



The Holy See

LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE SUPERIOR GENERAL OF THE SOCIETY OF MARY

*To the Very Reverend David Joseph Fleming
Superior General of the Society of Mary*

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 1:2). In the love of the Most Holy Trinity and with the words of the Apostle I greet you and the members of the Marianist Family gathered in Rome from 8-29 July 2001 for your Thirty-second General Chapter, which has as its theme “Recreating with a new thrust the missionary project of our Founder”. As you plan for a future faithful to God’s will and to your own foundational charism, I invoke upon you a fresh outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and I assure you of a remembrance in my prayers, “thankful for your partnership in the Gospel” (Phil 1:5).

It was my joy last year in the course of the Great Jubilee to add the name of Guillaume Joseph Chaminade to the host of the Blessed who have shown forth the holiness with which God never ceases to adorn the Bride of Christ. In beatifying your Founder, I called upon the whole Church to celebrate the memory of a man who was born in troubled times as upheaval took hold of France; a man who lived through the tumult of the Revolution, preferring exile and the threat of death to the compromises forced upon the clergy at that time; a man who, in the face of every hardship, never failed to look to Mary as his hidden strength and to find in the Cross the world’s one true hope. *Ave Maria, gratia plena* and *Ave Crux, spes unica* were words engraved on his heart, and so they must be on the hearts of those who are his spiritual children.

In a turbulent age such as Chaminade knew, the signs of the times can be hard to read. Yet we see in him an unusual capacity to understand the needs of the moment and the measures which these needs required. Faced not only with revolutionary upheaval, but with the less dramatic if no less pernicious threat of religious indifference which eroded Christianity at its core, your Founder demonstrated qualities of apostolic imagination and daring which had their roots in genuine

sanctity.

Blessed Guillaume Joseph Chaminade realized in a special way a truth which I mention in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, that “all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness” (No. 31). Indeed in founding the Society of Mary, he wanted to offer to the de-christianized society of his time “the spectacle of a people of saints”. This is what you were founded to be, dear brothers - a people of saints! And it is this which must guide all your planning at the General Chapter. “Can holiness ever be planned?”, I asked in the same Apostolic Letter . “What might the word ‘holiness’ mean in the context of a pastoral plan?” (*ibid.*). It is clear that unless, like Chaminade, we set holiness as the goal of all our missionary and pastoral planning, it will come to very little in a time which needs saints no less than the age in which your Founder lived.

In establishing a Society which combined the different vocations proper to the Church - priestly, religious and lay - your Founder anticipated the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that all the baptized without exception are called to a holiness which knows no bounds (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 5). In sending the Society forth on the paths of mission he understood that true holiness is the womb of true mission and that all Christians are called to be missionary. The success of the new evangelization at the dawn of the Third Millennium depends upon renewed acceptance of these ageless truths.

“*Duc in altum! Put out into the deep!*” (*Lk 5:4*): the words which Christ spoke to Peter echo down the centuries. They were words which Chaminade heard in the very depths of his soul; and they are words which you are called to hear now. The Lord’s command has always seemed strange, for to the unbelieving eye there are no fish to be caught. Certainly, in the time of your Founder it seemed as though the waters had nothing to give. Yet Chaminade, like Peter, heeded the Lord’s command, cast his nets into the deep, and what a wonderful catch resulted! You are that catch, you and all whom the Society of Mary has drawn into the love of Christ since your foundation. The waters of our own supposedly post-Christian time may seem to have nothing to give. We live in a time when people cry out for freedom, yet resist the truth; they doubt not only faith but even reason itself; they insist upon rights, yet evade responsibilities; they yearn for fulfilment, yet balk at love. Into such seemingly unpromising waters you must cast your nets as sons of Blessed Guillaume Joseph Chaminade, knowing that Jesus alone can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.

The God who drew creation from chaos, who brought a child from the barren womb of Sarah, who led slaves from the land of Egypt, who raised Christ from the dead: this is the God of the great catch which awaits you. He is Lord of the impossible! It is he who says to you now: “Look, I am doing something new!” (*Is 43:19*); and it is he who must inspire your every prayer, thought, word and action through the days of the General Chapter. Do not be afraid to chart a high and demanding programme of life and mission for your Society! The times call for not less but greater

love and generosity.

With the whole Church, I give glory to God who “can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” (*Eph 3:20*) for all that the Society of Mary has been and done since its birth in 1817. I entrust the work of the Chapter and the mission of the Society to the mighty intercession of Our Lady, Queen of Apostles, to whom each of you is consecrated in a most special way; and as a pledge of endless mercy in her divine Son, I gladly impart to the Society of Mary my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 7 July 2001

JOHN PAUL II

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