

**CIRCULAR LETTER OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL
OF THE CONGREGATION OF MARIANS OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
ON THE OCCASION OF THE SOLEMNITY OF
THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE MOST BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
DECEMBER 8, 2002**

Dear Brothers:

1. The year since the last celebration of our patronal feast has been filled with both blessings and challenges. Among the positive events that have graced our Congregation are the addition of 16 new priests and 9 perpetually professed members from Argentina, Belarus, Brazil, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, the Ukraine and the USA ¹; the celebration of the General Convention in Fatima dedicated to vocation promotion by our Congregation; the establishment of our first religious house in Cameroon (Atok) and the reopening of the formation program in Rwanda with the admission of four postulants; the further development of the project of the new Marian parish in Charkov, the project to elaborate a new Marian Ritual and Marian Prayerbook by the General Liturgical Commission, a renewed effort to promote the causes of our candidates to the altar by the General Postulator and the Vice-postulators; and the revitalization of the *MIC Information* as an instrument of communication between the General Curia and the Congregation. In addition, there were numerous worthwhile initiatives, projects and symposia sponsored by the individual Provinces, Vice Province and other communities (...).

As I look back on the past year, I have found particularly helpful for my reflection the recent document of the Holy See, *Starting Afresh From Christ*. This Instruction, which I urge all to (re)read with careful attention, provides a number of insights that can help us read well the signs of the times and draw from them priorities for our future.

2. Perhaps the most important element in the Instruction is the primacy that it gives to the spiritual life. What is meant by this emphasis is not the addition of more pious exercises to our daily life but the intensification of our relationship with God. Giving our spiritual life first place means that we "allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit to a constantly renewed discovery of God and of his Word, to a burning love for God and humanity and to a new understanding of the charism which has been given" us (N. 20). Further, since our vocation is meant to be a radical evangelical witness, intensifying our spiritual life means that we must "rediscover" the centrality of Christ in our individual and communal lives. As the Instruction points out: "Starting afresh from Christ means once again finding one's first love, the inspiring spark which first gave rise" to our following of him. "Consecrated persons cannot be creative, capable of renewing the Institute and opening new pastoral paths if they do not feel loved with this love. It is this love which makes them strong and courageous which instills fire and enables them to dare all" (N. 22).

A renewed, dynamic interior life gives rise to a confident faith, which becomes the point of departure for how we will respond to the events that I enumerated at the beginning of this letter. When we consider our experiences as a Congregation with faith, we view our history not with complacency or resignation but as unfolding under the guidance and providence of God, who as St. Paul writes, "makes all things work out for the good for those who love him (Rm. 8:28)." From this perspective, even the difficulties that we face contain within them an opportunity for a new beginning (cf. n.11), for a hopeful future. Far from making us passive, a lively faith impels us to wrestle with the challenges facing us: when struggling with the increasing age of members or lack of vocations, it impels us toward decisive action and creative reflection on new ways of presence; when faced with the need for reorganization, it helps us view change as a means to revitalization; when faced with the tragedy of scandal, it gives us strength and determination to provide an authentic witness. Placing our spiritual life first, renewing our fundamental motivation, helps us avoid the pitfall of spiritual mediocrity, of co-optation by the values of the society around us, of succumbing to the temptation of activism and efficiency in our works, and of subjecting the goals of the community to our own personal projects (cf. n. 12).

3. Another vital element for our Congregation is ongoing formation. If, as I noted above, a vibrant spiritual life is the key to renewing our religious life and witness, ongoing formation is the means by which that interior life is cultivated. As *Starting Afresh From Christ* rightly notes, we must rethink our approach to formation. In general, our attention has been focused on improving and strengthening our initial formation, and this attention has borne positive fruits. The young men emerging from our initial formation today, as either perpetually professed brothers or priests, are increasingly better formed for religious life and apostolic service. For this, I am deeply grateful to our formators, superiors and others who directly contribute to initial formation. However, while continuing our support for initial formation, I believe that we must be more serious about our formation beyond the seminary. As we rethink our approach to ongoing formation, we need to avoid the temptation to treat it like another period of instruction, focused on courses and conferences. Rather ongoing formation aims at the integration of the whole person into his religious consecration (cf. C. 147, 151). It calls for a "*theological way of thinking*"

about the consecrated life as “a never-ending formation ‘sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions in the heart the inner attitudes of the Son’ (n. 15).” While instruction is important, the preconditions for a fruitful ongoing formation are personal responsibility for self-formation, “openness” to learn from others and from life (cf. n. 15) and a sound attitude toward time. With regard to this last, it often happens (especially in our smaller communities) that we let ministerial duties and other needs dictate our use of time, with the result that opportunities for ongoing formation grow fewer and fewer. While understandable, we need to reverse this practice: otherwise we are gradually committing spiritual suicide.

While we study carefully how to strengthen our ongoing formation, there are already tools at our disposal that we should utilize with greater fidelity and seriousness: private spiritual direction, monthly and annual retreats, house meetings, quarterly interviews, the *quinquennialia*. In addition, I believe that the following initiatives and resources will be of assistance to us:

— I ask the General Prefect of Formation to study our approach to ongoing formation with other formators from the Provinces, beginning in a formation meeting to be held in the upcoming year, with the aim of further developing the directives found in the *Ratio Formationis Marianorum*.

— An important resource for ongoing formation has been the work of the Marian Historical Institute. I am deeply grateful to the President of the Institute and his confreres for the time and effort that they have given to producing critical texts of our foundational documents and to the biographical works and other studies being done on our prominent confreres from the past, especially our Founder and Renovator. I particularly ask the Major Superiors to do all that they can to assist the Institute in the translation and dissemination of these works for the benefit of the wider Congregation.²

— In view of these new resources by the Institute and of many worthwhile initiatives undertaken in the Provinces but unknown to the rest of the Congregation, I believe that we must renew our study of our charism and spirituality. In addition, a more organized and collaborative reflection on our charism and its relevance to the contemporary world, would fill a great need for our confreres. For these reasons and others, it is my intention to establish a general committee devoted to the study and promotion of Marian spirituality, with representatives from throughout the Congregation, at the beginning of the next calendar year. It is my hope that this committee, as one of its projects, could already begin to study initiatives that would help the Congregation prepare itself for the 100th anniversary of the Renovation in 2009.

— Given the widespread interest in the spirituality and apostolate of the Divine Mercy in many parts of our Congregation, and in view of the recommendation issued by the last General Chapter, a symposium on the relationship between the mystery of God’s Mercy and the Marian charism, will be held in May 2003 at the Marian shrine at Lichen. I wish to express my thanks to the Director of the Center for Marian Formation at Lichen for organizing this gathering. More details about this upcoming symposium will be released soon in a general circular letter.

— The General Postulator and the Vice-postulators are working in close collaboration to actively promote the causes of our candidates to the altar, especially Father Founder, Father Casimir Wyszynski and Father Renovator, as well as to gather information about other past confreres noted for their holiness. For all of us, the lives of these holy men, especially the Founder and Renovator, are of paramount importance as models of our Marian vocation and of service to the Church. They are not only an inspiration for our following of Christ: we believe that they are also examples of evangelical holiness for the wider Church. I am grateful for the initiatives of the General Postulator and his helpers. The promotion of these causes should be a priority for us all. I ask all the communities to pray for this intention and to assist the postulators in this effort.

4. As *Starting Afresh From Christ* points out, the fruit of serious ongoing formation is a community that lives its vocation with greater appreciation, authenticity and joy—and by that means attracts others to the possibility of a vocation to the Congregation (n. 16). During the General Convention in Fatima, the participants were unanimous in underscoring the priority of promoting vocations. Though some of our Provinces are enjoying success in attracting new members while others are struggling, all recognized that more must be done. A number initiatives were discussed during the General Convention to strengthen this pastoral ministry. In the near future, after the translation of these initiatives has been approved by the General Council, I intend to send these proposals to the Provinces for their study and implementation.

The lack of vocations in some of our Provinces poses a serious challenge to our Congregation. The communities experiencing this difficulty are also seeing a rise in their median age and a decrease in the number of members able to continue their works. These are signs of the times that we must read carefully, for our answers have implications for the future of the Congregation. Augmenting the number

of confreres with transfers from other Provinces may, in some cases, be the appropriate response. However, God may be calling us in a different direction. For example, it may be that these Provinces need to rethink their manner of presence (cf. n. 12-13): perhaps apostolates need to be reorganized and given a different direction; or the situation is calling for collaboration with other religious communities in continuing a particular ministry; or the circumstances call for withdrawal from a particular ministry altogether. In other cases, it may be that the appropriate course of action is the reorganization and merging of some of our Provinces, so that we can more effectively use our personnel and material resources to serve the Church. Given the far-reaching implications of these decisions, responding to this challenge calls for consultation and collaboration on the part of all the Major Superiors of the Congregation. It is particularly incumbent on us to look beyond our own local needs and preoccupations, to contribute to a vision that embraces the whole Congregation. It is my hope to engage in such a consultation during the Lichen symposium in May 2003. Whatever steps we take, I believe it is necessary that we avoid the temptation to invest our confreres and material resources in trying to maintain everything and thereby lose our flexibility and the possibility of launching new initiatives in the future.

As I close my comments on vocation promotion, my thoughts are particularly drawn to our communities in the missions *ad gentes* and in the apostolate in the East. These communities are our youngest and most in need of our support. While all of our works and ministries are important, the presence of this type of evangelization in our Congregation is a particular sign of hope for us: it is a reminder of the radical evangelical character of our vocation and it is also an important contribution in the name of our Congregation to the growth and spread of the Church. I ask all our Provinces to be mindful of these communities and to support them by their prayers and, in so far as possible, by their material means. I particularly ask that they encourage the confreres in their communities who have the aptitude and desire to offer themselves for this ministry.

One of the great traditions that we have received from our Founder and Renovator is the openness to risk, to leave the security of the known for service to the Church where its needs are greatest. Today, as we study the Church, we see that it is undergoing profound change. Already, its growth and vitality are shifting from Western Europe and North America, to the developing world: i.e., Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. These are the areas where the Church is growing and flourishing. These are the regions where religious and priestly vocations are thriving. This is where, in the near future, the majority of Catholics will be found. Though we are faced with many challenges, our Congregation should not be afraid to risk and be a part of this future. This does not mean that our communities in Western Europe or North America are not important to us, or that we are thinking about abandoning these areas. Rather, we must think about where our efforts may do more for the glory of God and the benefit of the Church, and where it seems we might be able to obtain greater, more universal, longer lasting good and more abundant results (cf. C. 116). I am encouraged to begin this process by the example of our Renovator who noted in his Spiritual Journal:

It often happens that we become preoccupied with the difficulties we see in our way or even with those that may occur sometime in the future, if at all. We complain that we do not immediately have at hand the means we need, etc. Then we start worrying about how to overcome all these difficulties and how to obtain all the things we need. And that is how it all ends: we do not even approach our goal. We should go about it differently. If what we mean to do is both good and useful and if it is likely to bring greater glory to God and good to the Church, then we must boldly set to work to accomplish it. Insofar as we have truly renounced ourselves and abandoned ourselves to God, we will find a way to eliminate the difficulties or at least to get around them, and our plans will be realized (October 24, 1910).

5. On the occasion of our solemn feast-day, I send my heartfelt greetings and prayers to all of you that your celebration may be joyful and fruitful! May the prayers of the Immaculate Virgin Mary obtain for you an abundance of God's blessings!

Yours in Christ,
Very Rev. Mark T. Garrow, MIC
Superior General

¹ Please note that some of the ordinations mentioned here will occur shortly after the celebration of our Feast-day, but before the end of the calendar year.

² An especially important means of support, is that the Major Superiors and formators encourage confreres in formation who have the aptitude and desire, to prepare themselves professionally for this research.

