

**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, 2004**

Dear Brothers:

1. Today, we recall and celebrate with joy Mary's preservation from all stain of original sin from the first moment of her existence, by the foreseen merits of Christ. God touched her life in an extraordinary way, because he chose her to be the mother of his Son. For this she was born immaculate. Not because of any merit on her part, but because of God's grace. The gift was given not for herself, but for the sake of her Son. In other words, we could say that the mystery of the Immaculate Conception is Mary's preparation from the first moment of her existence to encounter Christ. She was made "full of grace," full of love because of her call to welcome the Word made flesh. Mary responded positively to this call and never turned away from the Lord's love. She is the first to believe - the first of "us," the Church - the first to say "yes" to the divine invitation received through the angel. Mary Immaculate's destiny is ours, though realized in a different manner. This mystery reminds us that each person is created and called for this purpose: to encounter Christ, to welcome the Word made flesh into their life, to "incarnate" Him in their words and deeds, to be "holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). When we reflect on this mystery in Mary's life, and on the dignity bestowed on her, we are also reminded of the profound dignity and value which God has given to every human being. It reminds us that all people are of inestimable value, regardless of their particular circumstances or condition, because all are created and called to communion with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

While all the various apostolates sponsored by our Congregation are valuable and praiseworthy, I am reminded of the words of the Holy Father to the participants of the 1999 General Chapter: "To confront the needs of the Churches dramatically short of priests, to be present in the difficult situations in various parts of the world: all this responds fully to your charism (n. 4)," and again, "Dear Marian Fathers, may your commitment to the apostolate of the Divine Mercy and pastoral efforts always be accompanied by the witness of service to the poor: Serving the poor is an act of evangelization and, at the same time, a seal of Gospel authenticity and a catalyst for permanent conversion in the consecrated life [VC 82] (n. 5)." Recalling these words anew, I am grateful to the Provinces for the generous efforts already undertaken on behalf of our apostolates in the more difficult regions of the world. On their behalf, impelled by this reflection on our charism, I ask how this support may be deepened and broadened, even to permitting more confreres to volunteer for work in these regions, especially in the missions in Africa and Eastern Europe. It is true that we have serious personnel issues to resolve, but in responding to these concerns we must also 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).

2. The above reflections in preparation for our feast were also stimulated by my visits with our communities in Africa and the Ukraine, and by a trip to Bangalore, India. My experiences in all our communities were important to me, but because these communities are under my direct jurisdiction, I wish to share with you information that might otherwise be unknown or incomplete for you.

In September, I visited with our confreres in Rwanda. This gave me the opportunity to participate in the international congress dedicated to Our Lady at Kabgayi, in commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. To my knowledge, it was the first such international gathering ever organized in Rwanda in honor of the Blessed Virgin. Organized and led by our confreres, this congress was a milestone for our Congregation: a sign of its growing dynamism in this land and the intensification of its Marian identity. Our confreres hope to build on this initial success and to organize similar congresses in the future. The congress was conducted in the Diocese of Gikongoro, which is also home to the Shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows of Kibeho. In keeping with the pastoral plans developed in the early years of our presence in Rwanda (but adjusted to our current more modest means), and at the request of the local Ordinary, Father Leszek Czelusniak and the confreres have undertaken a variety of initiatives related to the Shrine to promote a deeper Marian formation among the clergy, religious and laity. After study and debate, with the consent of the General Council, I approved their request to build a modest house not far from the Kibeho Shrine, on which it is hoped a future Center of Marian Formation will be realized. The construction is already in progress. Recently, through the efforts of our benefactors and the St. Stanislaus Kostka Province, a large statue of the Divine Mercy was erected on the site, facing in the direction of the Shrine, which will serve as a point of reference for the devotion of the pilgrims and retreatants. The confreres plan to collaborate with and complement the

pastoral work being done by the Pallottine Fathers who conduct the Shrine itself, and to promote the ongoing spiritual renewal and healing of the local Church by focusing on formation in sound Marian spirituality and the spirituality of the Divine Mercy message. During the same visit, I was especially privileged to bless the chapel and quarters of the newly completed formation house at Nyakinama, which on November 6 welcomed eleven new postulants from both Rwanda and the Congo. Together with candidate Yves Oumarou from Cameroon, these new aspirants give us hope for a substantial novitiate program in the next year.

Though my visit to the confreres in Cameroon was in the first part of the year, to complete my comments about Africa, I am pleased to note the ongoing progress and consolidation of the mission at Atok. The confreres are actively and fully engaged in developing the parish and, per the request of the local Ordinary, in promoting the message of the Divine Mercy throughout the Diocese (In April 2004, on the occasion of Divine Mercy Sunday, the Ordinary formally initiated the Divine Mercy promotion in his Diocese and designated the Atok parish as its center). In preparation for this feast, the local superior, with the assistance of the confreres, completed a thorough renovation of the parish Church and other facilities. With the completion of these works, our confreres now have well-organized living quarters and suitable conditions for their pastoral work and initial formation. On another note, the proposed second community at Ngoya, which will be devoted to post-Novitiate formation for both missions in Africa, has been deferred to the next General Administration for approval to proceed due to unexpected difficulties with obtaining the title of the land that the Marians wish to purchase. The recent economic situation of the Congregation has also impelled us to be more cautious at this time. In the future, with God's help, we will overcome these obstacles.

In October, I was privileged to visit briefly with our confreres in the Ukraine. The last two years have been trying for our confreres due to the growing pains being experienced by all religious congregations in the Ukraine: the instability in vocation of a number of the younger men, the resulting lack of confreres for the needs of the Congregation, and the scarcity of financial resources to undertake new pastoral initiatives. I was pleased to see the efforts made by the confreres to respond to these difficulties, especially by the Vicariate Superior and Council, particularly their efforts to work more closely with the formators to address the needs of the men in formation. It seemed to me that the Vicariate, despite its challenges, has grown in stability. I want to thank the Polish Province for contributing to this stability by helping the Vicariate with its formation and by cooperating with the request to send a confrere to work in the Ukraine. Beginning with the previous General Administration, the General government mobilized itself to help the Vicariate complete the building project at Khmelnyckyj. This project, which comprises the seat of the Vicariate, the religious house and the church for the local parish, has largely been completed. Under the direction of the parish priests, the faithful are able to complete the interior of the Church by their own efforts. It was particularly gratifying to see the progress in this project. It provides the confreres with a suitable center for their life and pastoral work and is a sign of the Vicariate's gradual "coming of age." Likewise, after a number of years of work for the benefit of the Diocese in Kharkiv, it was a joyful moment to see the project for the religious house, pastoral center and parish church go forward. This project marks a new phase for the Marian presence in Kharkiv. Whereas our previous efforts were undertaken to prepare the ground for the Diocese, the new Holy Family parish (which includes the pastoral care of nearly 40,000 university students within its boundaries) has been confided to the Marians in perpetuo and provides a stable foundation for us to develop our presence in the future. Thanks to the assistance of charitable organizations and some of the Marian Provinces, the construction began this May. There is still much to be done and many challenges yet to overcome, but in view of the trials already confronted in bringing this project to reality, I can only give praise and thanks to God for the quick progress thus far.

In November, I traveled to Bangalore, India. This trip, my first to India, was undertaken to meet with a priest and his colleagues who have expressed a desire to join our Congregation. For approximately one year I have been in contact with him regarding this interest. In view of this contact, after having consulted the General Council, I decided to go to Bangalore to meet with this priest and to see if the situation offered our Congregation reasonable hope for the future. The work being done by this priest and his colleagues involves pastoral care of the poor of the lowest castes, particularly directed to street children in order to break the cycle of child labor which is a vast social problem in India, and the giving of retreats and renewals in parishes, with a special emphasis on devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Divine Mercy message. What I found persuaded me that there was sufficient reason to continue the discernment with these candidates and to study the practical steps necessary to establish a Marian presence in India. Obviously, it is too soon to know whether this initial interest will prove fruitful. There are risks and practical considerations to be confronted. Nonetheless, God may be opening a door for us to work for Christ and the Church in a new culture. With this in mind, I am entrusting this project to one of our Province's for further action.

These signs of progress in our missionary communities in Africa and Eastern Europe, the signs of interest in our Congregation in India, and other signs of growth and development in the Provinces that I have not mentioned, are heartening. It is true that we have serious challenges to face but these signs give us

cause to thank and praise God on the occasion of our feast day. In light of our feast, they are also an invitation to reflect more deeply on our charism and to rededicate ourselves to serving with renewed apostolic zeal and constant concern the promotion of the Gospel (cf. C. 17, 37; SD 24.X.1910, 27.X.1910).

3. This year, the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception has been an opportunity for us to deepen our appreciation for the meaning of this mystery in our life and mission. In many parts of the Congregation, special commemorations and study sessions were organized for this purpose. In the name of the Congregation, I want to recognize and thank those responsible for these congresses and symposia in Balsamao, Portugal (which also opened the 250th anniversary year of Frei Casimiro's death), in Washington, DC, in Lichen, Poland, in Kabgayi, Rwanda, and in Gorodok, Ukraine. I also take this opportunity to inform you of the recent publication (currently only in Polish) of the acts of the symposium dedicated to the Divine Mercy and the Marian charism, by the Marian Center of Formation at Lichen. God grant that these initiatives bear good fruit in the future in our religious life and apostolates!

In closing, I also note that the plans for the upcoming General Chapter in 2005 are largely complete and that the agenda and other pertinent information have been sent to the Chapter participants via the Major Superiors. On the occasion of our Feast, and as the Chapter approaches, I ask all the confreres to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit during the Chapter, that it may know and accomplish the will of God.

As my term of office comes to a close, I want to thank all the confreres, especially the members of the General Council and the General Curia, for all their support, collaboration and prayers. May God bless you for your generosity!

On the occasion of our patronal feast, I send my heartfelt greetings and prayers to all of you! May the prayers of the Immaculate Virgin Mary obtain for you an abundance of God's blessings!