

Marianist Spirituality

by Renny Markose, SM

Human beings in general recognize that we are not just made up of our physical body that perishes at our death. There is an inner principle animating one's life, and we call it the spirit. By nature, we all look for happiness and well-being. Many believe that happiness can be achieved by working hard to secure the material and physical necessities of life. However, once these basic needs are met, many of us wonder whether we are really happy. Within most of us, there is a longing for a much deeper and interior satisfaction and happiness, a happiness that satisfies our inner spirit, the animating principle of our life. Such a life, lived in accordance with the promptings of the interior spirit, which brings fullness to human life, is generally called a spiritual life. Spirituality helps us to discover how to live a spiritual life. According to Philip Sheldrake, "spirituality involves values and a principled lifestyle both of which are supported by specific spiritual practices including prayer or meditation."¹ He also says there are three different approaches to spirituality: "First, there are religious spiritualities. Then there is the ambiguous category of esoteric spiritualities. Finally, there is an increasingly important spectrum of secular understandings of spirituality."² In this paper, we will talk about Marianist spirituality, which is a Christian spirituality.

Christian spirituality comprises a lifestyle that aims at living a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence in accord with the spirit of God in a community called the Church. For Christianity, all the definitions of spirituality agree on these points: reference to Christ, to the Spirit, and to the Church; and a faith in the presence of God's Spirit in concrete life situations. A Christian believes that the spirit that animates the life of a person is the Holy Spirit, the breath of God. Therefore, a spiritual person must live according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. For Christians, the reference to live such a life is Jesus Christ because he was conceived in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit and lived a Spirit-filled life from the moment of his conception.³ In sum, Christian spirituality consists of

¹ Philip Sheldrake, "What is Spirituality?" in *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, England: Oxford Academic, 2012), <https://doi-org.libproxy.udayton.edu/10.1093/actrade/9780199588756.003.0002>, accessed Sept. 23, 2024.

² Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction*, 9.

³ Ernesto Maria Caro Osorio, *Voglio essere santo . . . Maria mostrami il cammino* (Rome, 1996), 26-39; trans. Timothy Phillips, SM, Aug. 2024.

believing in Jesus Christ and living out that belief by conformity to Christ's life on this earth. Almost every epoch and every culture in Christian history has given birth to various ways and methods of imitating Christ's life. Thus, we have numerous Christian spiritualities known by different names, and Marianist spirituality is one among them. What is distinctive about Marianist spirituality? Or what does Marianist spirituality offer that other Christian spiritualities do not have? Or how does Marianist spirituality differ from other spiritualities? Marianist Father Quentin Hakenewerth's words are a good starting point to discuss these questions.

The uniqueness of our [Marianist] spirituality does not lie in the fact that we have elements which are not found elsewhere. All the essential elements of the life of the Spirit should be found in every spirituality. What is unique is the particular emphasis that is given, the specific methods used, and the particular way of understanding and living the life of the Spirit. Our spirituality identifies us in the sense that it does shape our attitudes, our outlook, and our dispositions.⁴

To make this point clear, he provides a helpful example from everyday life.

Usually just a glance at a face is enough to recognize someone. Yet every face has the same components: a mouth, a nose, two eyes, eyebrows, ears, and so on. The same essential elements are found in every face, but when we see them together, we recognize the face of an individual person, a face that identifies the person for us. It is not the essential elements that identify the face for us; rather, it is the particular form or pattern of the essential parts together. It may be the way some parts are emphasized or the way they are related to one another, or the way certain characteristics are highlighted. . . . So, it is with spirituality.⁵

Thus, Marianist spirituality contains essential elements that every Christian spirituality possesses, but it also has certain characteristics that give it a proper identity. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the special elements of Marianist spirituality to understand its uniqueness.

⁴ Quentin Hakenewerth, SM, *A Manual of Marianist Spirituality* (Dayton, Ohio: NACMS, 2000), viii.

⁵ Hakenewerth, *A Manual of Marianist Spirituality*, vii.

Blessed Father William Joseph Chaminade, Founder of the Marianists, used the single expression, “the stamp of the institute,” to describe the spirituality of the Marianists. He said that a religious of Mary is marked with a special stamp, “the interior spirit.” “It is the interior spirit,” he said during the retreat of 1821, “that ought to characterize us.”⁶ Father Joseph Simler, SM, describes the original vision of Chaminade about Marianist spirituality: “According to the thought of the Founder, this interior spirit of the religious of Mary should proceed from four essential, characteristic elements: devotion to Mary, modesty, faith, and the family spirit.”⁷ This is what the Founder desired for his religious institutes as their identifying mark.

It is important to note here that the Marianist spirituality we are talking about is not just the spirituality of the religious orders that Father Chaminade founded; the foundation of these religious institutes happened several years after founding and leading numerous lay Catholic communities called Sodalities. Hence, Marianist spirituality encompasses the spirituality of all these foundations that together are known as the Marianist Family. The Founder, from the first foundation in 1800, always insisted that *devotion to Mary* is the first mark of his religious family. His insistence on the special role of Mary in Marianist spirituality is evident in *The Manual of the Servants of Mary*, the first manual he prepared for his Sodality. “The new Sodalities are not only Sodalities in honor of the Blessed Virgin; they are a holy militia advancing in the name of Mary, intending to combat the infernal powers under the protection of her who is destined to crush the head of the serpent.”⁸ Later, after founding the religious institute for men, he affirmed this in 1821: “The spirit of the Institute is the spirit of Mary; this explains everything! It is essential, therefore, that we acquire the interior spirit.”⁹

Why an insistence on Mary? As mentioned earlier, the goal of every Christian spirituality is to develop a way of life in conformity with Christ’s life. Father Hakenewerth says, “A [Christian] spirituality is a set of principles, guidelines, and methods we follow in order to live the life of the Spirit of Jesus in our own life.”¹⁰ We often look for models and examples when we think of practicing our spirituality in concrete life situations. Father Chaminade was moved deeply by the way Mary cooperated with the Holy Spirit in God’s

⁶ Joseph Simler, SM, *William Joseph Chaminade: The Founder of the Marianists* (Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission, 1986), 277.

⁷ Simler, *William Joseph Chaminade*, 278.

⁸ Simler, *William Joseph Chaminade*, 131.

⁹ William Joseph Chaminade, *Marian Writings*, vol. 2 (Dayton: MRC, 1980), § 765, p. 305.

¹⁰ Hakenewerth, *A Manual of Marianist Spirituality*, vii.

plan of salvation. The quality of her spiritual life brought forth Jesus Christ, the Son of God, into the world. The Holy Spirit formed Jesus Christ through Mary. The conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary was an act of the Spirit of God made possible by Mary's "yes" that she uttered in faith. And Jesus, who was born of Mary, manifested the action of the Spirit in his human nature. Therefore, Father Chaminade believed Mary is the model of bringing the life of Jesus to anyone who would believe. He says: "When Mary consented to the Incarnation of the Word . . . she conceived him in his entirety, that is, in his natural as well as his mystical body. She could not separate him from what was to form one with him. . . . When Mary conceived the savior in her physical womb, she also conceived in her spirit, by her faith, all Christians are members of the Church, the mystical body of Christ."¹¹

However, Mary is not just an external model for a person to live Marianist spirituality. Modeling our life after the life of Mary helps us to become more and more like Jesus. According to Father Hakenewerth: "The more consciously we live the presence of Mary in our life, the more we allow her presence to form our own interior personality in the image of Jesus . . . the model is within, so we generate within us the very virtues of Jesus himself. . . . Any influence she has on us will be in the direction of becoming more like Jesus and one with him."¹²

Thus, devotion to Mary helps us to take on the virtues of Mary. By practicing these virtues, we allow God's Spirit to work within us to form us in the virtues of Christ.

The importance given to Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, is thus one of the important features that distinguishes Marianist spirituality from other Christian spiritualities. This special characteristic of Marianist spirituality is manifested in the daily dedication that a Marianist makes to the mother of Christ. Regarding this special dedication, which is unique to the Marianists, Marianist Father James Heft writes: "There is no other dedication to Mary that is exactly the same. That is why the Society of Mary exists."¹³ The importance of the example of Mary in Marianist spirituality is nicely summed up in the *Rule of Life of the Society of Mary*.

[Mary] shows us the way of true Christian life. Following her example of faith, poverty of spirit, and attentiveness to the Lord, we hope to reflect to those around

¹¹ Chaminade, *Marian Writings*, vol. 2, § 482, p. 185.

¹² Hakenewerth, *A Manual of Marianist Spirituality*, 27.

¹³ James Heft, SM, "Mary, A Gift from God," *Alive*, vol. 21, no. 2, 5.

us Mary's warmth of welcome to God and to others. Like her, we wholly commit ourselves to the mystery of our vocation.¹⁴

Mary can guide us on our spiritual path because she is the first human person who practiced true Christian spirituality. Mary's openness to the action of the Holy Spirit in her life came from her strong faith. *Living out the faith of Mary* is another characteristic of Marianist spirituality. What is special about Mary's faith?

From the moment she gave her consent to be the mother of the Incarnate Word, she lived a life of fidelity to the action of the Holy Spirit. She surrendered herself completely to be guided by God's Spirit and God's ways. It is her faith in God and her cooperation to the action of the Holy Spirit that brought forth Jesus Christ to the world and through him a new life in abundance to humanity. And her unchanging trust in God's promises helped her to remain firm even when standing at the feet of her dying son. It is her faith and love that prompted her to remain with her son's disciples and to cooperate again with the Holy Spirit in the birth of the Church. Emulating the exemplary faith of Mary is a principal way to advance in Marianist spirituality.

Blessed Chaminade was overwhelmed by the faith of Mary, and he always reminded his disciples that they should find their strength and hope from her example. The Founder said to them, "If you feel moved to fear, timidity, or even distrust, think of the special protection of the august Mary all around you."¹⁵ In the unprecedented historical circumstances of his time surrounding the French Revolution, when there seemed to be no hope on the horizon, the Founder always found courage from Mary's faith.

How wonderful was the faith of the August Mary! She put faith in the mysteries revealed to her, and these mysteries were accomplished in her, and they were accomplished only because she believed. . . . Faith, accomplishment. What a lesson for us! These same mysteries are announced to us. They will be accomplished if we have faith; they will be accomplished, so to speak, in proportion to our faith. Our faith will make them substantial realities.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Rule of Life of the Society of Mary (Marianists)*, 1983, § 8.

¹⁵ Simler, *William Joseph Chaminade*, 278.

¹⁶ Chaminade, *Marian Writings*, vol. 2, § 635, p. 251.

The Founder always had this “faith-filled Marian sense of history,” which he wanted to be another mark of his religious family’s spirituality. He believed, like Mary, that God will provide a remedy for evil at the appropriate time, even when evil appears overwhelmingly powerful.

Another consequence of living a life of faith is that it moves us into action, to service. The Spirit of God fills the person with God’s love, and the person is moved to express that love to others who are also made in the image of the same God. Practicing Christian spirituality means assuming the virtues and works of Jesus. “If a virtue is really of Jesus, it moves us to service.”¹⁷ Jesus said it clearly: “I did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mt 20:28). But he began this service only after being filled with the Spirit of God (Lk 4:1). And when his hour to depart from this world came, he chose his mother to continue his mission. Hence, Marianist spirituality, which takes Mary as its model, focuses on cooperating with Mary in her mission that Jesus entrusted to her.

What was the mission Jesus entrusted to Mary? Mary began her mission from the moment of Jesus’ conception in her womb. Her primary mission was to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in forming Jesus. In other words, her first mission was to form a family, because by bringing forth Jesus to the world, she started the Holy Family. From that moment onward, Mary became Jesus’ constant companion in his mission. He associated Mary in all the mysteries of his life, his death, his resurrection, and his continuing presence and work through the Holy Spirit in the Church. Practicing Marianist spirituality requires that we allow ourselves to be formed by Mary in the likeness of Jesus, her son, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Mary’s first mission was not limited to forming Jesus physically or spiritually; she also helped form him intellectually. It was she who taught and educated him in the culture and language of the people around him in the Holy Family. The Marianists have inherited the mission of education from her. Mary educates, and education is an important means of expressing Marianist spirituality.

At the moment of his death, Jesus confided John, his beloved disciple, to Mary. In this way, she was entrusted with the mission of forming another family: John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, became her son in faith. We see her expanding this mission by being present with the disciples in the Upper Room to help build up the Church. They became her sons in faith, and she became their mother in faith. She united them like a family. Her mission was to form a new family of faith. She brought family spirit into the nascent

¹⁷ Hakenewerth, *A Manual of Marianist Spirituality*, 22.

Church. Like a true mother, she became a uniting bond of this new family, nurturing every child in the family. In Marianist spirituality, one learns to be like Mary by realizing her mission is more and more to nurture others.¹⁸

Father Chaminade wanted this *family spirit* to be another distinctive seal of his foundations. This aspect was evident from the very beginning when he began forming faith communities called Sodalities. While defining his faith communities, he wrote, “It is a community of fervent Christians who, in order to imitate the Christians of the early Church, strive by their frequent meetings to have but one heart and one soul and to form but one single family, not only as children of God, brothers of Jesus Christ, and members of his mystical Body, but also as children of Mary.”¹⁹

Chaminade believed this family spirit was a “new fulcrum” to bring unity and harmony in society torn apart by the French Revolution. He wanted his Sodalities to be families and, therefore, did not allow uncrossable barriers between various social classes beyond what was necessary. He brought this fraternal principle to a greater level when he founded the Society of Mary. Father Simler, who writes about this characteristic in his biography of the Founder, states:

The authority associated with priestly functions and the sacerdotal character was fully recognized in the family, but this authority [was to] be exercised with paternal concern and obedience rendered with filial respect. . . . [Father Chaminade] expected that in his religious societies the spirit of true fraternity would bring together priests and lay religious, lettered and unlettered, united to each other by a common devotion to Mary.²⁰

Whatever the Marianists do, they do it in a family spirit, following the instructions of the Founder. Therefore, forming faith communities and cultivating family spirit in those communities is another way of expressing Marianist spirituality.

On the whole, we see the pervasive role of Mary in Marianist spirituality. It is her special role in the Marianist way of life that makes it distinct. Marianist spirituality follows the way of Mary in designing our life-path:

¹⁸ Hugh Bihl, “The Primal Marianist Spiritual Path,” 1993, English manuscript available at NACMS; Spanish trans., *La nueva evangelización con María: La consagración mariana en la Familia marianista* (Madrid: SPM, 1994), 133-41.

¹⁹ Simler, *William Joseph Chaminade*, 131.

²⁰ Simler, *William Joseph Chaminade*, 280.

her active listening to the Holy Spirit,
her openness to grace to form Jesus in her,
her strong faith and trust in God,
her willingness to actively participate in Christ's mission of forming others to a
life of service.

It is she who shows us how to live a true Christian life. Father Heft nicely sums up the special role of Mary in Marianist spirituality. He says that the special dedication that the Marianists make to Mary has two consequences. "First, Mary, as our Mother, following the lead of the Holy Spirit, shapes us in the life of faith. Second, our dedication to Mary is apostolic. That means, like Mary, we are called to conceive Jesus in our hearts and present Him to everyone else through the formation of communities of faith and lay leaders for the Church who work for the transformation of the world."²¹

Thus, in Marianist spirituality, we approach Jesus through Mary with the help of the Holy Spirit. Mary teaches us to listen to the Spirit within us to become people of faith. For Marianists, every person is a child of Mary, and in the spirit of fraternity, we gather in communities of faith to live like Jesus, Son of God, become Son of Mary. The following two articles from the *Rule of Life* help conclude this discussion.

In calling us to be Marianists, God asks us to follow in a special way Jesus Christ, Son of God, become Son of Mary for the salvation of all. Our goal is to be transformed into his likeness and to work for the coming of his kingdom.²²

In communities inspired by faith, we seek to live like the first community of Jerusalem, having but one heart and one soul. Thus, we hope to bear witness to the presence of Christ and to show that still today the gospel can be lived in all the force of its letter and spirit.²³

These articles sum up the goal of Christian spirituality and the uniqueness of Marianist spirituality. Like any sound Christian spirituality, the goal of Marianist

²¹ Heft, "Mary, A Gift from God," 5.

²² *Rule of Life*, § 2.

²³ *Rule of Life*, § 9.

spirituality is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ and to cooperate with him in his mission. But Marianists pay special attention to Mary to achieve this goal: being filled with the Spirit, she shows us the way. She leads the path. And we do not travel alone, but with a community of faith dedicated to her mission.