

**Pope John Paul II's Address  
to the members of the General Chapter of the Congregation of Marian  
Fathers  
delivered at a Special audience on June 30, 1987, at the Consistory Hall**

Beloved Brothers:

1. Welcome! I receive you with great joy on the occasion of the celebration of your Congregation's General Chapter. My heartfelt greetings go out to all of you, especially to the Superior General whom I thank for the kind words the addressed to me.

A Chapter is certainly an event of great importance for the religious family, a true grace of God. It must therefore constitute a powerful motive for reflection on the path that has been traveled and on the way in the original charism has been lived out.

2. The history of your Institute is very complex and troubled. A retrospective glance allows us to follow the various phases of its journey, especially during the first two centuries after its foundation.

The Servant of God, Stanislaus Papczyński, wishing to dedicate his life to the propagation of the cult of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and moved by an inner inspiration, joined with several hermits in 1670 and established with them the first community of "Marians." They adopted a white habit in honor of Mary Immaculate.

The aim of those forming that first nucleus was, as you well know, to dedicate themselves to pastoral activity among the poor peasants of the area, and particularly the young, who were more exposed to the negative influences of the atheist ideologies of the day. To the first goal was later added that of suffrage for the most needy souls in Purgatory.

3. This is the specific heritage that your Founder, Father Papczyński, entrusted to you; an ideal that came forth from a heart open and sensitive to the motions of the Spirit and attentive to the needs of the time. Very early the Marians extended their sphere of action beyond Poland and Lithuania, opening houses in Portugal and Rome itself.

They obtained initial approval from the Holy See in 1699, and were placed under the jurisdiction of the Friars Minor, since their number was still small. In 1787, following Pius VI's approval of the Constitutions of the Order, the Marians acquired autonomy. At this point, however, the tree, which had begun to flourish was suffocated due to adverse political situations and persecution against the Church and her Institutions. But the Holy Spirit, who ever watches over God's works, permitted this trial only in order to bring about a greater purification.

Following the long period of the Institute's progressive decline – an extremely difficult period lasting two centuries, doubtless the most troubled in the history of the Marians – the Lord raised up a man of renewal who saved the work of Fr. Papczyński from extinction: a Lithuanian, George Matulewicz. He always considered service to the Marians his particular mission in the Church. In fact, he wrote in his diary: "I am, and always have been deeply convinced that my most important vocation is to serve the Congregation of the Marians, to dedicated all my energies to it and organize in the best way possible. I have always considered this a task entrusted to me by God."

In 1910, the Holy See approved the new Constitutions – somewhat modified according to the indications of Matulewicz, but leaving unchanged the Congregation's original aim, which had by then acquired new vigor. Following the long trial, the Lord abundantly blessed the work of the Marians, who quickly branched out into the United States, Australia, and other countries of Europe, opening themselves to the foreign missions and to the publishing and school apostolates, privileged means for a more capillary and incisive propagation of the Christian message.

4. This is the itinerary, tormented but glorious, of your Institute. May the witness of the Fathers who have preceded you be source of stimulation, encouragement, and hope. It is, in fact, God who marks out the path of His Church and realized its goals. You have been chosen as instruments of His will, to realize His project at this moment of the history of your religious family.

But this choice implies a great responsibility: to be totally faithful to the one who has sent you forth. A religious cannot in fact speak "his" word, nor can he realize "his" work, but he must commit himself to the work of the One who has sent him forth. He is consecrated by the Lord to follow Christ even unto extreme consequences, perhaps, unto persecution and the cross. He is a person reserved to God, essentially is witness: he proclaims what he has contemplated and experienced in his personal encounter with Christ; he is the man who fully obeys the Spirit; who does not transmit a human science, but the very wisdom of God, "to preach Good News to the poor," and "to bind up the brokenhearted" (Lk 4:18, Is 61:1).

Matulewicz fully lived out this program. In his diary he affirmed: "My field of work is the Kingdom of Christ, the Church in pilgrimage. My party is Christ." He added for his brothers: "Each of us, with total and spontaneous selfabnegation, must sacrifice himself and offer himself wholly to the Church."

5. The special Chapter of 1984 invited the Marian Fathers to accept the renewed Constitutions with a deep inner conviction, in accordance with a serene recreating of the original charism. This obviously demanded an effort towards new conversion in the life of each individual and of the entire Congregation. The present General Chapter, on the other hand, seeks to study in detail the way in which to realize in practice, and in an authentically evangelical spirit, in the life and works of the Marian Family what the Constitutions themselves suggest when they affirm: "Members should embrace all people without distinction with Christian love and they should desire to become all things to all so as to gain all for Christ. They should wholeheartedly seek the good of the country, in which they live and work. They should learn its language and prudently adapt themselves to its culture and customs. Everywhere they should strive to become good and useful laborers for the Church and for society, doing what is good not only in God's sight but also in the sight of men" (Constitutions, No. 10).

This mission is carried forward in places and cultural contexts, which are certainly much different from those of the time of its foundation. Modern society presents new miseries and new kinds of poverty: persons who suffer isolation; families and populations which are the victims of incessant socio-economic and cultural changes, and which are discouraged by the injustices inflicted upon them to the point that they often lose sight of the true sense and the authentic values of life.

You, Marian Fathers, sons and heirs of the ideals of Father Papczyński and of the newly Blessed Matulewicz, whose zeal for the proclamation of the Gospel and unshakeable fidelity to the Church remain an unquestionable point of reference for all of you, let yourselves be drawn to the swelling ranks of the new poor of various cultures, so as to be able to respond to their deepest aspirations, their thirst for truth, justice, and love.

Show the world how the wisdom taught by the Gospel in the source of culture which, as it promotes in the person a sensitivity to the authentic values of freedom, justice, and peace, also broadens his horizons to include the perception of religious values, and introduces him to that experience of the divine, in which alone the restlessness of the human heart can be quenched.

6. The apostolic work with you are carrying out along these lines will show you how necessary for every religious is the effort to tighten more and more the lings which unite him to Christ, to the Holy Virgin, to his brother in the Congregation. In fact, the mission entrusted to you by the Church will have meaning and credibility if in the proclamation of Christ's message you truly live in communion with Him and with your confreres: "Even as I have loved you... you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34-35).

You must therefore strive to infuse the vigor of faith and culture into your community, which is founded on prayer and especially on devotion to the Eucharist, the efficacious sign of love and unity. You must also carefully revise those customs, which do not correspond to the expectations of the Christian community of today; while preserving those, which help you to fulfil the duties of your specific mission.

The evangelical poverty that will bring you to place your trust in God alone will make you sensitive to the cry of the poor; it will make you authentic witness to freedom in the face of the widespread thirst for gain. Living according to poverty – as individuals and as a community – you will free yourselves from the tyranny of the consumer society. This attitude will open your hearts ever more to your brothers and sisters, who will recognize in you the spirit of Christ, whose ardor and strength you transmit.

In order to deal effectively with the most urgent pastoral problems, which require of you constant availability and tireless adaptation to the increasingly difficult situations, it is indispensable that you give primacy to your spiritual life: that you live more fully each day the duties connected with your consecration; in a work, that you be able to "put off your old nature... and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (cf. Eph 4:22-24).

With this attitude of total donation to God, you will be present to your brothers and sisters in a deeper way, in the "tenderness of Christ," and collaborating spiritually with them, you will effectively contribute to the building up of the earthly city, which must have its foundation in the Lord and be constantly directed towards Him (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 46).

7. My wish is that you keep yourselves constantly open to the pastoral needs of the local Churches: be ready to respond generously to the needs of the poor and the aspirations of the young, who are the hope of the Church and of society in terms of future vitality.

The world has need of the authentic witness of religious consecration, as a concrete sign of hope and an

unceasing leaven of salvific renewal. May the Most Holy Virgin, whom you love and venerate as the Mother, and inspirer of your religious family, illuminate and protect you always; may she fill your life with great enthusiasm in the service of your sublime vocation and your ecclesial ministry.

May you be accompanied and encouraged in your work by my Apostolic Blessing, which I give you from my heart and extend to your beloved Institute.