rebuilding the Church now in our time and place.

Further, the ecclesially oriented character of charism may lead us to a deeper appreciation of the intimate relationship between and among the vision, mission, and spirit dimensions of the Marianist whole. Such an enriched grasp of the Marianist charism can lead us to speak of our Marian spirit-animated mission, the multiplication of communities of faith, as the development of living ecclesial cells that are allied with and participating in the mission of the Mother of the Church, forming the Church in our time and place ever more fully into the body of Christ given for the sake of the world.

However expansively Marianists today may imagine the development of the notion of charism in terms of what Paul refers to as ministry/service, charism begins and serves, in the first place for Paul, for the sake of building up the Church. That being the

case, our Marianist iteration of charism today needs to be understood and lived as oriented to enabling the Church in North America to more effectively realize its mission to the world.

So, whether understood in terms of development or *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*, it is a clear-headed and forthrightly expressed understanding of the Marianist charism that is needed to position us to embody and advance the charism in the time ahead.

We have a rich history of service to the Church and the world. In reconnecting more deeply to our foundational roots, with an eye to addressing the ecclesio-social situation of our day, and in sharing our “gift of grace” more fully, the Marianist Family is poised to live a whole new era of deeply needed service to the Church and world.