

**CIRCULAR LETTER ON THE OCCASION OF THE CANONIZATION OF  
FATHER STANISLAUS OF JESUS AND MARY PAPCZYŃSKI,  
FOUNDER OF OUR CONGREGATION**

Rome, 17 September 2016.  
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Dear Confreres,

On June 5 of this year, we celebrated the Canonization of Fr. Stanislaus Papczyński, Founder of our religious community. Many of us personally attended this unforgettable and unique event during which the Holy Father Francis proclaimed him a Saint, while others – even though unable to be physically present at the Canonization in Rome – united spiritually and followed its course through the mass media. God granted us this extraordinary grace which had been awaited and prayed for by generations of our confreres – Fr. Stanislaus’ spiritual sons – and his lay venerators. We are still living in an atmosphere of solemnity, as all Provinces and General Vicariates hold ceremonies of thanksgiving. In this way, we wish not only to express our gratitude to God, but also to prolong, as it were, this time of grace, which has been given us and also to strengthen and to deepen our reflection on this particular event. I hope that this letter will help our individual reflections, which – supported by the grace of God – will renew our charism, assist our apostolic efforts, and stimulate us to live a more holy life following the example which we see in the life of the new Saint, our Fr. Stanislaus and which the Church recently gave to us in his person, in the act of canonization. It is noteworthy to immediately mention that Fr. Stanislaus’ official canonization title is “Priest, Founder of the Congregation of Marian Fathers.”

**Canonization as the Gift of Divine Mercy,**

Understanding the importance of the gift of St. Stanislaus’ Canonization demands that we recall some historical facts. As God Incarnate, Christ is the Lord of history, and He acts both in the history of individuals, as well as entire human societies, including our own Congregation. Suffice it to say that the miracle used for the Founder’s Beatification was performed exactly on the 300th Anniversary of his death, while his Canonization took place in the Year of Mercy.

Despite the fact that our Holy Founder died in the odor of sanctity, tangible efforts towards the opening of his canonization process were started quite late – 50 years after his death, because the Congregation was poor and had no means or the adequate personnel, while the country was plunged in continuous wars and the epidemics that were associated with them. It was the Servant of God, Fr. Casimir Wyszynski who began preparations to open the process, convinced that *it was very pleasing to the Lord*, and that for this reason, *God would give us His blessing*. Formally, the process was initiated at the diocesan level in 1767 and continued for less than three years. In 1770, the documents were sent to the Holy See, and thus began the Roman phase of the process, which initially lasted five years. Right from the start (1772), there appeared a need to clarify certain objections raised by the Promoter of the Faith; then, the response provided three years later was found to be inadequate. As time passed, it turned out that the Congregation was unable to continue the process. Soon after, a grim period of our Congregation’ history began as a result of the persecution of the Church in Europe: first the Marians were expelled from the General Procurator’s Office in Rome (1798), then all of our monasteries in Portugal were suppressed (1834), which was followed by the dissolution of monasteries following the orders of the Czar in the Republic of Poland (1864) which led to the downfall of the entire Congregation. As a result, the process was suspended from 1775 until 1952. Shortly after the renewal of the Congregation – as soon as the 1923 General Chapter in Gdansk presided over by Bl. George Matulaitis-Matulewicz – decisions were made to resume Father Founder’s process, and consequently, two decrees (numbers 34 and 35) were passed. The first decree ordered the restoration of Fr. Stanislaus’ tomb, and the second – the gathering of documentation in support of his heroic virtues in view of the beatification. Legally however, the process resumed only after World War II, in 1952. A General Postulator for the Congregation was also appointed. That time marked the beginning of intensified research, of finding and developing in an academic way new historical sources in support of the process, which served to clarify all doubts pertaining to some aspects of Father Founder’s biography. Forty years later (1992), the decree of heroic virtues was proclaimed and finally, in 2007, we rejoiced at the Beatification of our Founder.

Father Founder’s canonization process took a long time and went through many difficult trials. There was a time when it seemed that the Canonization would never happen. It could even be said that, for various reasons, some of St. Stanislaus Jesus and Mary’s spiritual sons doubted his holiness or were not convinced of his being a suitable candidate for the altars. Also, the knowledge of his writings and charismatic heritage was far from the ideals of the religious life, as described in Church documents which speak about the importance of the founders for the religious institutes. However, this history of the process has its own logic in the history of salvation: it appears as a replica of the history of the

Congregation that he founded and as well as a reflection of his own life. It should also be noted that the two miracles fit perfectly into the logic of the transition from death to life, from despair to hope and the power of grace, which manifests itself particularly clearly in the face of death, human weakness, and hopelessness. All these histories: of the Congregation, of the canonization process, and of the miracles used both for the Beatification and the Canonization, reveal what St. Stanislaus emphasized in his experience of faith associated with the founding of the Order: "Divine goodness and wisdom, despite countless difficulties standing in the way, begins and carries out what He wants, even if the measures, according to human judgment, are so unfit. For nothing is impossible for the Almighty. It shone most clearly in me [...]. But God himself, God (to whom be everlasting and endless glory and thanksgiving) as He inspired me for this work of His admirably, that is lovingly, mercifully, wisely, wonderfully, so He Himself accomplished it and is accomplishing it for ever and ever" (*Fundatio Domus Recollectionis*).

God performs His works at the appropriate time. And the time for Saint Stanislaus came. We are grateful to the Lord of history for deigning to give us this long awaited grace. We accept it as a gift of God's mercy that was providentially reserved for our times and especially needed, as we celebrate the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. We give thanks for this gift together with Mary, the Mother of Mercy, to whom our Holy Founder has always been devoted with filial affection and in whose honor, that of the Immaculate Conception, he founded our Congregation.

### **Discovering our Father Founder**

Although it is clear that the canonization of the founder of any religious institute is the elevation to the altars of that person only, not of the entire community he founded, the fact evidently and inevitably marks the entire institute. It is, in fact, the approval of the holiness that the founder demonstrated in his life and which he left to his spiritual sons and disciples. His holiness also possesses a doctrine, which may not always be able to be described theologically, but which – in addition to most certainly possessing a Christian and Catholic character in all its dimensions – also has its own shape, its original color. The tradition of the history of spirituality calls it a school of spirituality. Without a doubt, the seal of approval of this school is the canonization of its creator. Thanks to the grace of God, we lived to see the moment when the Successor of St. Peter officially proclaimed, supported by the Magisterium of the Church, that our Founder is holy, and that the example of his life is a model not only for us but for the whole Church; that he is present with us in the mystery of the Communion of Saints, and that numerous faithful experienced his powerful intercession. Thanks to his presence, and as a result of our personal commitment to reading his writings and learning about its heritage, the spiritual paternity of St. Stanislaus of Jesus and Mary Papczyński shines anew today in the Congregation that he founded. This is particularly important in the context of the changes that took place in our Congregation due to historical conditions, especially the renewal performed more than 100 years ago by Bl. George Matulaitis-Matulewicz. The Congregation that was sentenced to death and in which only one member – Fr. Vincent Sękowski – was still alive but preparing "a coffin for himself and for the Congregation" (*from V. Sękowski's letter to G. Matulaitis-Matulewicz*) was granted an extraordinary grace, and the Canonization of its Founder is, in a sense, a confirmation of its way of holiness, outlined by the Founder for the Institute he founded.

The Church has already approved not just another version of the Congregation's Constitution as a program of life, but it also approves the style of life found in the witness of the Founder. In this sense, a hope can be seen in the Congregation that the Canonization will not only revive the charism of our religious community, but also stimulate us, St. Stanislaus' spiritual sons, to a more faithful and more generous response to the grace of our vocation, while his example and total dedication to Christ and the Church following the example of the Immaculate Mother of the Lord will become convincing enough to attract new generations of young men to lead a holy life in our community according to our charism.

The grace of the Canonization demonstrated once again the importance of our roots, the depth of our relationships with our Holy Founder, and what is – or should be – our point of reference and base for reflection. We need to continue and deepen the theological reflection on St. Stanislaus' founding charism. This reflection started quite strongly after both the Founder's Beatification and the 100th Anniversary of the Congregation's Renewal, performed by Bl. George. We need to go further and to reflect on what belongs to the essence of the Congregation's charism and identity, and what is changeable, temporary, related to the understanding of a given period in history, the need to adapt to both the ecclesial and social conditions, or situations related to a given culture and mentality. The decision of the last General Chapter was quite providential which charged the Superior General with the task of appointing a "Committee for the Constitutions and Directory, the goal of which will be to review and ratify possible changes as well as editing the standing Constitution and the Directory of the Congregation of Marian Fathers." The Committee has an obligation to present the results of its work during the next General Chapter. According to the Chapter, the reasons for this decree were "the Beatification of Father Founder in 2007 and the Centennial Jubilee of the Renewal and Reform of our Congregation in 2009." In the Chapter's opinion, these events awakened in many confreres "the need to redefine the Marian Fathers' charism and to express it in legal form, i.e. in the Constitutions" (*From to the documents of the General Chapter 2011*). The Committee has nearly finished its work; however, it will be up to the next General

Chapter to take up the responsibility to discern and to properly express our charism in the legal form and to record it in our by-laws. The Canonization of our Founder reminds us even more clearly of the importance and necessity of this task.

### **The Relevance and the Vitality of our Congregation's Charism**

Some reflections on the charism of our Congregation have already appeared in interviews, reports, or theological articles. Other reflections are formulated on a regular basis, depending on the need. We begin to make our own ideas on the meaning of Canonization, the holiness of Father Stanislaus, the essential elements of the charism and its impact on our spirituality and apostolate. They are not only the beneficial fruits of the grace of the Canonization, but are above all a good stimulus for creatively seeking ways to suitably express the nature of our religious community: of what is most enduring and unchanging, and what is only short-term, and therefore passing. In addition, as we reflect on our charism, we also look for ways to implement it in our life and our apostolic works. In a sense, it was not until the Beatification and Canonization of our Founder that we began to fully realize the extraordinary relevance not only of his personal charism, but above all the appeal of the founding charism that he left us, his spiritual sons. This is a gift that is our legacy and treasure, but which is also a tremendous mission to fulfill.

In the past, as we used to talk about the spirit of the Congregation and its mission, we mentioned three elements: spreading devotion to the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God, helping the deceased, and broadly interpreted pastoral ministry. This concept goes back to the Congregation's beginnings and the description of its specific objectives given by St. Stanislaus in his *Norma Vitae*. We also realize that – even though our Constitutions from the recent period of history did not express these three elements in one paragraph or show them as co-related – we combined them together in our consciousness, as well as in important documents and studies, looking for the rules of their implications.

Knowledge of the historical sources gives us the understanding that spreading devotion to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was of paramount importance to our Holy Founder and this applied to the same extent to the name of the Congregation, and the community's special objective. Saint Stanislaus justified this attitude of his only in one way, namely, a vision "formed in my mind by the Divine Spirit" (*Fundatio Domus Recollectionis*). Carried by this vision, he left "the Congregation of the Pious Schools, which was more dear to me than my life," and, subjected everything to his mystical experience; he also made a vow of blood, that is, a pledge to defend the privilege of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of the Lord even at the cost of his life, if necessary.

Shortly after, another characteristic of the Congregation emerged – that of helping the deceased suffering in Purgatory. Here, too, referring to historical sources, we find St. Stanislaus' special spiritual experiences, especially those described by witnesses. The Founder himself does not mention them, unlike in case of "the vision of the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception." In the *Norma Vitae*, he records *suffragium defunctorum* as the second aim, without giving any special justification. We can only correctly infer this from the context of helping the dead, because it was to be given to those "subjected to expiatory pains in Purgatory – especially the souls of soldiers and those who died of pestilence." Therefore, it is the case of people who have left this world unprepared to meet the Lord and who had not led a holy life. They need to be prepared and purified, so they can fully enjoy the sight of the Lord.

The third dimension, recorded in the *Norma Vitae* as "humbly helping pastors in their church work" expresses the apostolic nature of the Congregation. This characteristic found its proper expression not only in the documents approving our community as an Institute of Clerics Regular and in the multiple apostolic activities of the Congregation, but especially in the apostolic zeal of our Holy Founder: his preaching of the Word of God, the abundant spiritual and theological literature, hearing countless confessions, providing spiritual direction to both individuals and entire monasteries, and receiving pilgrims; as well as in his commitment to social issues combined with his love for his earthly homeland, assistance for the poor, and deeds of mercy. The Founder also added to this a very personal feature, which he passed on to his community: the apostolate of sobriety, understood as abstinence from hard spirits (*crematum*), forbidden to his spiritual sons (*Norma Vitae, Testamentum II*). At the foundation of this concept, as well as St. Stanislaus' pastoral activities and his concern about founding an apostolic religious community, was his deep conviction that such a form of life dedicated to God is fully evangelical, because it is proper to Christ and the Apostles.

Spreading the honor of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of the Lord, assisting the deceased who have left this world unprepared to meet Christ, and humbly assisting the pastors in their church work, in addition to the experience of faith of our Holy Founder have also been justified by the needs of the Church and the world of that day. The Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God was still meeting with opposition from many members of the Church, although it reveals the mystery of the unfathomable mercy of God towards mankind. In this aspect, our Founder was ahead of the mainstream Church by nearly 200 years. It was the same with the prayers for the dead. The historical and social conditions of 17th Century Poland, with frequent wars and the epidemics associated with them, resulted in the death of innocent and unprepared multitudes of people which called for a Christian response. In some regions

of the Republic, more than 50% of the population died. This situation also brought about a decrease of religiosity due to the shortage of priests and pastoral care, especially in the poor and rural areas. The skill of the saints is found in their gift to discern the signs of the times and to heed the movements of the Holy Spirit. Our Founder was focused on the works of the Holy Spirit; he knew how to read His inspirations and to find answers to the needs of the Church and men. He left us this ability in his charism.

Throughout the history of the Congregation, the three above-mentioned elements of our patrimony have been implemented in many ways and were subject to different interpretations, or were even disregarded. We should mention here several figures that have become our reference points. The first one historically is the Venerable Servant of God, Fr. Casimir Wyszynski with his great concern for fidelity to Father Founder and to the patrimony of the Congregation. The second, who saved our Congregation from death and renewed it, is Blessed George Matulaitis-Matulewicz. Through his work of renewal, he has left a mark on the Congregation by communicating to it a new dynamism and a new understanding adapted to the contemporary times. His Constitutions continue to be our point of reference, and the idea of the universal apostolate combined with social commitment and going where the need is greatest is still alive and current today. A beautiful fruit and witness to this attitude came in the persons of our blessed martyrs, Anthony and George. They were at the place where the need for faith, pastoral care, and bearing witness of love for the brethren until death was indeed the greatest. The same witness of the love for Christ and the Church until the end were given during the times of the inhuman Communist regime by the Servants of God, Fabian Abrantowicz, Andrzej Cikoto, and Janis Mendriks.

After the 2007 Beatification of Father Founder, the Jubilee of 100th Anniversary of the Congregation's Renewal, and now the Canonization of Father Stanislaus, it becomes increasingly clear that God speaks to us through these events, and that we must heed His voice to really understand it and to answer Him according to His will. Many of us arrived at the realization that our Congregation is a living community on the march, and that we need to constantly dialogue with the Holy Spirit about our charism that He has placed in our hearts. We should not fear the new, subsequent, and our own interpretations of the Congregation's charism, because this is also our job. We are not just subjects to the Constitution and Directory; as living people professing the same charism, we must seek ever new, modern, and appropriate forms of expressing it, always remaining faithful to our patrimony and our Marian tradition, in filial obedience to the Church.

Having undertaken a reflection and exchange of ideas in recent years, we realized that the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of the Lord is the essence of the Congregation's charism out of which flow the nature and mission of our community. We saw that St. Stanislaus was captivated by the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God. He dedicated the Congregation that he has founded to spreading this mystery and proclaiming the holiness of Mary's life; also for this reason, in honor of the Conception of the Mother of God shining as the brightest white, he donned a white habit. He associated his profound mystical experiences with the Congregation's mission and his personal great love for Mary Immaculate and her unique privilege.

We also realized that subsequent expressions of the charism are like two hands that reveal our charism on the one hand, and realize it on the other. The mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary shows that God's love precedes all human actions; that God raises human lives out of the depths of His love; that His mercy is greater than all evil and sin; that human life is a gift and therefore is sacred from the moment of conception; that every human life is willed by God. The mystery of the Immaculate Conception tells us that we ultimately "come from God," He is the source of our life, and we come into the world surrounded by His grace and His Providence. This causes everyone's life to take on a special dignity. In a world where there is contempt for human life, where – in some aberration of liberalism – the killing of unborn children is regarded as part of human rights, the Canonization of Father Founder, who points to the Immaculate Conception of Mary, is a cry for the restoration of the dignity of every human life. The holiness, to which every person is called, has its own destiny contained in the creative plan of God. It is the fullness of life in God, the fullness of happiness with God and one's loved ones in the Kingdom of Heaven. That's why the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of Mary must lead to praying for the dead and staying at the side of the dying. Conception and dying are like a buckle that links everything together – the temporal and the eternal – a human life, which, according to God's plan is to be "holy and unblemished." This dimension of our Congregation's charism is still relevant today: today's man wants to remove the dying not only from his consciousness, but also from the world of culture and social life. And should it prove impossible, he wants at least to belittle it, to reduce it to entertainment or a slogan. In this way however, he eliminates something much bigger: the eternal destiny of human life, the fact that human life is a pilgrimage to the Father's house, and death is a passageway, a gate. The people of today do not want to hear about dying and try to block it out, because they do not want to hear about what is beyond the line traced by dying. The prayer for the dead, however, is not only an act of faith in the eternal life in God, but also a deed of mercy beyond temporality, reaching those with whom we have only a relationship in the love of God. It builds a community of saints, which prepares us in this way for the inevitable stage of our transition to the

eternal homeland. If we realize that both dimensions are to be implemented actively, we immediately understand why our Congregation has an apostolic character: it is to reach the greatest possible number of people with this great good news about the origin and destiny of man. And God entrusted this task to us today. The Canonization of our Founder is, on the other hand, a sign of how much the Church and the world need our charism.

In our striving to creatively respond to the grace of vocation and openness to the charism of our religious community, which the Holy Spirit has entrusted to us, I commend all of you and myself, to the maternal protection of Mary Immaculate, Mother of the Lord and our Mother, to Saint Stanislaus, to Blessed George, Renovator of our Congregation, and to Blessed Anthony and George, Martyrs.

I bless you all from the depth of my heart,

Fr. Andrzej Pakuła, MIC  
Superior General