

Understanding the Marianist Charism and its Manifestations
by Thomas F. Giardino, SM

When we try to describe the Marianist charism, we may find ourselves searching for words and struggling with the same dilemma that Mark Twain observed: “The difference between the almost-right word and the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.”

The Marianist charism, if lived well, leads us to experience expansive, new possibilities for our lives and the needs of our world. Yet, many of us who have surely experienced the Marianist charism often find it difficult to articulate or to help others understand it. We end up using lightning bugs to describe what we have experienced in our lives as lightning. Words fail us, in part, because a charism is not a “thing.” A charism is an experience; it partakes of the mystery of the Spirit. It’s like love: words and poetry approach some of love’s meaning but never quite catch the whole. But when you are in love, you know it. A charism, like love, opens us to new potential and possibilities.

While it’s essential that we experience the Marianist charism, it’s also critical that we are able to more deeply understand and articulate it, if this reality is to continue in history. It’s also essential that we understand that this intense and life-giving experience that we call Marianist charism has a source: the Holy Spirit.

We Marianists have a vision or ideal about everyday life based on our Catholic and Marianist tradition that we believe contributes to the Reign of God in our time and place. Like our founders, we notice that our everyday life is a mixture of obstacles and supports for our vision—so we live “in the gap” between these two realities: our vision and current reality. Chaminade, Adele and Marie Thérèse in their time and place lived in this gap and experienced an uneasiness with the fragmentation and incompleteness that accompanied the French Revolution with all of its mixed consequences. Yet, for them and for us, in the tension of the gap, grace erupts as charism.

The context of charism for a people of faith begins with everyday life and God’s interests for human flourishing in our individual and collective circumstances. The desire to understand everyday life with its big and little mysteries is common to all times and cultures. For example, the Fulani people of Mali tell this story:

HOW THE WORLD WAS CREATED FROM A DROP OF MILK

At the beginning there was a huge drop of milk.

Then Doondari came and he created the stone.

Then the stone created iron;

And iron created fire;

And fire created water;

And water created air.

Then Doondari descended the second time. And he took the five elements

And he shaped them into a human being.

But the human being was proud.

Then Doondari created blindness and blindness defeated the human.

But when blindness became too proud,

Doondari created sleep, and sleep defeated blindness;

But when sleep became too proud,

Doondari created worry, and worry defeated sleep;

But when worry became too proud,

Doondari created death, and death defeated worry.

But when death became too proud,
Doondari descended for the third time,
And he came as Gueno, the eternal one,
And Gueno defeated death.¹

The story captures, in symbol and mystery, part of our human condition: trying to understand our everyday experiences. We find in our lives that, whether we are 25, 35, or 55, we are trying to understand blindness, trying to understand fire and water (consider the disasters of the Boston Marathon bombing or Hurricane Sandy), trying to understand pride and death, and trying to find meaning in this belief about eternal life that we hold onto, sometimes only tenuously.

In the midst of mystery, we are searching for meaning. We are yearning for something *more* in life. This yearning is not unique to us as Marianists. Just as the desire to understand the mysteries of everyday life is common to all times and cultures, so is the sense of uneasiness, incompleteness or limitation that seems part of the human condition—our Christian story names this as a consequence of “original sin.” William James commented on this dynamic in religious experience more than a century ago.

From this place of unease, we find ourselves yearning or searching for *more*. St. Augustine was pointing to his own experience when he said, “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Religions offer some solution or peace, some path to wholeness or fullness of life, some *more* about life. Jesus said, “I have come that they might have life, life in abundance”; Buddha proposed the Eightfold Path leading to release from suffering.

The path is often experienced as a religious conversion or experience. Again, paraphrasing William James: this conversion is some event or awakening that connects me with something outside or inside me that is bigger than me, which leads to the solution or direction toward resolution of my uneasiness. We call that salvation in the Christian tradition or Nirvana in the Buddhist tradition. Time and again, I have heard lay and vowed religious in the Marianist Family use this type of language to describe their experience of a Marianist community; many call it their “vocation story.”

This is the context for charism, any charism. In the Christian tradition, charism is the experience of God’s manifestation of love for the world, for people who are trying to understand their experience of the mysteries not only of fire and air but of blindness (physical or spiritual) and death. Christians approach this in faith and hope, that, in fact, there is Good News for this mystery.

A founding charism

Chaminade had an experience of this movement, this grace, this energy of the Holy Spirit, where he made connections between his life, his dream and everyday life. These connections were not just to make him feel better after the devastation of the French Revolution, but they gave him insight, motivation and direction for social transformation. Like Chaminade, we have a strong belief that there is Good News for life even if it often seems shrouded in mystery. Like Chaminade, we have had experiences of sacred energy; we call it grace, the grace of the Holy Spirit that makes vital connections between our dreams and everyday life—not for ourselves alone, but for our church and our world. We call this experience of the Holy Spirit a *charism*,

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and subsequently for some it becomes a “founding charism.” [See Graphic 1 “Understanding a Founding Charism” at the end of the article]

The seminal scriptural text for our understanding of charism comes from Paul to the Christian community at Corinth:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit;
there are different forms of service but the same Lord;
there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. **To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.**

1 Cor. 12, 4-7

This New Testament text gives us the fundamental reference for a reality that the early Christian community (a key image for Fr. Chaminade) experienced in its life together. Paul is speaking about a process by which God’s Spirit becomes manifest or visible. We also notice the effect of the Holy Spirit in what we often call the “gifts”: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fear of the Lord, fortitude or courage (Is. 11, 2-3) and the “fruits”: love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and charity (Gal. 5:22). The Spirit uses our human capacities and gives us motivation to use them to become charisms.

We can describe a charism as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit working in and through the believer’s natural ability—yet somehow more—and which is given for the sake of the building up God’s community for the Reign of God in the world.

Spirituality and approach to service

Each founding charism sparks a style of spirituality and an approach to service. Because a charism is an *experience* of the Holy Spirit, in seeking to understand the Marianist charism (or any other), we need to think about how the Holy Spirit acts. Like other founders of spiritual and apostolic paths, Chaminade had an intense experience of the Holy Spirit that changed his life and ultimately led to what we now call the Marianist Family. Chaminade’s experience of the Spirit came in response to pondering with Mary—Our Lady of the Pillar—about how to rebuild the Church and society after the devastation of the French Revolution.

Chaminade zeroed in on one action that changed the world: the Spirit overshadows Mary to bring forth Christ to the world. He was inspired to see the role of Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, as a lasting role in history. She brought forth in her body, formed and educated Jesus in the “Holy Family” for his mission of bringing about the Reign of God experienced as human dignity, freedom, justice, solidarity and reconciliation for all persons. Accordingly, Chaminade focused on the Incarnation as a source of the spirituality and the apostolic approach for the Marianist Family.

Chaminade never used the term “charism”; it wasn’t available to him at the time in this context. The word came into this common usage only after Vatican II in whose documents it is not often used. Chaminade often used the phrase “spirit and method” to refer to what we now call “charism” and then he filled those terms with specific Marianist content.

So what does a charism do? A particularly fertile charism gives rise to a following of persons who have a similar experience as the founding person—they *identify* with the experience. They notice this reality in themselves (when they see it in action in others) and seek to live out this way of fulfilling their baptismal commitment. The charism leads to a particular manner of *experiencing of God (spirituality)* and a way of *making a difference in the world*

(approach to service). Followers or disciples usually initiate particular ways of acting and establish institutions, such as religious congregations, small faith communities, and schools that embody the central insight of the founding person for the sake of others.²

This was the case for Chaminade, Adele and M. Thérèse. Chaminade had a significant experience in Saragossa, where he spent much time praying and reading his New Testament. Certain passages, certain paragraphs, jump out at him. Imagine him, if you will, marking them with his yellow highlighter.

After the French Revolution, in the early months of 1800, he comes back to Bordeaux, rents a little room and begins to celebrate the Eucharist there. Other people, young and old, come to this oratory, and they get into conversations about the Church in France and in the rest of the world. They ask themselves questions, such as, how are we going to help bring about the Reign of God and evangelize after this time of great destruction of society and the Church? How can we bring about social transformation? Where is God in all this?

Chaminade shows his New Testament to others and notices that they have highlighted some of the same passages. Something resonates inside of them, like the same guitar strings on two different guitars. And the particular passages that Chaminade underlines have to do with Mary's role in history—salvation history—to give birth to Good News.

Our founding charism is good news because it involves **an experience of God (spirituality)** and a method to make a **difference in the world (approach to service)**. In a famous retreat that Chaminade gave for the Marianist Family in 1821, he said

“ . . . God calls us not only to personal sanctification, but to revive the faith in France, in Europe, in the whole world, to preserve the present generation from error. What a noble, vast undertaking! What a holy and generous project! It is most appealing to a soul that seeks the glory of God and the salvation of men. And God has chosen us from among many others.”

Imagine: “God has chosen **us**”—**you and me**—“to revive the faith . . . in the whole world.” Once we realize this sense of call, there's no stopping us in the work we are to do in the world. Our Marianist spirituality is Incarnation centered, meaning we take the world seriously because we believe that God entered the world in a special way, as one of us, so persons in their flesh and blood and joy and grief are important; and the way God came into the world was through a woman, Mary. Our Marianist spirituality is not just pious platitudes, but involves principles and practices related to personal growth and political action. It takes discipline to be a disciple.

The Marianist charism

We understand charism in the larger experience of humankind and the Church as an experience of the Holy Spirit bringing the Good News of God's unconditional love for humankind. It happens in this fundamental search for meaning in our lives. For us in the Marianist tradition, our particular Marianist charism can be stated as succinctly as:

“Missionaries of Mary” or more fully as: the experience of being formed by Mary to continue her mission of bringing forth Christ in his person and message as Good News for the world.

While there are other formulations of this charism, there is a “core” of the charism, as we'll discuss later, that needs to be preserved for its authenticity.

In the Marianist world, we often speak of the “objective elements” or the manifestations of the charism in everyday life: **faith, mission, Mary, community, and inclusivity**.³ Most of us encounter the Marianist charism through these manifestations. [See Graphic 2 “Understanding the Marianist Charism” at the end of the article.] You might think of them as the doors through which persons enter into the field of grace that is the Marianist response to the needs of the world. And you might have noticed that different persons are attracted by different doors and enter the Marianist world in that way.

Manifestations of the charism

How should we understand the manifestations of the charism? Some of the ways that members of the Society of Mary have described the manifestations include⁴:

- **Faith of the Heart**: We strive to live the faith in a community, imitating Mary’s response as a model of faith, and helping her in her mission. Chaminade stressed faith of the heart, which can be described as deeply rooted and convinced, thoughtful but not intellectualized, and reaching far beyond a few pious practices and transforming the structures of daily life and the basic insights of the human spirit. This emphasis corresponds very well to the search for transcendence and the need for a contemplative dimension in our lives and an identity anchored in something that is firm and worthy of stable and lasting commitment. Marianists thus stress a deep inner or interior spirit as a ground for action.

- **Missionary spirit or dynamism**: We participate in the mission of the Church and as the Church. The mission is the community entering into a covenant with Mary, to assist her in her mission to communicate the faith in Jesus Christ. Mary invites us, as she did the servants at the wedding in Cana, to listen to Jesus and to do whatever he tells us. Thus there are a variety of ministries that Marianists can be involved in to serve the mission. We are called in a special way to develop a new synthesis of faith and culture—and this implies an inculturation of the gospel that is deeper and more far-reaching in all the many cultures of our world. A pervasive *sense of mission*—being sent—is fundamental.

- **Alliance with Mary**: We are formed by Mary, our Mother, just as Jesus was formed as her son. We are her Family in the Church, and we help her in her mission of communicating the faith. Chaminade saw in her the source of a dynamism that allows us fully to take part, through our Alliance with her, in all the mysteries of her Son, especially in his saving mission. For Chaminade, devotion to Mary is quintessentially Christocentric. It develops in us a formative, community-centered way of acting in the world and fosters a missionary commitment.

- **Apostolic Community**: We are a community of faith, gathered with Mary, who tightens the fraternal bonds of family and becomes present and active in the world today, within the Church and like the Church, in order to communicate faith. It is a community in which the members have real *responsibility* for the internal and external life of the community. As we say in the prologue of the Society of Mary *Rule of Life*: “Inspired by God’s Spirit, Father Chaminade understood the rich creative possibilities of a Christian community for apostolic service. Such a community could bear witness of a people of saints, showing that the gospel could still be lived in all the force of its letter and spirit. A Christian community could attract others by its very way of life and raise up new Christians and new missionaries, thus giving life in turn to other communities. A community could thus become the great means to re-Christianize the world.”

- **Inclusivity/one great family**: Chaminade sought to reproduce within the Marianist Family the variety and wealth of experience that exists within the Church as a whole. From the beginnings, Chaminade gathered men and women, vowed religious and lay people, persons

coming from all socioeconomic classes—Chaminade used to speak of “one great family.” This inclusivity offers us a generous and “catholic” vision for the Marianist charism. The “mixed composition” of the Society of Mary is a striking example of this inclusivity that highlights the experience of gospel brotherhood and the plurality of means and ministries for the work of formation in faith.

Marianist charism is more than community

Just as a house is more than one of its doors, the Marianist charism is more than any one of its manifestations. One problem with all matters that involve intangibles of the Spirit is the tendency to reduce them to something more manageable, to reduce our founding charism to *one* of its manifestations, usually community. I have heard many times in conversations by lay and religious members of the Marianist Family the phrase “our charism of community.”

This reductive phenomenon is not uncommon. William Bausch, writing on the sacraments, illustrated the tendency by putting it this way:

“We have to overcome a long history of reductionism; that is, of reducing an encounter with God in Christ to a momentary time or isolated element. . . . Suppose someone of prosaic mind tried to get at the meaning of our [USA] national Thanksgiving Day. He worked at it until at last he declared that the whole ‘essence’ of this holiday could be captured in the turkey wing. That told it all. But, of course, what a fantastic reductionism.”⁵

So, while we may be in good company, we also do a disservice to those wishing to understand the Marianist charism. If, for example, we reduce our charism to “community” and neglect “mission,” we may spend so much time gathering and forget that we are also “sent.”

Understanding the Marianist charism as a symbol

These manifestations of faith, mission, Mary, community, and inclusivity are more like pieces of a mosaic that make up the integral Marianist charismatic portrait. The “pieces” are interactive and interdependent in revealing the whole of the portrait.

You’ll notice I’m mixing several metaphors—doors and houses, mosaics and portraits—that approach, but do not entirely capture, the meaning of the Marianist charism. I have found another mode of understanding that seems to help in our quest. That is: charisms usually function like symbols rather than signs. Two quotes might be useful:

“A symbol is not an object to be manipulated through mime and memory, but an environment to be inhabited . . . every symbol deals with a new discovery and every symbol is an open-ended action, not a closed-off object. By engaging in symbols, by inhabiting their environment, people discover new horizons for life, new values and motivation.”⁶

“Symbols, being roomy, allow many different people to put them on, so to speak, in different ways. Signs do not. Signs are unambiguous because they exist to give precise information. Symbols coax one into a swamp of meaning and require one to frolic in it. . . . Signs are to symbols what infancy is to adulthood, what stem is to flower, and the flowering of maturity takes time.”⁷

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The Marianist charism is that kind of fertile reality: “an environment to be inhabited” wherein vowed religious, members of Marianist Lay Communities, faculty and staff in Marianist educational institutions, and others “discover new horizons for life, new values and motivation.” The challenge is to keep real meaning in these characteristic symbols or manifestations of the Marianist charism without reducing them. The Marianist charism is highly symbolic, affective, more “curved” than straight-lined. This is part of its attractiveness, yet part of the difficulty in articulation. It does not easily yield to discursive language. So, a particular challenge today is to articulate an identity that gives meaning, yet has some boundaries (for example, you can usually notice ways of acting that embody the charism and those that do not), but that is still supple and not closed-off.

The variety of articulations of the Marianist Charism—or any founding charism that is particularly fertile—can seem overwhelming to those seeking to understand it. Because a charism is of the Holy Spirit, no one articulation can authentically contain all of it. The truth of the charism is in our living of it. The point that Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, made about religions, also is relevant for a founding charism:

“...German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg made a poignant observation: ‘Religions die when their lights fail,’ that is, when their teachings no longer illuminate life as it is actually lived by their adherents. In such cases, the way the Holy is encountered stalls out and does not keep pace with changing human experience.Only the living God who spans all times can relate to historically new circumstances as the future continuously arrives. A tradition that cannot change cannot be preserved. Where people experience God as still having something to say, the lights stay on.”⁸

The core of the charism

The Marianist Charism has a fertility that, so far, has stood the test of time and inspires people to act from its meanings – or, to change the metaphor -- it is illuminating our everyday lives. Distinctions between the charism and the manifestations of its spirituality and apostolic approach are important to make so that we can preserve the understanding of what we might call the core of the charism:

The experience of being *called by God, formed by Mary and sent on the mission of Christ* to embody the Good News in one’s time and place.

The charism, of course, is only lived in and through its spirituality and apostolic approach and their manifestations of community, faith, mission, Mary, and inclusivity. With this appreciation, the creative Marianist imagination is free to respond to new times and cultures while remaining faithful to the original inspiration.

What does being “formed by Mary” look like in day-to-day life?” One way of understanding it is that **it means belonging to and actively participating in a Marianist community or in a Marianist communal environment**—whether that is a vowed religious community, a lay community, or an institutional environment inspired by the charism.

In practice this means that these communities or communal environments act in the way that Mary acted: as a person of faith, a person committed to the socially transforming mission of Jesus, a person who builds a family. To be *formed by Mary* involves openness to the influence of such a community and to act in ways to create such a community.

In this way we are formed. We receive for our lives, personally and collectively:

- A source of **motivation: persons, stories, a tradition**
- A sense of **direction: amidst the myriad options in our lives**
- A style of **formation: a preference for communal dynamics**

Aren't these gifts what we are looking for in the Marianist Family? This is what we can expect of a charism. The Marianist charism can yield these benefits if persons can notice in us the embodiment of these manifestations, individually and collectively.

Endnotes

¹Adapted from Ulli Beier, ed., *The Origin of Life & Death: African Creation Myths* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1966), 1.

²This understanding or distinction regarding *spirituality* and *apostolate* is based on the 1978 Vatican document “Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church,” # 11, which attempted to further develop the theology of charism after the concept was briefly mentioned in Vatican II documents.

The relevant article states:

“The very charism of the Founders appears as an experience of the Spirit transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth. It is for this reason that the distinctive character of various religious institutes is preserved and fostered by the Church. This distinctive character also involves a particular style of sanctification and apostolate, which creates its particular tradition with the result that one can readily perceive its objective elements....”

What is clear in the *Marianist* experience is that the transmission of the charism to the “disciples” of the founding person happens with laity *and* vowed religious.

³There is some discussion about—and some are dissatisfied—with trying to capture the manifestations in single-word concepts. I wrote to Eduardo Benlloch, SM, a Marianist studies expert, about this and he responded: “. . . I think it is impossible to find a very short and precise expression. It will always require a proper explanation. . . . What matters most is not the name we give to these points; but rather the way we explain them, which always needs to be done. We can always come to a formula that summarizes the spirituality of the whole Marianist Family. This one, for example:

Lay, religious and priests

 With a deep interior spirit

 Gathered in missionary communities

 In alliance with Mary

 For service of the Church.”

Raymond Fitz, SM, has recently stated the manifestations this way: Formed in Faith, Nurtured in Community, Diversity United in Common Mission, Motivated by a Missionary Spirit, and animated by the Spirit of Mary.

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⁴This description of the manifestations of the charism is based on the recent writings of David Fleming, SM (Circulars 1 & 7) and Manuel Cortés, SM, the present Superior General (*The Charism and Spirituality of the Marianist Family*). For a full elaboration of these manifestations there are many works to consult, such as the *Commentary on the Rule of Life of the Society of Mary*.

⁵William Bausch, *A New Look at the Sacraments* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1983), 6-7.

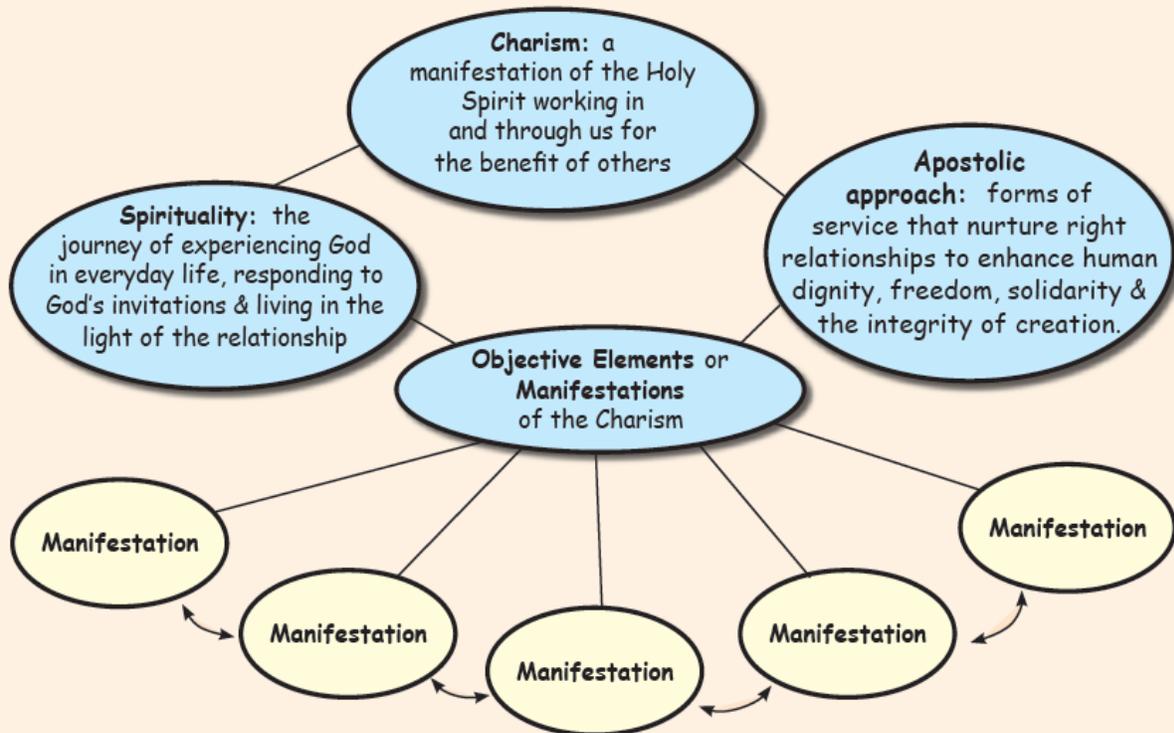
⁶Nathan Mitchell, "Symbols Are Actions, Not Objects," *Living Worship* 13:2 (February 1977): 1-2.

⁷Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1982), 5.

⁸Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 23.

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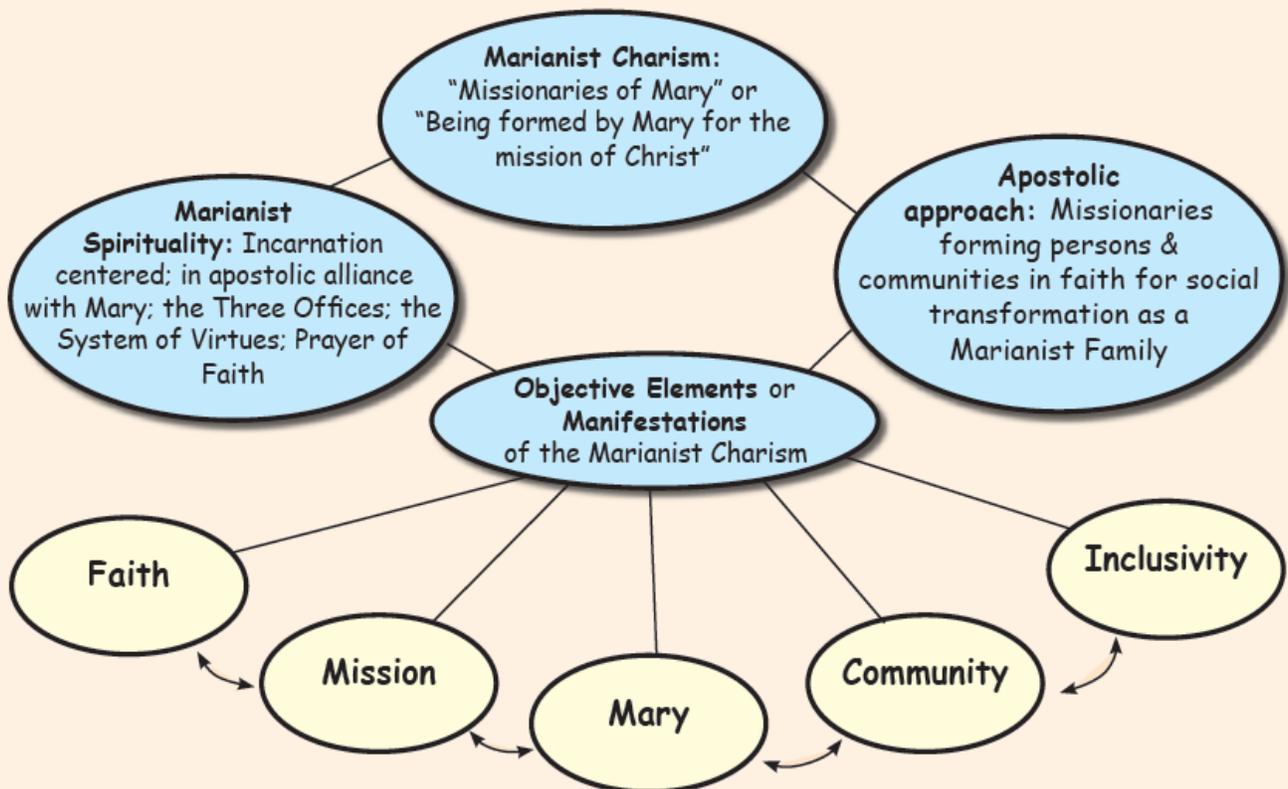
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