What Makes a Community or Institution Marianist, Especially in Challenging Times?

by Thomas F. Giardino, SM

A few years ago, a writer from one of our Marianist universities contacted me. He was working on a story for the university's digital magazine about what made the institution distinctive from the Marianist perspective. He had an article on this topic, authored by Father David Fleming, SM, from *A New Fulcrum: Marianist Horizons Today*, but Fleming's work was several pages long, and the writer only had a couple hundred words for his story. So, he asked me, "Can you answer the question about what makes a university Marianist . . . in a paragraph . . . and get it to me in two weeks!"

Mary's "yes" got the best of me, so I agreed and then prayed. The paragraph below is what emerged, with a few minor tweaks for this article. I suggest you first slowly read the sentences in the indented paragraph below and then reflect on a story or anecdote that illustrates *your* experience with this actually happening in your community or institution, past or present.

> Because the Marianist tradition is a person-centered charism with a mission strategy, when this reality is felt by members of the community or institution, then that community is alive with Marianist sensibilities.
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> This means that persons in the community/institution experience that they individually matter, that relationships matter, that the world matters, and that there is a relationship between their participation in the community/institution, their faith, and their encounter with the common good of our society and God and Mary.
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> For this to happen, there needs to be a critical mass of persons who are in the community/institution not simply for transactional relationships but for transformational relationships. That is, they touch the meaning and purpose of the identity of these persons, what they live for.

I know there is more than one way to answer this question, and I felt the need to respond in a way that leverages Father Chaminade's Marian principles that offer a fresh perspective from our tradition. If you are reading this article and are a member of the Marianist Family, I suspect you are part of a community or institution because of and for transformational relationships and not only for transactional ones. (*A brief note*: All communities have institutional elements, but not all institutions have communal elements.)

Let me start with a story. It's about Father Chaminade when he comes back from his exile in Saragossa, Spain, after the French Revolution, and the Church in all of France—including in Bordeaux, where he lives—is really in shambles. For example, there are more than 200 parishes without pastors in the Bordeaux archdiocese to which he returns.

What did he do that was so important that the archbishop didn't press him to become a pastor? He began by bringing people together in communities because he was convinced that personal and institutional change happens best in rich communal environments. He often called it "the contagion of good example."[1] Chaminade was still in a challenging time even if the violence of the French Revolution had subsided. He recognized that traditional administrative solutions would not be sufficient to rebuild the foundations of the faith.

This may sound obvious, but it is an intentional, Marian principle and practice of Marianist Lay Communities (MLC) and vowed religious communities. Chaminade knew that we form communal and institutional structures, but they also form us and the relationships in them. For these structures to be nourishing and fruitful, they need to be filled with meaning and purpose. That is, they relate to what people live for. This is the principle that leads to practices that enable the principle.

He also knew that life in these communal environments spills over into mission, leading to ministries. These insights were infused into the early Bordeaux Sodality (MLC), the communities of the Marianist Sisters (Daughters of Mary Immaculate), the Marianist brothers (Society of Mary), and then the schools that they established.

The lay communities, the religious orders, and the schools grew so attractive that they expanded almost exponentially—of which we are the heritage. The growth was a grace; however, given this phenomenon of when organizations (like communities or schools) become large and complex, Chaminade recognized there is a tendency for these organizations to lose their heart and soul or to fray at the edges and pull apart. This may sound familiar, as it seems to be endemic to any human association. We sometimes hear this lament about the Church these days, and other institutions. People lament and say they are "too corporate" and "not very Marianist"!

However, Chaminade had another insight that he built into his communities. He knew you needed to have a group of people who were "light and salt"[2] in the midst of the community, not as some elitist group but as a service that attracts people into the ways of transformational relationships, distinct from transactional relationships. "Attraction" is key to Marianist collective life. (I will explain light and salt shortly.)

Attraction is a Marian principle that leads to certain practices in Marianist institutions and communities. We draw people into the community by attraction; people

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[1] Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 89 to Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, Mar. 19, 1817; vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 208.
[2] Hugh Bihl, SM, *Monasticism and Marianist Religious Life*, Mon. Series, Doc. 10 (Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission, Mar. 1973), pp. 48–53, especially pp. 49–50.

see something in the community that is already in them, and they are drawn to the group. We often see this dynamic in Marianist educational institutions when young adults come for a campus tour and decide to attend the institution because they "felt something . . . felt 'at home.'" It resonated with who they are in some way.

I often explain it as the resonance of two guitars next to each other. If I pluck the D string on one guitar, it causes the D string on the other to vibrate. Analogously, the Marianist charism resonates with individuals who discover they have a shared, internal experience of the Holy Spirit when they notice the charism in institutions and persons who call themselves Marianist.

Marianists know that the environment is formative. The "something" that is experienced comes to expand the personality and horizons of those who are searching. They "fit" as they understand themselves to be or what they desire to become. The experience is transformational and not simply transactional. (In the school context, it is more than "I pay tuition, and I get a degree"; or in a community, "I solve my loneliness need"—though neither of these is bad in itself, as God works in mysterious ways.) It is not always why one comes, but why one stays.

Another key Marian and Chaminadean principle is Chaminade's call for some people within a community or institution to serve as light and salt. This principle directly supports the Marianist practices that are "attractive." Light means *a source of wisdom*, and salt means being a living *witness to the spirit* that should permeate all members of the group. We see this dynamic played out in the "State" in the midst of the Bordeaux Sodality and priests in the Society of Mary.

Chaminade recognized that a thriving community requires a core group, functioning as a service of attraction, drawing others away from transactional and toward transformational relationships. As light, they are a source of wisdom, providing clarity, direction, and visible guidance within the community or institution. As salt, they are quiet and unassuming witnesses to the spirit that ought to permeate the group.

Let me say a bit more about salt, lest it remain abstract. For those of us who like to cook, we know salt becomes effective as it gives of itself to stimulate flavor in the rest of the recipe. If we see distinct salt crystals at the end of the cooking, it has failed; there is no "taste" of grace! Holding on to oneself results in isolation and profound blandness in the institution or community. Like Mary of Nazareth, an unassuming presence allows others to come alive with what they have internally, bringing out the flavor of the entire mission.

But if we give of ourselves (like Mary did), this allows the other people (the "ingredients," as it were) to come alive with what they have within themselves to bring about the end result. Without the salt giving of itself, there is a blandness. This is part of Marianist spirituality. Marianist spirituality is an apostolic spirituality. With self-giving salt, all is more flavorful.

This dynamic of selflessness is where being light and salt becomes real. We want to continue to be person-centered and with a mission strategy and live creatively in the tensions that inevitably arise. Contemporary communities and institutions exist in the real world, constantly subjected to the challenge of the fragmenting forces of market-driven logic and social media isolation.

To sustain a community or institution characterized by effective and satisfying transformational relationships, "frequent reunions" (as Chaminade would say) are integral. Today, this takes challenging and vital choices to come together frequently and to include serious, regular, and ongoing formation or professional development. While video conferencing is often convenient or necessary, leadership in Marianist groups encourages face-to-face interactions as often as possible to reinforce the durability of relationships and enhance interpersonal dynamics. "Durable" and "frequent" are characteristics of transformational relationships in the Marianist tradition.

If the "light and salt" dynamic has merit, then "what you are living for" is key for your own vocation. Yes, in a holistic manner, we are part of a family, a household, a community, and institutions all at once!

Let me close with a thought from Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist monk who said this about himself, as one who combined serious activism and prayer with the responsibilities of community life with his brothers.

"If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for."[3]

This is an insight about a transformational dynamic. It is being light and salt as part of a Marian-inspired community or institution that is attractive to others, even in challenging times.

[3] *What I Am Living for: Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton*, Jon M. Sweeney, ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2018), p. vi.