I. Introduction

This document is a synthesis of the results of the synodal consultation completed by the Marianist Lay Communities in response to the invitation of Pope Francis in his apostolic constitution, *Episcopalis Communion* (6.3), to consult with our membership as part of this global process. The Marianist Lay Communities are an international, private association of the faithful and were granted a Decree of Ecclesial Recognition by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on February 22, 2006. The Marianist Lay Communities originated in 1800, when a group of twelve individuals gathered under the direction of Fr. William Joseph Chaminade in Bordeaux, France in order to reimagine and renew the future relationship of the Church and society in the wake of the French Revolution.

Today, Marianist Lay Communities (MLCs) can be found in 32 countries spread across all 5 continents. The men and women of these communities are responding to a call from God to live and share the Marianist charism and spirituality, which includes the deep cultivation of a faith of the hear and joining in alliance with Mary, the Mother of God, to carry out her mission of bringing Christ to the world. Marianist Lay Communities fulfill this mission through careful attention to what *Gaudium et Spes* calls the “signs of the times,” and by responding through the formation of small, faith communities active in the Church and world according to their lay state.

The Marianist Lay Communities happily share their charism, spirituality, and mission with the three other branches that have come into being since the founding of the MLCs and are known collectively today as the Marianist Family: the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (FMI), the Society of Mary (SM), and the Alliance Mariale (AM). While each branch of the Marianist Family lives our charism according to their distinct state of life, all branches collaborate closely with one another as a discipleship of equals. As equals, each branch brings its own distinct perspective and resources into collaboration with the other branches through formal and informal means in order to help achieve our common mission of bringing Christ to the world. In this way, the Marianist Family embodies a church in which all members of the faithful – lay as well as ordained and vowed religious; women as well as men – are afforded opportunities for participation and leadership.

This synthesis report is the result of a consultation with the membership of the Marianist Lay Communities as an international association of the faithful, and is warmly offered to the General Secretariat of the Synod in preparation for the upcoming Synod of Bishops. The Marianist Lay Communities enthusiastically support both the Synod and Roman Pontiff’s efforts to be attentive to the *sensus fidei* of the People of God, and have arranged this document to outline our consultation process, primary findings, and recommendations for the Synod to consider. The conclusion of our primary findings will be threefold:

1. The future of the Catholic Church must have a dynamic Marian face;
2. The Church must continue to support the full participation of the laity in its life and mission; and
(3) Associations of the faithful are excellent means of discerning the signs of the times and responding at the level of concrete action and praxis.

Moreover, this synthesis will suggest that if the discernment of the Synod of Bishops concurs with these findings, two steps can be taken in order to further support this vision of the future Catholic Church. First, we believe the Synod of Bishops can support the work of associations of the faithful by continuing to grant legitimacy to their role in the Church and by promoting participation in such associations as a good means of living a life of faith. Second, we believe that the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and especially the Holy See, can play an essential role in aiding the work of international associations of the faithful by facilitating opportunities for global cooperation among these vital means of lay participation in the life and ministry of the Church in the world.

II. Process and Methods

Following our Marian character, the normal discernment processes of the Marianist Lay Communities share many aspects in common with concept of synodality. As such, it was possible to integrate the processes recommended for the Synod with forms of Marianist discernment already taking place. The results of three processes were merged together into this synthesis.

First, our North American region had recently finished the completion of a Year of Shared Discernment when the Synod processes were announced. This year was an opportunity for the communities of North America to come together in meetings spread across an entire year to focus on their collective identity and mission. Second, Lay Marianists from all our countries around the world have been reflecting on three key questions in preparation for our international assembly this summer, the theme of which is putting into effect the vision of Fratelli Tutti. Those three questions are:

1. What are the inspirations we discover in Fratelli Tutti that are closest to the Marianist Charism?
2. Among the many proposals of Fratelli Tutti, what are we already doing in the MLCs of my community, country, and region?
3. What are the challenges and concrete actions to which we feel called to respond as Marianists, in the MLCs, and in the Marianist Family?

Our system of National and Regional Responsibles collected responses to these three questions from Lay Marianists around the globe, and those responses have helped inform this synthesis report.

Third and finally, after the announcement of the Synod of Bishops and publication of supporting materials, a group of our Lay Marianists worked with our leadership to survey our membership and hold listening sessions specific to the Synod. During this process, we focused on four questions:

1. What in the Church and in our charism brings us joy?
2. Who is neglected within the Church?
3. What should the Church stop doing?
4. What can our charism offer the Church to start doing?

These questions prompted dialogue in our association that spanned not only across countries, but across continents and language barriers as well.
While our summary of findings will be presented below, it is our hope that two points can be gathered from this discussion of our process alone. In the first place, we wish to suggest that the spirit and principle of synodality is already alive and well in the Church – not only through diocesan and parochial structures, but also through other means such as the Church’s many vibrant associations of the faithful. In the second place, our Marianist Lay Communities take very seriously the call to participate in the Church’s communion and mission according to our distinctive charism. Therefore, we also hope to demonstrate a high degree of conformity to the five “criteria of ecclesiality” that Pope John Paul II outlined for lay groups in his exhortation Christifideles Laici (n.30). We emphasize these two points because it is our sincerest hope that this demonstration of the spirit of synodality and everyday participation of our association of the faithful in the life of the Church affirms the present efforts of Pope Francis and this Synod of Bishops not only through our words but moreover through the actions that our association has and will continue to carry out.

III. Primary Findings

Finding 1: The Marianist Lay Communities believe that the Catholic Church of the future must have a dynamic Marian face

In many ways, our Marian spirituality begins with Mary’s fiat, or “yes”, to accept the gift and mission of bringing Christ to the world. We find that this aspect of Marian spirituality is universal and primal, because it relates to the foundational human experience of standing before the Holy Spirit, hearing a vocational calling to serve God in a way that we might not fully understand, listening to and truly receiving that call, and then affirming and responding to that call with a deep faith of the heart. This “yes” takes place prior to – though not opposed to – ecclesial structures or dogmatic confessions, and therefore relates to people on a very human level. We believe that this is the same sentiment the Church magisterium expresses when it notes that the Marian dimension of the Church precedes others such as the Petrine or Pauline.

During our listening processes, these aspects of our Marian spirituality came up through concrete examples and sentiments. For example, many of our members related how either themselves or others they know have been attracted to the Marianist way of life even while they were not yet certain about – or were perhaps even skeptical of – some aspects of the Catholic Church. However, this was not the experience of everyone. For many, the Marianist way of life has been a means for devout Catholics to explore their faith even more deeply. As we continued to listen, what became clear is that a truly Marian spirituality greets each person at whatever point they are at on their faith journey at a deep and human level and invites them into a more profound relationship with God. In this way, our Marian spirituality necessarily presumes the dignity of all people as well as the universal possibility and call to holiness of each person. From a Marian perspective, no one should be left out or uninvited.

Moreover, Marianists recognized that Mary’s way of bringing Christ to the world is inherently maternal and gestational. This means that religious formation in a Marian way is gradual and takes much time and patience. One of our founders, Fr. William Joseph Chaminade, is often attributed with the words:

I am like a brook that makes no effort to overcome obstacles in its way. All the obstacles can do is hold me up for a while, as a brook is held up; but during that time it grows
broader and deeper and after a while it overflows the obstruction and flows along again. That is how I am going to work.

Although this way of working may not initially appear Marian, for us, it wonderfully illustrates how the gradual and life-giving spirituality we see in Mary can work in the Church and society.

This maternal and gestational way of forming people in our Catholic and Marianist tradition often opens up a faith journey for people who were struggling otherwise. For example, we heard time and again in our listening processes how many lay people have an experience of the Church as a moralistic, “finger wagging” institution that is more concerned with a strict code of rules than cultivating a deep relationship with God and Christ through the experience and power of the Holy Spirit. Although the specific issues and methods of exclusion that our members report varied widely, the solution to their issues was consistent. Regardless of the particular nature of their struggle, our members repeatedly expounded on how affirming and life-giving it is to experience and participate in the Church through hospitable and inclusive communities such as the MLCs, who are very slow and intentional with their ways of inviting and forming members of the faithful. Because of our alliance with Mary and her mission, our communities are formed in familial and egalitarian ways that build intentional relationships with each member and is attentive to the unique needs of all.

Like Mary in the midst of the first Church community, these communities do not detract from the other dynamics present in the Church, but rather help sustain the faith, prayer, and expectation of the Spirit in the Church. We believe that this Marian spirit of hospitality and inclusion is more necessary today than ever in the life of the Church.

Finding 2: The Church must continue to support the full participation of the laity in its life and mission

The spirit of Vatican II renewed within the Church its calling to participate in the divine economy of salvation and liberation that God is working in the world. This spirit greatly reinvigorated the Marianist Lay Communities, in part because of the crucial role that is asked of the lay faithful in order to carry out the mission of the Church in the modern world. The Marianist Lay Communities not only believe in, but moreover bear witness to the assertion in Lumen Gentium that the lay faithful “are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world,” (Lumen Gentium, n.31). The Marianist Lay Communities celebrate this affirmation of our mission, and since the time of our foundation have succinctly expressed this idea through the axiom: “We are all missionaries.”

In our Marian way, this missionary zeal is lived out in how we dedicate time to personal and community prayer, discern our personal vocations, ministries, and life-styles in the context of Christian community, open ourselves to spiritual guidance, and develop skills to help correlate cultural and social analysis to the good news of the Gospels. Contrary to the accusations that arise from time to time out of various corners of the Church, we do not believe that our calling to live the Gospel in the “everyday” or “secular” realm that is, as laity, natural to us (LG, n.31) in any way diminishes the sacramental character of the Church. On the contrary, our alliance with Mary of Nazareth and our acceptance of her mission to allow God to enter the world of history through her and in her allows us to see this way of life is deeply incarnational.

In our listening processes, the necessity of these incarnational aspects of lay Christian life as a response to the challenges facing the Church and society today was made abundantly clear. Once again, the particular challenges facing the Church and society are often dependent on the global region, local
culture, and various socio-economic factors. In some places, the Church faces the challenge of a rapid decline in clerical and vowed religious vocations. In other places, our communities have seen an increased need for more dedicated and well-educated catechists as a result of the fact that the populations they work with are increasingly educated, thoughtful, and adult about matters of faith. Moreover, the incarnational character of the Catholic faith and moral life means that it must extend outward into every sector of the world. On this point, our listening processes heard a wide range of perspectives that indicate an increasing need to make matters of faith and morals concrete in areas especially occupied by the laity such as law, education, science, business, and medicine. In each example, what is evident is that the Church needs the knowledge, skills, and experience of lay people who are deeply involved in each of these cultural and vocational areas.

Belonging to an association of the faithful and a local MLC has allowed each of our members to more thoroughly and intentionally integrate their personal and professional lives with the Good News of the Gospels. Therefore, our listening processes indicate not only that the full participation of the laity in the life of the Church is necessary and healthy, but also that the activity of associations of the faithful are one vital means to achieving that participation.

Finding 3: Associations of the faithful are excellent means of discerning the signs of the times and responding at the level of concrete action and praxis

Among the many responsibilities of the Church, there has always been “the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel,” (Gaudium et Spes, n. 4). This is yet another expression of the council fathers that resonates deeply within the Marianist Family, who takes the task of interpreting the signs of the times in light of the Gospel as one of our most fundamental callings. Born in the wake of the French Revolution, the Marianist Lay Communities are especially aware not only of that fact that every era will see great changes in its social, cultural, economic, and technological sectors but moreover that the rate of such changes appears to be increasing as well. As the Magisterium is well aware, these rapid changes pose many advantages to both the material and spiritual condition of the human family, but they also pose significant moral and spiritual challenges as well.

Some of these challenges naturally pertain to the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Church; however, our listening process also discerned a set of pragmatic challenges as well. Indeed, when reflecting on the discussions of our listening processes, one of the reoccurring themes was the necessity of continuing to cultivate a Christian response to the signs of the times, not only in the domain of correct theory and teaching, but also in the domain of concrete action and praxis. The Marianist Lay Communities believe that our Marian forms of discernment are especially oriented toward this second domain of action and praxis. On this point, we do not mean to diminish the close relationship between theory and practice; nor do we wish to diminish the importance of the voice of the lay faithful in the ongoing development of Church teaching. Rather, our point here is to emphasize the notion of one our founders, Fr. Chaminade, who was fond of saying that “new times call for new methods.”

As our times continue to change, the Marianist Lay Communities often take solace and inspiration in the story of Mary at the wedding feast at Cana. Seeing a concrete need in the world, Mary implores the servants to “do whatever He tells you,” (Jn 2:5). In many ways, the core of this message stays the same from age to age. However, the pragmatic aspect of “whatever He tells you” adapts and changes to fit each new context. In Cana, seeing a concrete need was a matter participating in the
conversion of water into wine. Today, discerning the signs of the times will involve contemporary issues such as the conversion of oppositional and overly politicized disputes into the productive discourse of a community committed to the common good. In this way, new times call for new methods. These new methods may be ways of organizing one’s personal, family, professional, and social life; or they may be new techniques for adapting the use of new technologies for the spiritual and material wellbeing of all; or again, they may be any other number of issues pertaining to the type of practical, “how to” knowledge necessary to live out our faith and mission in day to day life. Because associations of lay people are deeply embedded in these various contexts, they are particularly well-suited to help discern not only the signs of the times, but also the practical steps needed to respond to those signs in a manner fitting the faith and moral teaching of the Church.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Catholic Church entering the third millennium must continue to exhibit a dynamic Marian face that is familial and inclusive in its mission of bringing Christ to the world. We believe that the Marian dimension of the Church will aid in promoting the full, active participation of the laity in the life and mission of the Church, as well as assist in the Church’s responsibility of interpreting the signs of the times in light of the Gospel. Moreover, this synthesis has promoted the idea that associations of the faithful can be – and are already – strong and vibrant currents within the Church that will help achieve each of these goals for the future. Importantly, this synthesis document has also made the case that associations of the faithful are willingly and successfully working alongside the many other communities, societies, and institutional structures of the Church. Associations like the Marianist Lay Communities help support vibrant parochial and diocesan communities, and they are working fervently to carry out the teachings and exhortations of the Magisterium.

As a result of these findings, there are two actions we believe can be taken by the Synod of Bishops in response to the call our association has heard from the Holy Spirit. First, we believe the bishops can support the work of associations of the faithful by continuing to grant legitimacy to their role in the Church and promote participation in associations of the faithful as a good means of living a life of faith. While we believe and accept that the primary means of cultivating new vocations to our association must be the example of our own life and work as attractive communities of faith, the written and verbal support of the bishops for lay vocations within associations of the faithful would go a long way to help build further momentum among the faithful.

Second, we believe that the ecclesiastical hierarchy can play an essential role in facilitating global cooperation among international associations of the faithful. Associations like the Marianist Lay Communities are rapidly increasing in both our numbers and our capacity to be of service to the Church and world. At the same time, the pace at which we must discern the signs of the times and develop new methods for the missionary work of our associations is also increasing rapidly. These challenges are often practical in nature and can be more easily responded to when ideas and resources are shared among the various associations of the faithful.

In our efforts to meet these challenges, our association has benefited from informal relationships with other associations. Therefore, we propose that the Holy See and ecclesiastical hierarchy consider facilitating official gatherings of associations of the faithful in order to promote cooperation among the associations and therefore increase our respective abilities to carry out our charism and mission in our rapidly changing world. Topics for such gatherings could be pragmatic in nature and include sharing and collaboration on topics such as the appropriate use of new technologies,
incorporation of faith and one’s vocation in the context of family life, how to develop the institutional capacity of associations of the faithful in life-giving manner, and so forth. In short, more opportunities to gather and share how we live our respective charisms and fulfill our missions would greatly increase our ability to be of service to the Reign of God.

The Marianist Lay Communities offer these two suggestions in response to what we have heard while listening to our membership throughout this synodal process. Regardless of whether or not these particular suggestions are a viable path forward, we are convinced that associations of the faithful are and will continue to be an excellent means of promoting a dynamic Marian face of the Church, facilitating the full participation of the laity in the life and mission of the Church, and continuing to discern the signs of the times in light of the Gospel. May God bless this process of listening to the sensus fidei of the People of God, and may the Holy Spirit be with all the bishops throughout the Synod.

May the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit be glorified in all places through the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

Béatrice Leblanc,
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Signed on June 30, 2022

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