MARIANIST LAY COMMUNITIES IN A SYNODAL PERSPECTIVE

Circular No 1

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CONTEXT OF THE SYNODEAL PROCESS

As the Preparatory Document (DP) of the synod states, "the Church of God is called together in Synod" starting the journey on 9-10 October 2021 in Rome, the title of which is "For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission".

Pope Francis invited the whole Church to reflect on a decisive theme for its life and mission: "Precisely the path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium" (Vademecum n.1.2.).

In order to situate ourselves succinctly in the process, we recall that the first phase concluded on 15 August 2022, with the presentation of the syntheses of the local Churches; we are currently finalising phase 2, reflecting on the Document for the Continental Stage and presenting the 7 Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies before 31 March 2023, which will open Phase 3, preparatory to the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

It seems necessary to keep in mind the fundamental question that drives and guides us on this path:

"How is this journey which enables the Church to proclaim the Gospel, according to the mission entrusted to her, taking place today at various levels (from the local to the universal) and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a Synodal Church?"

As the Vademecum (V) of the synod tells us, "this rediscovery of the synodal roots of the Church will involve a process of learning together in humility how God is calling us to be Church in the third millennium".
This process reminds us again and again that it always starts from **LISTENING**: "It is particularly important that this process of listening takes place in a spiritual atmosphere that favors openness to sharing and listening" (V n.1.1); "The aim of the present Synod is to listen" (V n.1.3). And it mentions to us the attitudes with which to face this journey, among others, **humility** in listening, **courage** in speaking, **openness** to conversion and change, a Church that listens and is **on the way**, overcoming the plague of **clericalism**, combating the virus of **self-sufficiency**, giving birth to **hope**, and dreaming and looking to the **future** (V n. 2.3).

**THE WORKING DOCUMENT FOR THE CONTINENTAL PHASE (DEC)**

Millions of people from all over the world have been involved in the activities of the Synod and along the way have experienced the **joy of finding themselves** as brothers and sisters in Christ (DEC n. 3).

As stated in point 17, "there is a strong mobilization of the People of God, the **joy of meeting, walking together and speaking freely**".

The second chapter presents a biblical icon - the image of the tent with which chapter 54 of the book of Isaiah begins - "**Enlarge the space of your tent**". This tent is a space of communion, a place of participation and a basis for mission (DEC n. 10-11).

They help us today to focus on what the Lord is calling us to through the experience of a lived synodality: "**Enlarge the space of your tent, spread out the awnings of your dwelling (home), do not restrict them, lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes**" (Is 54,2) (DEC n. 25).

To get ready, it is necessary to extend the tent, acting on the three elements of its structure: the awnings, which protect from the sun, wind and rain, delineating a space for living and coexistence. The ropes, which hold the awnings together; they must balance the tension needed to prevent the tent from collapsing with the flexibility to cushion the movements caused by the wind. And the stakes, which anchor the structure to the ground and ensure its solidity, but are still able to move - the foundation of faith that does not change, but can be moved. At its centre is the tabernacle, i.e. the presence of the Lord. This is how many syntheses imagine the Church: a spacious but not homogeneous dwelling, capable of sheltering everyone, but open. (DEC n. 26-27).

Widening the tent requires **welcoming others into it, accommodating their diversity**. It implies, therefore, a willingness to die to oneself out of love. The fruitfulness of the Church depends on the acceptance of this death, which is not, however, an annihilation, but an experience of self-emptying in order to allow oneself to be filled by Christ through the Holy Spirit (DEC n. 28).
Chapter three, "Towards a Missionary Synodal Church" presents the vision of a Church capable of radical inclusiveness, shared belonging and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus, the center of the synodal process (DEC n. 31). The Churches have realized that the path to greater inclusiveness - the extended tent - is a gradual one. It begins with listening and requires a wider and deeper conversion in attitudes and structures (DEC n. 32).

The syntheses also reflect on the difficulty of listening deeply and accepting to be transformed by this listening (DEC n. 33).

"People are asking the Church to be a refuge for the wounded and broken, not an institution for the perfect. They want the Church to meet people where they are, to walk with them rather than judge them, to build real relationships through care and authenticity, not a sense of superiority" (DEC n. 39).

In carrying out the mission we move towards the fullness (plenitude) of our Christian vocation. To "widen the tent" is at the heart of missionary action. Therefore, a Synodal Church represents a powerful witness to the Gospel in the world (DEC n.42).

Synodality is a call from God to walk together with the whole human family (DEC n.43).

The People of God express a deep desire to hear the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. In particular, the syntheses invite us to recognise the interconnectedness of social and environmental challenges and to respond. The call to ecumenism, however, is not only directed to a common social commitment; many syntheses underline that there is no complete synodality without unity among Christians (DEC n.45 and 48).

THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE ATTITUDES OF THE SYNODAL JOURNEY

In order to dream the Church of this century, the synodal journey invites us from the outset to work in community based on active listening to others, on respect for different ideas and opinions; a way of being where the Spirit generates dialogue and communication - not confrontation - and which widens "our tent" based on discernment and consensus, leading us to INDIVIDUAL CONVERSION which will bring about the sought-after "Church going forth".

But these attitudes are much more universal than the synodal path. This world needs all people to actively listen to and respect each other in order to break the growing polarizations in economic, political, social, ... fields. We need to generate dialogues and spaces of communication where we can meet and broaden our vision and thinking (widen our tent) through discernment and individual conversion.

And this way of being must be "universal". From the circles of officials and leaders, to the circles of family and friends, to our professional and personal relationships.
We Christians must be a point of reference for a way of being here and now, humanizing our world with these attitudes, and not only in the synodal process - which has come to remind us of these essential behaviors for our ecclesiology - but also in our way of relating to each other in our lives and in our daily environment.

In particular, lay people must be able to let go of the roles that, between society, our education, our environment, our expectations of what we should be or achieve, what was expected of us, our experiences ... those things we have come to fabricate for ourselves and that hide our essence of what we really are, the fundamental thing that unites us all: Jesus.

Only from there, letting it Jesus come out in each one of us, from our true being, can we connect with each other and with everyone in a natural way through these attitudes of listening, welcoming, respect, growth, dialogue, communication, discernment and conversion.

Without fears, without prejudices, without immovable positions... with illusion, with hope, with growth, with conversion... from what we really are, EVERYTHING is possible and achievable. From a spiritual maturity, we accept the other’s point of view; we overcome the fear of confrontation, and we recognize our limits by opening ourselves to others.

One of the great challenges today is to make synodality a living and daily experience that inspires the way of being and living of everyone in the Church, and that favors synergy between the various ministries, charisms, gifts and services.

SYNODAL ATTITUDES AND THE MARIANIST FOUNDING TEXTS

Faith of the Heart and Human Relationships
Change in the Church requires the individual conversion of each one of us. As the Vademecum reminds us, "this change requires a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord sees them".

Pope Francis calls for an attitude of openness to conversion and change in the synodal process. Conversion and renewal of structures will only come about through the conversion and ongoing renewal of all members of the Body of Christ.

In his letters, Father Chaminade invites us to pass the faith entirely to the heart, loving what we believe. To live our daily life in the light of this faith, so that it becomes our path, our motive for action:
If faith, solidly anchored in your spirit from your higher studies, passes entirely into your heart. Corde creditur ad justitiam (Rom 10,10). We must love what we believe. We have very powerful reasons for credibility and, so to speak, one only needs to be reasonable in order to submit one’s reason to faith. This submission is already a great favor from God, but it only precedes the submission of the heart, and the heart is only submissive when it loves. At least I see it this way, and it would seem to me very dangerous not to see it this way in practice. Faith, especially this faith of the heart, is a great gift of God; that is why we always need to say: Domine, adauge nobis fidem (Lk 17:5). God grants, let us say, this grace easily when one exercises oneself in works of faith. Justus ex fide vivit (Heb 10,37-39; Hab 2,3-4). My dear son, what happiness for us if we can walk the rest of our days in the beautiful paths of faith, act only by faith, live only by faith! Faith which would only enlighten our spirit would not give us the life of righteousness, which is a divine life (Letters, no. 661, To Jean-Baptiste Lalanne, 23 January 1833).

He anted agreement and togetherness; the ability to see things in a welcoming and respectful way.

People act in the best possible way with the information, knowledge, environment and experiences we have had in similar situations, and which are therefore necessarily different from the information, knowledge, environment and experiences of anyone else. Thus, we need to “broaden our minds”; to accept that each person uses the resources they have at each moment in the best possible way, and that these differ from those of others. This attitude allows us to be in a position to meet the other, to come to agreement and union, rather than rapid confrontation.

M. Chevaux wrote to me almost at the same time about the difficulties which still existed between M. Clouzet and you: I answered him as follows, and I believe that all is now at peace. I do not believe that Fr. Clouzet has ever had any desire to harm you, on the contrary; but it seems that he went out of the way of charity, humility, etc. As for the college he is trying to form, I cannot believe, in spite of all that has been said, that there was even the idea of rivalling the college at the château. I very much hope that peace, union and agreement will be established and maintained among you all. M. Chevaux seems to wish it also very much, and I cannot easily work for the particular good of people when the spirits are not at peace.... I believe that M. Gaussens will be able to keep quiet; but he will always have particular ideas of his own and also for himself. I believe, as you do, that Mr. Clouzet’s departure from Saint-Remy will be good for him; but it is
above all his soul that should be healed: he must not go away wounded, for you yourself will always regret it. Be generous towards God, for God will not be overcome in his generosity towards you (Letters, no. 661, to Lalanne, 23 January 1833).

William Joseph Chaminade encouraged Adele de Trenquelléon to this flexibility and adaptation in her dealings (behavior), and spoke of "becoming docile to the breath of the action of grace". These attitudes and behaviors cannot be changed by individual effort, or rather, they cannot be changed quickly and permanently. Only by changing our deepest beliefs and allowing "the breath of grace" to work in us, can we bring this flexibility and adaptation to others into our daily behavior. Only by believing deep within ourselves that this is the way of being that we are asked to be in the world, will our behaviors respond to this "inner truth".

I often think of the community in general and of each of our daughters in particular, but especially of you, my dear daughter, whom God will want to make a saint. But you must make yourself docile to the breath of the action of grace, which must be abundant in you and which chooses so many ways to purify and sanctify you (...) Therefore, be courageous, my dear daughter, respond to God's plans, be faithful to grace and to all grace... Remember that a superior must be all for each one, and win them for Jesus Christ. She must not be distinguished by a fixed character, but according to each occasion, be in one way or another, adapting herself to every situation (Letters no. 117, to Adele).

The Community and the Union

The synodal process was always based on working in community, because it is in community that we share and grow in faith.

We have seen how the mere fact of meeting in the synodal groups has been a source of joy for the participants in the process; meeting and recognizing each other as Christians and being able to share the concerns, dreams, fears and joys of our life of faith, sitting around Jesus, allowing ourselves to be inspired by the Spirit, listening to each other and discerning together what God is asking of us today, is already one of the fruits of the process.

In the following letter, Father Chaminade alludes to the famous text of Acts 4:32, which became one of his mottos "one heart and one soul". We must strengthen the fraternal bonds between the members of the community so much that we feel it as one.
It would be very good for you to write (to Lalanne) a little letter in which you would tell him that (...) you have in your heart the most sincere desire to do all you can to promote the prosperity of the school, and to strengthen more and more the fraternal bonds which unite you in the community (...), and that you see nothing more beautiful than what Luke says of the Christians in the Church of Jerusalem: “that they were all of one heart and soul and that they had all things in common”. Dear son, that is why we must no longer speak of the past, nor go on looking for who was wrong and who was right...” (Chaminade. To Clouzet. 25-26 Sept 1833. Letters III. no. 702).

In fact, as stated in our document "MARIANIST LAY COMMUNITIES IN THE CHURCH AND IN THE WORLD", community is our choice for living our faith.

Being in community is an essential aspect of the Marianist charism and therefore defines our spirituality. In the face of individualism, we choose to live our faith in community. (2.2)

A demanded aspect of the process is the call to walk together with the whole human family (DEC n. 43). There is still a long way to go, but we must continue to cultivate a climate of dialogue in many places where Christians live in the midst of people of other confessions or non-believers, and engage in a dialogue made of daily and common life.

The following is an ecumenical text by Father Chaminade, which we Marianists, especially the religious, have continually made our own in various works in places with people of other confessions.

"You ask if Protestant students can be admitted to this school? My answer is: YES. The teachers will do for them what they do for Catholic pupils. There is no discrimination of any kind. The only suggestion is that, according to prudence, this or that exercise may be suspended from time to time for this or that individual. Never, outside of class, should Catholic pupils say anything against their Protestant classmates, nor vice versa. They should not even realize that there is the slightest difference. If the school conducts itself in this way, not only will there be no disadvantages, but there will be advantages. Let us be Catholics with firmness and to the effusion of our last drop of our blood, but let us also always be modest, moderate, that is to say truly charitable towards all, and with a gentleness
without any root of bitterness”. (Chaminade. To De Moneroc. 29 Nov 1837. Letters IV. nº 1014).

Equality and Interdependence

"Overcoming clericalism" is one of the attitudes that the Vademecum sets out in order to face the synodal process:

- The Church is the Body of Christ enriched by different charisms, where each member has a unique role to play.
- We are all interdependent and we all share the same dignity.
- It calls on pastors to listen to the flock, just as it calls on the laity to express their opinions freely and honestly.

Synodality means moving from a Church of the one to a Church in which all are related. We must overcome hierarchical logic and question the pyramidal structure. The Synodal Church is an inverted pyramid; with true equality of all the faithful cooperating in the building up of the body of Christ, so that all have the right and duty in their condition to express their opinion for the good of the Church.

To achieve a Synodal Church, we must believe that the Spirit manifests itself through any person.

The novelty of the forms and life of the lay congregations created by Father Chaminade brought him criticism from the parish priests of Bordeaux. In his response, he deploys "synodality" and his inclusive vision, for example, in the "mixed composition" in equality and parity.

3RD QUESTION

The old Congregations have done much good for more than three centuries. These Congregations which the Jesuit Fathers had first established in their colleges and from there passed on to society brought together only people of the same status. Why not stick to the experience of the past but make Congregations in a new form whose success is doubtful to say the least?

RESPONSE

We have already noted that this is by no means a rehearsal: something experimented with for twenty-four years in Bordeaux and elsewhere is not so new! We know the good Spirit that reigns in Bordeaux; how they are, in general, attached to religion and to good principles. We will not say that it is the work of the Congregation, but I am allowed to believe it clearly of enlightened people who think that a single nucleus of good people in a populous city can powerfully support good principles in it and maintain them, like a column supporting a building, even if it is only a small part of it.

But let us answer directly to the question that has been put to us: why new forms of Congregations, and why is the state of things not the same? Why do new needs call for new
and greater measures? Since the catastrophes of the Revolution, who is the wise man who does not see that the levers that moved the moral world somehow need other points of support? It is therefore only a question of knowing whether the new Congregations offer more means and resources than the old ones. That is what we believe.

The new Congregations differ mainly from the old ones in five points, which seem to us to give them advantages over them.

1. The very gathering together of various states, resulting in the cities in a complete social body enlightened by religion, which is practiced publicly, in good faith and in all its purity: this is what the society of the early Christians presents to us quite well in this century of licentiousness and impiety.

2. **Public assemblies** (at the Madeleine, on Sunday afternoons, open to the public) in which it is a matter of teaching religion in a way that is interesting and equally profitable to those who listen and to those who speak. There are, in our Congregations, simple artisans who, without departing from the modesty that befits their condition, know their religion well enough to teach it to their workers and their children, and to defend it when necessary. In these assemblies, individuals have been formed who, having become priests, are now rendering outstanding services to religion.

   Moreover, as these assemblies are public, they can be easily monitored, if necessary, by the ecclesiastical and civil authorities, which should remove any fear that they might overshadow each other.

3. **The spirit of zeal (enthusiasm) and propagation.** In the old Congregations, the aim was almost exclusively to support pious Christians in the good ways, by means of mutual edification. **But in our century, in the epoch of renewal in which we find ourselves, religion asks of its children something else. It wants all, as one, to support the zeal of its ministers and, guided by their prudence, to work for its revival.** This is the spirit which inspires the new Congregations. Each Director is a permanent missionary, each Congregation a perpetual mission.

4. **The Postulants’ class.** This is the name given to the groups of adolescents who come together after their first communion, when they are still without any help, exposed to all the dangers of the world. It is the particular work of some Congregants who apply themselves to it zealously and always under the influence of the Director. One cannot believe what good it does, not only for the children, but also for the young people who educate them. Nothing like it was seen in the old Congregations.

5. Lastly, and it would undoubtedly have been necessary to begin here because, of all our means, it is the most powerful and the most dear to us. The new Congregations are not only associations in honor of the Blessed Virgin: they are a holy militia which advances in the Name of Mary and which is convinced of fighting the infernal powers under the very guidance of and in obedience to the One who must crush the head of the serpent [cf.]

   From all these differences, it is easy to see that the new Congregations, if conducted and maintained according to the spirit of their institution, offer more help to religion than was obtained from the old Congregations. There is, therefore, **sufficient reason to establish and propagate the Congregations in their new forms.**

"WRITINGS AND WORDS. Vol 1, no. 154" (See also draft version, no. 153).
New wine, new wineskins
The Church of God is convened in synod; it is probably the first time in the history of the Church that all members of the Church are universally involved in a synod.

As the preparatory document states, we find ourselves in a historical context characterized by "epochal" changes in society and a crucial stage in the life of the Church. A context of global pandemics, local and international conflicts, the growing impact of climate change, migration, various forms of injustice, racism, violence, persecution and increasing inequalities in humanity are some of the factors.

For Father Chaminade, the phrase "Nova bella elegit Dominus" meant discovering the new ways of evangelizing that God inspired, according to the times we were living in. This phrase is more relevant than ever, in a totally different social and religious context, which we in the Marianist family refer to as "New wine, new wineskins".

"If I do not always do things as others have done them, it is undoubtedly because I do not know how to do them better, and also, it may be, because the times are not the same. Nova bella elegit Dominus" (Chaminade. To M. Trincaud, Vicar General of Agen. 1 April 1832. Letters III. nº 621)

"If I were asked today why I preferred to found a new Institute rather than to follow the rule of so many others already approved, I would reply that the history of the Church testifies that this has always been done after the storms which have shaken the Institutes at various times (...). The cause of this conduct (of establishing new rules) is not the spirit of novelty, in a state of life which proscribes novelties; the cause lies in the new relationships which the culture and the world which one wishes to sanctify must establish with the institutions which can offer them that sanctification. A new institution is appropriate to new times, places and circumstances; that institution has no need of that which refers to the old customs of the old Institutes; what it has need of is all that has to do with the present forms, which was not the case with the old Institutes. The Spirit of God does not refuse this change; what he does is to show that his influence is universal, and that he will know how to reach all men, in spite of the diversity of spirits and customs in the diversity of history" (Chaminade. To Jacoupy, bishop of Agen. 20 January 1817. Letters I. nº 85).
All Missionaries

In the next steps presented in the Working Document for the Continental Stage, the people of God express the desire to be less a maintenance and conservation Church and more a missionary Church.

The whole process "cannot be understood if it is not aimed at encouraging us to go out of ourselves and our communities of reference in order to carry out the mission entrusted to us as Church".

Father Chaminade reminded us that mission is a pillar of the Marianist charism and that we cannot abandon it. "You are all missionaries" and the works are only a means for the mission, which is none other than to multiply Christians.

Your arms seem to fall off, when you see the young men around you, who, like you, have the same mission, as you say, full of goodwill, but lacking in experience? Where have you read that the apostles, and the seventy-two disciples, acquired their experience before working at the great work entrusted to them? They were willing, it is true; but that was all. Our Lord’s disciples had no more aptitude than the Twelve Apostles. Like them they knew all their weakness, but like them they put all their trust in Him for the mission they received from Him. Alas, how we have degenerated! Where is our faith, our faith in Jesus Christ? I really have no intention of humiliating you, nor of humiliating your collaborators, but I want to awaken you all from the slumber into which you seem to have fallen, and to remind you of what you all are since your entry into the Company of Mary. You are true missionaries. The teaching of youth, whatever it may be, is certainly not the end you have set yourselves, in consecrating yourselves entirely to God, under the special protection of the august Mary. Teaching is only a means by which we use to accomplish our mission, which is to form everywhere the spirit of faith and religion, and to multiply Christians. Penetrate yourself, dear child, with these sentiments, and work to bring them into the hearts of all your brothers and co-workers; you will surely find them there in such a degree that you cannot even imagine. If you are all animated by these sentiments, then you have found the remedy for the hideous evil that reigns in the College. You are all missionaries, fulfill your mission! Perhaps the word “mission” can be tiring for some, imagining that, to be a missionary, one has to go preaching from village to village, from parish to parish, without having formed the idea of a stable and permanent mission. It is necessary to rectify all the ideas which are in conformity with this (Letters, nº 725, To Jean Chevaux, 7 February 1834).
THAT YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER

We have seen that living synodality goes beyond the synod event; it is a way of acting in everyday life, always with a view to the ultimate goal, mission.

And this way of acting requires greater awareness when we exercise any position of authority or responsibility, whether in the ecclesial sphere or in our lay life: as community leaders, as fathers or mothers, as professionals, ... today we need to exercise transforming and cooperative leadership; leaders are not managers who execute tasks, they must be inspirers around values. They go beyond the dimension of the self and are concerned with achieving the common vision with and through interaction with others.

Increasingly, we need to lead our responsibilities with emotional intelligence, sharing, interaction and involvement.

The Gospel reminds us again and again how leadership is realized in service to others. For God, authority is synonymous with service, humility and love; that is the logic of Jesus:

But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you shall be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mt 20:26-28).

For if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet (Jn 13:14).

And in the end, this individual conversion and this way of living only leads to "that we love one another", and that "we are recognized for our lives".

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another (Jn13:34-35).
Our Lady of the Pilar, grant us
strength in faith,
security in hope
and constancy in love

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