

**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, 2003**

Dear Brothers:

1. While preparing for our patronal feast, I found my thoughts often returning to my recent experiences in Rwanda. While on visitation of our confreres there, I participated in the annual celebration at the Shrine of Our Lady of Kibeho. It was an impressive moment. Of special significance in the celebration was the presentation and blessing of the official image of Our Lady of Kibeho, in which one of our confreres, Father Leszek Czelusniak, played a crucial role.

There are many impressions that I could relate from this celebration. But I was particularly struck by the contrast between the spirit at the Shrine and that of another site that is located nearby. Kibeho is not only associated with Marian devotion but with the fratricidal war that occurred in 1993-1994. Not far from the Shrine is a memorial to the thousands of people who lost their lives there during the violent turmoil of that time—by one estimate given to me, nearly 9,000 people. The memorial itself is quite simple: as one enters, one follows a path down a series of steps to walk among the shelves on which are displayed the remains of those who were massacred. It is not a sight that one can experience without being profoundly moved. When one sees the magnitude of the evil that was inflicted, one cannot help but ask: what hope is there for peace and reconciliation in the face of such monstrous acts?

Kibeho could have become a memorial to the mystery of evil, a sign of the futility and destructiveness that result when we allow ourselves to be driven by fear, prejudice, hatred and irreverence for the human person. It could have been a place of despair. Instead, it is a place where people find forgiveness, spiritual healing, and renewed faith in Christ. It is a place of conversion, of healing of memories, where people can leave their burdens of past violence and find peace of heart.

The tragedy that occurred here—while it should never be forgotten—is sadly not unique. It finds an echo in many other parts of our world: in the former death camps of WWII, in the mass graves of the Balkans, in the “killing-fields” of Southeast Asia, and in the ever-deepening spiral of violence and terrorism occurring in Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel. Here, I was struck by how the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the face of this tragedy and evil, shines forth as a sign of consolation and hope for a wounded people. She is a sign that encourages people to seek reconciliation with God and others, and an inspiration to become participants in the building of a new life based on Gospel values.

2. Is this not what we Marians recall and celebrate on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception?

This dogma expresses the truth that Mary was preserved from all sin from the first moment of her existence by the foreseen merits of Christ her Son, in view of her special call to be the Mother of Christ. Yet, it is more than an extraordinary grace or privilege afforded her in view of her role in the mystery of salvation. The mystery of the Immaculate Conception is not only a dogma to be believed but a belief to be lived and proclaimed. The mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception is a gift to the Church, an anticipation and prefigurement of its hope in Christ. In contemplating this mystery, the Church contemplates its own future. Mary, the preeminent member of the Church, in her Immaculate Conception, already participates in the victory of Christ over evil and in the reconciliation of all creation. In her Immaculate Conception she is the realization of what God wills to realize in all of us: that we “be holy and blameless in his sight, ...full of love” (Eph. 1: 4) and that we be “without spot or wrinkle...holy and immaculate” (Eph. 5: 27).

As our Constitutions put it, the mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception “urges us to trust in the unlimited fruitfulness of the work of redemption (C. 6).” This Mystery inspires us to accept the gift of salvation in Christ and to cooperate with that gift by “avoiding all sin, even the slightest, by holding in highest esteem purity of heart, by imbuing life fully with divine grace and charity (cf. C. 6).” The mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception is a sign of the gift of salvation in Christ received in faith and lived in hope and love. In this mystery, Mary becomes an icon of God's mercy for us. Not for just one people or for one place, but for a world wounded by evil and

tempted to despair, the mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception is a sign of hope; a source of consolation, and a stimulus to trust in the mercy and grace of God.

3. We have been given a tremendous gift as a religious congregation in having received the mystery of the Immaculate Conception as the focal point of our religious identity. The year 2004 marks the 150th Anniversary of the definition of the Dogma. A number of our communities around the world will mark this anniversary by holding symposia and conferences on its significance and by organizing liturgical celebrations in thanksgiving for this gift to the Church.

For us, the anniversary affords a unique opportunity to rediscover the importance of this mystery in the life of our Congregation. As "Marians of the Immaculate Conception" we are called to be signs of hope and trust in the salvific grace of Christ in the midst of a broken world. Do our life and works reflect this message of hope and joy in the gift of salvation in Christ? Are we impelled by this mystery to greater fidelity to our religious consecration or to greater missionary zeal to share our Christian hope with others?

4. Since the last celebration of our feast day, I have been occupied with the Visitation of the Provinces. These visits have given me an opportunity to know at first hand the life of our communities. Based on these experiences, I can respond positively to the questions that are raised above. In many places, our Congregation manifests joy and enthusiasm about its life and mission. During my private encounters with the members during the Visitations, the great majority of our confreres express deep contentment and satisfaction with their religious vocation. However, there are also signs that our Congregation needs to renew its appreciation of its religious identity and of its missionary zeal as "Marians of the Immaculate Conception."

As noted in our Constitutions, especially article 6, our vocation, inspired as it is by the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, calls us to pursue an intensive spiritual life both privately and in common. It is the principal responsibility of our religious vocation: that our life be so lived in divine grace and charity, modeled after Christ and Mary Immaculate, that we give and consecrate ourselves so completely to God and the things of God, that God truly becomes the center of our life and of the entire Congregation (cf. §4).

Frequently enough, this spiritual motivation grows lukewarm and is obscured by the routine demands of daily life and ministry and by an attendant lack of regular, serious nourishment at the fountains of the spiritual life (cf. nn. 66-71). In turn, this results in the minimalization or reduction of common prayer and common life, of mutual charity and support, and ultimately, of our religious identity. For this reason, during the Visitations, we have emphasized the importance of ongoing spiritual renewal and of faithful participation in common prayer and common activities. It is a disturbing and destructive development when members allow themselves to become absorbed in their works, or when they are frequently absent from common prayer and common activities, or when a local community has practically no common life. Clearly, this does not exclude us from the need to adapt our way of life to the demands of life and mission in a unique place or under unique circumstances. Nor is this phenomenon the prevalent experience in our Congregation. However, it is common enough that it should cause us concern. Left unchecked, it is ultimately a form of "spiritual suicide."

An intensive spiritual life nourishes and makes possible the life of the evangelical counsels. Indeed, the vows do not make sense unless they are rooted in a lively and authentic faith, unless they are part of an abiding relationship with Christ and Mary Immaculate. Experience during the Visitations shows us that our members generally are faithful to the observance of the vows and are devoted to growing in their understanding of their religious consecration. However, like many other Congregations in recent years, we have had to confront a growing number of cases where members have failed gravely in their observance of the vows or have abandoned their practice altogether. While any such case is painful for us, some have been particularly troubling for the harm that has resulted to the confrere, to others and to the Congregation. In the context of this letter, it is not possible to explore the various aspects and contributory causes of this phenomenon. Experience shows, however, that in every case difficulties with the vows share in common a disconnection between one's spiritual motivation and the activities and duties of one's daily life and, in addition, a degree of disengagement between the confrere and the common life. As we contemplate the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, we find inspiration and guidance to resist and overcome these dangers. The unfolding of the mystery of the Immaculate Conception in Mary's life shows us that she continues to mature and integrate her response to the gift of salvation throughout her pilgrimage of faith—there is a wonderful coherence between her words and deeds, between her faith and actions. She not only says "fiat" to God's will, she becomes a living "yes" in her own person to the action of the Spirit. Ongoing contemplation of Mary's Immaculate Conception, challenges us to greater coherence between

what we profess in our hearts and the way in which we live in our daily lives. It challenges us to be more engaged in and accountable to each other in living out the Marian life and calls on us to pray for and support each other in our common vocation.

Our Congregation largely finds itself in cultures that are increasingly materialistic and secular. We know from our own struggles to live the Gospel that some of the values prized in these cultures are in marked opposition to those proposed by the Gospel. All of us, particularly those living in the more affluent countries of Europe and North America, run the risk of gradually assuming the values of this prevailing materialistic and secular mentality. If we do an honest and frank inventory of our life, we may already find that our style of life is becoming too comfortable, too complacent. Perhaps we will find that we are assuming elements of our consumer-societies that are not in harmony with the detachment and simplicity of life called for by our religious vocation. Perhaps we may also find that our evangelical spirit and apostolic zeal are becoming lukewarm. That is, that we are less willing to embrace the self-sacrifice and availability that are the heart of apostolic mission. Already, in Europe and North America, we see the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life in decline (in some places, a phenomenon that has lasted for more than a generation), in part because the values inherent in these vocations are not supported or esteemed in the cultures at large.

In this context, the pursuit of an intensive spiritual life and discipleship in imitation of Mary Immaculate is of profound importance and assistance. The mystery of the Immaculate Conception celebrates the gift of salvation received, lived and proclaimed in the life of Mary. Renewed contemplation of this mystery in light of our own vocation, cannot help but stimulate a renewed joy and appreciation on our part, both individually and communally, of the gift of salvation that we have received in Christ. From this flows a renewed zeal to proclaim and share the Gift with others. A new effort to contemplate the meaning of the Immaculate Conception, I believe, will result in the reinvigoration of our apostolic works. It will give us new energy to enliven and make even more creative the works that are currently being undertaken as well as lead us to undertake fresh initiatives in the New Evangelization called for by the Holy Father.

5. In this anniversary of the 150th Anniversary of the Dogma, which starts with our patronal feast, I send my heartfelt greetings and prayers to all of you that your commemorations of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary be spiritually fruitful and joyful! May the prayers of the Immaculate Virgin Mary obtain for you an abundance of God's blessings!

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Mark T. Garrow, M.I.C.
Superior General