

Marvelous Companions

**Community life among Marcellin's
Little Brothers of Mary**

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Institute of the Marist Brothers
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CHILDREN OF A NEW SEASON¹

X

Love: a basket of bread
from which to eat
for years to come;
good loaves, fragrant and warm,
miraculously multiplied:
the basket never empty,
the bread never stale.

Catherine de Vinck, 1974¹

INTRODUCTION

25 March 2005
Feast of the Annunciation

Dear Brothers,

About a year and a half ago, you received a copy of a circular entitled *A Revolution of the Heart*. Since that time, a number of you have been in touch to share reactions to what you read as well as the fruit of your prayer, reflections, and discussions with others. Many thanks to all who responded with a word of gratitude, an alternate point of view, and other helpful ideas and suggestions.

A Revolution of the Heart was the first of three circulars that I am writing about the topic of identity. And whereas that letter focused on Marcellin's spirituality, I mentioned that those to follow would look at identity from the perspectives of community, and mission and ministry respectively.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the current letter, *Marvelous Companions*, takes up once again our

discussion about identity, this time from the viewpoint of community life. The last of the three, concentrating on the Church's mission, our works, and the Jean-Baptiste Montagnes of today, will appear prior to our General Conference.

Now you and I realize that a vast array of items falls under the heading of community, obviously I am able to address but a few of them in this letter. The task of writing about other equally important ones must be left to another time or placed in other hands.

The topics that I do discuss in this circular can be grouped into two categories: one, some of the pressing challenges you and I face today in living Marist community life; two, those qualities that a person can expect to find in any experience of life together that claims to be in Marcellin's tradition.

The points raised under this second heading have a bearing on the topic of identity. In the previous circular, I suggested that the following question lay at the heart of our struggles with that issue: "On whom or what do you and I set our hearts?" What we treasure and hold dear should be evident not only in our spiritual life, but in our community life as well. It should be evident not only in the simplicity that must characterize the places where we live, but also in our style of prayer and worship, our manner of relating to one another and those outside our community, and the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation found in the group.

Here at the outset two questions might be raised. Some may ask why the circular is addressed to brothers and not to lay Marists also. Others may wonder what makes me give community life priority over mission in my discussions of identity. I will answer each question in turn.



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First of all, the letter restricts itself to life together among the brothers because the life of Marist laity includes forms of community too diverse to be discussed adequately in a document of this nature and size. To my way of thinking, a circular that focuses on a few specific aspects of the topic at hand is a more effective instrument of change than one that attempts to cover a subject too broadly. Consequently, I have decided that a discussion about the topic of community in the lives of our Marist lay partners would be better placed in a letter to them that I look forward to sending out later this year. At that time, I also plan to explore more fully some emerging models of community made up of both Marcellin's brothers and Marist laity.

By omitting the topic from this circular, then, I am not denying that the element of community is important in the lives of lay men and women who share Marcellin's charism. Rather at this time I wish to concentrate on aspects of the brothers' life together that need urgent attention today.

Second, in choosing to focus on community rather than mission in this second circular, I would like to begin by acknowledging that while there is little doubt that the two are distinct dimensions in our way of life, they are also inseparable. I say this fully aware of the fact that we are often reminded that religious life did not come into existence for the sake of community. Rather, apostolic institutes such as our own were established, in the main, to address an absolute human need for the sake of the gospel: in our case, the obvious lack of evangelization among poor children and young people in post-revolutionary France.²

But God has also entrusted himself and his work to our care, and in so doing has invited us to make Jesus Christ the center and passion of our lives. In accepting this invitation you and I become his disciples. That fact

alone renders unnecessary any imagined wall standing between our mission and community.

The members of our 20th General Chapter said much the same in their *Message*. “Like Mary,” they challenged us, “let Christ be the center and passion of your life and the life of your community.” Our identity as disciples of Christ lies at the heart of our mission *and* of our life together as brothers in community.

At the time of our Baptism we entered into that community of disciples known as the Church;³ at first profession you and I went a step further, pledging to find our identity and destiny among a specific group of disciples within the People of God.⁴ In making that public commitment, we let the faithful and everyone else know that, henceforth, our identity would be bound to our intention to live fully and radically the *Good News* of Jesus Christ within the community of Marcellin’s Little Brothers.

Our failure to realize that community and mission are actually two sides of the same coin has caused us to accept all too readily a number of facile but inaccurate descriptions of our life together. Merely living together, for example, can never ensure that a Marist community exists, nor does a common work, or an agreed upon *Plan for Community Living*. These elements might help but they can never guarantee that you and I have formed a community that Marcellin would recognize as his own.

Likewise, our reluctance to place discipleship at the heart of our life together has led many of us to accept poorly analyzed cosmetic and ultimately ineffective solutions for the difficulties that we encounter in our life together.

Little is accomplished today by continuing to rank community and mission in order of importance, or in asking ourselves time and again, which one has the



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greater claim on our time or talents, or whether one must be sacrificed so that the other might take place.

DEFINING MARIST COMMUNITY LIFE

It may surprise some to learn that in parts of our Institute at the moment, the fundamental question about our community life centers around its meaning. Arriving at a commonly understood and accepted definition is a pressing task facing many Institutes today, including our own.

We know that Marcellin held community life in high regard. In his *Spiritual Testament* he included these words: “I beg of you, my dear brothers, with all the affection of my soul, and by all the love you have for me, do all you can to ensure that charity is always maintained among you.”⁵ The virtue of charity was to lie at the heart of any community that mirrored the founder’s spirit.

How best, then, define community today in our Institute? Perhaps one of the most honest ways is to simply say it is an affair of the heart. First and foremost, life together with our brothers challenges you and me to form and nurture a loving heart.⁶ Without that, we may survive, but never flourish in community.

What do I mean by a loving heart? A tale entitled *The Gift of the Magi* hints at an answer to that question.

The story’s details may be well-known to some. A young couple, having fallen upon hard times, is left with but two treasured possessions: Jim’s gold watch and Della’s flowing brown hair.

One Christmas, wanting to buy a gold chain for Jim’s watch, Della sells her hair. Jim, determined to give

his wife the tortoise shell combs she has long admired in the store window, sells his watch.

The author concludes his tale with these words, “The magi, as you know were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish [people] in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest. They are the magi.”⁷

If you and I long to form and nurture a loving heart, we must ask ourselves: what are we willing to sacrifice for the sake of our community, or any community of which we are members? It is easy to point to many aspects of community life that are unattractive. How much more difficult, though, for us to acknowledge that being called together by God is what transforms our life in community into a moment of grace.

A BALANCED APPROACH

I write about life together today for still another reason: the concern I hear voiced about its present state in parts of our Institute. There is concern about the quality of our community life, but even more so about the impact that a problem-ridden community can have on our ability to carry out the mission that has been entrusted to each of us. Sad to say, in recent years a lack of genuine community life has been one of the reasons given for requesting a dispensation from vows.

In discussing our life together, I plan to talk about its everyday reality, rather than the ideal for which we all strive. In so doing, I must first say that we have many wonderful communities in our Institute: open, life-giv-



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ing, and prayerful centers of fraternity. During the course of my own life, I have been fortunate to be a member of some of them.

What made these communities so memorable? Our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* put it well. We came together realizing that we were different but complementary, and that it was our passion for Jesus and his *Good News* that united us.

With that understanding in mind, we sought the will of God so as to fulfill it, lived simply, and took an interest in the life and ministry of one another. While trying to overcome our selfishness and sensitivity, we learned to forgive and accept forgiveness. In time these communities grew to be not only centers of evangelization, but also places of friendship and sharing where the human and spiritual qualities of each member were able to develop freely.

In recent years, blessed with the opportunity to meet and speak with brothers throughout our world, I have learned that many of you have had the same experience of spending years together with talented, prayerful, and generous men who are among our Marist brothers.

For example, when sharing his experience of life in community with me recently, one of our confreres said spontaneously: “Seán, God has blessed me with some marvelous companions on my journey through life.” I knew exactly what he meant.

In spite of all this good news, I must also express my preoccupation with the number of brothers in a few parts of our Institute who are, in fact, living by themselves on a more or less permanent basis, as well as others who appear to be living alone together. As I mentioned earlier, the fact that any number of us live under the same roof does not ensure that community life exists. Brother Basilio once put it this way: “There are

brothers who left the Institute years ago, but simply never changed their address.”⁸

How can we explain this last phenomenon? There are many reasons for this situation. Some feel overwhelmed by community life or lack the skills necessary to cope with a diverse and challenging group of adults living together physically. Consequently, they choose merely to co-exist with those with whom they share the house.

With what result? Loneliness, irritability, and ongoing disappointment.

Some of us must also face the emotionally and spiritually crippling problem of activism. Stretched thin in our ministry, we return to a community equally busy and with some members uneasy about anyone taking time alone. Such a situation can seriously erode a person’s ability to embrace the gift of solitude in his life.

We have too many brothers who arrive at midlife only to discover that they are strangers to themselves. One of the people you and I need to get to know and befriend early in life is our self. That can only occur if we take the time to do so, and learn to be at home with being alone.

Finally, I am concerned about reports of brothers in community who are bitter and angry. We all have days when we are not at our best. However, for any of us to subject our community to a steady diet of bad days is not only unjust, at the very least it has implications for the group’s ability to construct a life that will support the ideals that we hold dear and to promote vocations. Each of us has a responsibility to live in such a way that the spirit of joy that should mark our way of life is clearly evident to all.

At the same time, you and I must admit that every Marist community in which we have ever lived has been



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flawed. And that is because you and I have been members of these communities and we know only too well that neither we nor those with whom we live are perfect. But can't the same be said of any human community?

The admission that many aspects of our life together in community can lead to hurt feelings and disappointment is understandable. Day-to-day disagreements are common among us, and those with whom we live often fail to meet our expectations. As a consequence, a spirit of reconciliation must also lie at the heart of any community today that claims the founder's charism as its own.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS CIRCULAR

This circular is divided into three parts. In the first, I take a look at what our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* have to say about life together. That document presents a rich theology of community, albeit an ideal from which we often fall short. As part of this section, I also talk about some of the evident generational and cultural differences that exist in Marist community life today, and discuss a few of the models that have been used to describe life together.

Next, I examine some of the phases through which communities pass as they form and develop. As you read this second section, keep this point in mind: unless Marist community members are able to share something of their personal and spiritual lives, allow their brothers to have a claim over their time and talents, foster a spirit of mutual respect, and learn to disagree and survive their differences, they will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the ideals about which our *Constitutions and Statutes* speak.

Finally, I describe a number of concrete challenges that exist in more than a few Marist communities today

and suggest ways in which we might deal with them. How, for example, can you or I keep alive, over time, our enthusiasm for life together? What can we expect realistically from others in the group and what might they expect of us?

Are there ways in which community members can intervene when alcoholism or another addictive behavior is a problem for one of them? What approaches are most effective when dealing with other destructive behaviors in the community, such as chronic complaining and negativity, unremitting aggressive and explosive reactions, long-standing bitterness and anger among some of our brothers?

In what ways can you or I best foster a spirit of hospitality and prayerfulness in ourselves and among those with whom we live? How can we sensitively express affection, tenderness, and care for one another? Can conflict among members of the community be managed in a way that will strengthen the group? How do you or I learn to admit our own role in some of the difficulties that occur in community life and to ask for forgiveness? Simply put, how can we build a Marist community where forgiveness is a habit and reconciliation no stranger?

The last section also includes this question: If Marcellin were to visit any of our communities today, would he recognize what he had in mind when he spoke these words in his *Last Testament*: “Let it be said of the Little Brothers of Mary, as it was of the first Christians, ‘See how they love one another’.”⁹ The answer to this question brings the circular to a close and identifies those qualities that mark a community Marcellin would claim as one of his own.



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PART I

Constitutions and Statutes

Theology offers neither absolute certainty nor simple answers. What it does provide is a context in which to understand our human experience as a faithful and faith-filled people.

The text of our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* makes reference to at least six dimensions of our life together: Trinitarian, Marial, spiritual, apostolic, human, and evangelical. At the beginning of the third chapter of that document, we are reminded that love between the Father, Son, and Spirit is the source of our life in common. Our unity is a sign that God's love, poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, is stronger than our human limitations.¹⁰

Setting up a community with his apostles, Jesus prayed that they and all of us today might be one, as he and the Father are one.¹¹ That same Father longs for a world where all men and women will come together to form a single human family, a world in which each person is seen and loved by all as a brother or sister.¹²

Mary has a place of prominence in our life in common. Jesus was the focus of her life; no less must he be the focus of ours. Like those who gathered together on Pentecost, we remain conscious of Mary's presence and her role as Mother of the Church, as well as our Good Mother and sister in faith. We also rely on her to help us live as brothers, and to understand more fully that we make up one body in Christ.¹³

Like Mary's life at Nazareth, ours is meant to be simple and hard-working; in imitation of her generosity of heart when visiting Elizabeth and attending the wedding at Cana, we remain attentive to the needs of the community and the world.

The spirituality passed on to us by our founder and early brothers is both Marial and apostolic. Following Marcellin's example, we live in God's presence and leave the results of our work in His hands, convinced that "if the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labor."¹⁴

At the same time, we realize that doubt, loss of enthusiasm, and dryness of heart are also a daily experience in the lives of most of us. Secure in the knowledge that God is always faithful, and with reliance on Mary and our brothers, we continue to strive to be a total gift to God and others.

In our life in common we witness to the evangelical counsels in a very concrete way.¹⁵ Our devotion to poverty is obvious in our simple style of living, and our willingness to share freely our talents and time with all whose lives we touch.¹⁶ We practice obedience by constantly searching to know God's will.¹⁷ Chastity, a virtue that opens our hearts to friendship, prompts us to receive the love of others as though it is the Lord's own.¹⁸

And so, united as brothers in community, known for our spirit of welcome and nurtured by a dynamic life of



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prayer, we are well-disposed to take up our ministry: to make Jesus known and loved among poor children and young people.¹⁹

Within this theological context each of us takes an interest in the life and work of our brothers. We strive to accept one another as different in a number of ways and yet, at the same time, complementary. Because our love for our brothers is unpretentious and wholehearted, we make every effort to sympathize with their difficulties and to share their joys.²⁰

Putting aside egoism and the touchiness that is often our reaction to a brother's admonition, we, instead, accept with simplicity what he has to say and reflect upon its meaning. When in the wrong we ask for pardon, and when wronged ourselves we are the first to offer forgiveness. In this way, the community in which we live becomes a place of friendship, of life shared, where each one's human qualities and spiritual gifts can flourish.

Finally, no matter his age, we treasure each of our brothers, because of the person he is and his relationship to community, not just because of the contribution he makes to our ministry, regardless of its significance.²¹

The young brother and his midlife confrere bring the wealth of their gifts of mind and heart to the community. While both share their enthusiasm and zeal for our way of life, the midlife brother does so with full knowledge of his successes and failures. Our older brothers give us the best witness to the Lord's fidelity we can find: their perseverance.

All receive something in return: our younger confreres, support for their vocation; our midlife pilgrims, the encouragement of their brothers; those in their later years, the respect and love of all.

In any discussion about community, our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* provide us with an excellent point of reference. What we find there reflects so well the hopes of many of us when it comes to life together. We must persist in our efforts to live out this ideal, though we often fall short.

ONE SET OF EYES OR ANOTHER

Since the close of Vatican II, each of us has read the text of our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* with a particular set of eyes, and that holds true for both the experimental text that was ours from 1968 until 1985, as well as the one that we have known since our 18th General Chapter. Some of us have viewed the text through a Western set of eyes, while others have brought to the task the eyes of the East, or those of the poor, the mystic, the young, and so many others. What we have found written is encouraging, challenging, inspiring.

The experience of reading these *Constitutions and Statutes*, then, has not been the same for everyone. We have brought to the task many different understandings about the workings of our world, various hopes and fears, an assortment of dreams and disappointments. However, for too long a number of us have failed to realize that there are different ways of appreciating the same reality.

In reading the Biblical stories about creation, for example, those of us who hold fast to a Western way of thinking with its tendency to center on the self, are likely to place emphasis on the individual. And so these tales become stories about God creating each person in His own image and likeness.

There are other ways, however, to understand the very same stories. For example, it is just as accurate to



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say that, since the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit is at the heart of our Christian understanding of God, Adam and Eve are made in the same image precisely because they were created as a couple. Their sin is the original sin, not because it is the first sin, but because it is a sin against their origins: they break their communion with one another and with God. Cain repeats this sin when he slays his brother Abel.²²

While the Western worldview that dominates the thinking of a majority of brothers in our Institute has very positive points to recommend it, like anything else, it also has its limits. It can, at times, burden us with polarizing and hierarchical patterns of reasoning that interfere with our ability to appreciate the unity inherent in God's creation. Were we to step outside this constricted way of thinking, we might understand more fully why community members cut off from mission move so quickly in the direction of self-involvement, while those immersed in mission find the source of their vitality in community.²³

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Directions: Take a few minutes apart to consider the following questions. As you do so, use a pad and pencil to jot down any points you wish to remember later. They will be recalled more easily if you have some written notes to prompt you. Having some notes on hand will also be of help in any communal or regional discussion of these questions.

So, clear your head, and ask yourself these questions:

1. What has been your experience of community life during your years as a brother? What challenges have you faced; what consolations have you found?
2. Take a moment to reflect upon those Marist communities that have contributed significantly to your human and spiritual growth, and to your zeal for mission. What was it about these communities that made them so rich in grace?
3. What sections of our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* describe best your experience of community life? What texts in the same document appear to be most at odds with your overall experience of life together?

We have too many brothers who arrive at midlife only to discover that they are strangers to themselves.

GENERATIONAL, CULTURAL, AND OTHER DIFFERENCES

Aside from those mentioned already, other differences exist in our Marist community life today. For example, generational and cultural understandings about community vary. As we discuss some of them in the pages just ahead, keep this thought in mind: our Marist identity, as difficult as it might be to put into words, is a fundamental element that unites us as Marcellin's brothers. It is that basic identity upon which we must build as we seek new ways to live and serve together in the ever changing world in which we find ourselves.

a. Generational differences

Our preparation for life in community has been determined in part by the years during which we passed through the postulancy, novitiate, and scholasticate, or their contemporary counterparts. As a consequence, for some of us community life has always been equated with a set of fixed practices that mark each day: for example, having various prayers, a certain number of meals together, and a time for recreation occur during every period of 24 hours. A predictable uniformity marks the life of community members and the manner in which they interact.

When faced with questions about the nature and purpose of community life, these brothers fall back on tradition and the law. Vatican II and our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* notwithstanding, some insist that there is but one fixed way to live out community life. Read the rules, they say; they are quite clear and allow for few exceptions.

This first group brings a number of gifts to our life together. Any community benefits from a pattern of prayer marked by a regular and predictable rhythm. For most of us, having the ongoing support of a community in our

life of personal and communal prayer is a treasure that we often come to value only when we no longer have it.

Those committed to regularity in community are also frequently faithful in celebrating the rituals of holidays, birth and feast days, and other special occasions. These and other gifts should not be overlooked; they are important in the life of any Marist community. Such efforts go a long way toward building a sense of fraternity among those involved.

A second group of brothers holds fast to a very different model of community life. For them predictability, punctuality, and regularity are not so important as the quality of the relationships that exist among those in the group.

Wanting to promote a level of exchange that moves beyond the superficial, they are keen to talk with others in the group about their affective life and experience of God. Some wonder how best to express their feelings of affection and care, their doubts and preoccupations.

Physical presence at prayer is less of a concern to many in this second group than the preparation that has gone into the service, the manner in which it is carried out, and the ability of those in the group to adapt.

Brothers in this second group can be accused of having a “supermarket mentality” when it comes to life together, picking and choosing aspects of our life to observe, but they also bring many gifts to the community: a welcome spontaneity, new ideas, a fresh perspective. They have a developing life of faith, take time for personal prayer, and are committed to community life. Their understanding about each of these areas, however, differs greatly from those who make up the generations before them.



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What will be
the price of life
and a future
for our Institute
and its mission
today?
Nothing short
of a revolution!

And herein lies much of the confusion: it is obvious that we have within the Institute different generations of brothers; what has been less clear until recently is the degree of difference that exists among these groups. For example, the fact that a number of young brothers are keen to talk about Jesus, spirituality, and their human experience, but fail to be faithful to some community exercises is a source of confusion to a number of older brothers reared on warnings about particular friendships and the importance of regularity.

At the same time, lacking an experience of the world of Church and religious life prior to Vatican Council II, many in the younger generation are unaware of the sacrifices that a number of older brothers made to insure Marist life as it exists today.

An example of the generational differences that are common in our Institute at the moment are illustrated in the following remarks an older man made a few years ago. He said, “These days everyone seems to be asking me what I think. Quite frankly, I don’t know what I think. For 40 years, I was told to let the community Superior do the thinking.

“Our younger brothers, though, are different.” he continued. “I envy their ability to speak their minds, even when what they think runs counter to the opinion of the majority. But as for me, often I am not really sure what I think!”

Finally, there are those who regardless of age understand that a relationship of discipleship is what binds together the members of any of our Marist communities. Marcellin was clear in his desire that communities of his brothers should be a reminder of the communities of believers who gathered to share the stories about Jesus and the Eucharist. He wrote, “Be of one heart and mind.”²⁴

Sad to say, however, a number of us continue to rely on skills for community life that were meant for another age, a different understanding of life together. As a consequence, we can at times feel lost when faced with the reality of the community today. Take the virtue of charity, for example. Many of us were taught to equate it with longsuffering. In reality, however, charity has more to do with speaking the truth in love, than with guarding our words carefully lest we hurt others. Today in a number of quarters, we are in urgent need of acquiring new skills for life together in community.²⁵

In every Marist community, each brother has his story to tell, and needs to be given the opportunity to do so. If we listen closely to the telling of that tale, we will learn something about the gifts he possesses and the challenges that have been his at different points along life's journey. We will also come to appreciate more fully the influence that culture and family have played in the formation of his self-understanding, faith, and beliefs about life in common. Most importantly, we might catch a glimpse of the love that God has for him and has shown to him over the course of life, in good times and difficult ones.

Later in this circular, I suggest steps that we can take as an Institute to better prepare all of us for life together in the 21st century. For the moment, though, keep in mind that there are several unique generations within our Institute today. Each has a different experience of formation, different expectations of community life, and in some instances, almost totally different understandings of religious life itself.

b. Cultural differences

Then there is the question of culture! It has been one of the instruments that God has used to nurture the vocation of each of us. Culture has likewise helped to



shape our hopes and expectations about life together. These last two elements, our hopes and expectations about the community, can differ greatly among the members of any one community and will do so significantly when the members of that community are from different countries and cultures. There is no reason to be surprised about this fact. For an Institute that has a presence in 77 different countries, pluralism and diversity should be the norm, not the exception.

What do we mean by the word *culture*? It is used generally to describe the customs and traditions of any group of people. Consequently, when we use the term *cultural differences* we are usually referring to the diversity that exists between one group and another in terms of practices such as the process of decision making, how elders are cared for, and holidays celebrated.

Multiculturalism, a word used to describe the presence of diverse cultures, provides us with two great challenges today. One, to confront our fear that pluralism will lead to division and disunity. Two, to admit that our knowledge about cultural differences is often based upon little more than a quick look at the tips of several icebergs. So much of another culture is hidden, invisible to the eye.

Each religious institute also has its own culture; ours is no exception. Our Marist religious culture influences the ways in which we organize our lives and helps determine those expressions and customs that we have come to hold as sacred. As part of that culture, a particular apostolate, a certain spirituality, traditions having to do with community life, and other elements – some dating back to the time of the founder – are passed from one generation of brothers to the next.

As an institute expands, however, and moves its mission into new lands and among new peoples, it faces

still another cultural challenge. While respecting the past, it must, at the same time, enter fully into the culture in which it finds itself. Taking time to learn well the language of the people of the region, and studying their history, traditions, and customs are all important signs of respect.

Any institute's identity should be strong enough to allow it to take root in new soil and, in time, be tended by and learn from those who for so long tilled that soil.

The histories of many religious congregations, our own included, remind us that this hoped for outcome has not always been achieved, and not because of ill-will or a lack of hard work on the part of those involved. Unfortunately, some past understandings of missiology judged new cultures to be inferior, without merit, pagan. Local languages were often referred to as dialects, and long held customs and traditions were suppressed. God was to be brought into these cultures, not found within them.

Though years of experience have helped us to understand better just how complex culture can be, difficulties continue to exist. These ongoing cross-cultural struggles are but a mirror of what is going on in our Church as she struggles to move from an institution dominated by western thinking to one that is truly catholic. Theologian Karl Rahner has reminded us that Vatican II was "the first major official event in which the Church in fact began to actualize itself precisely as a world Church."²⁶

During the years just ahead simple demographics will make this last challenge all the more urgent. At the beginning of the 20th century, for example, approximately 80 percent of the Catholic population lived in Europe and North and South America. By 2020, however, estimates are that approximately 80 percent of all



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Theologian Karl Rahner has reminded us that Vatican II was “the first major official event in which the Church in fact began to actualize itself precisely as a world Church.”

Catholics will live in the eastern and southern hemispheres, with Europe and North America containing the remaining 20 percent. In a period of 120 years, the demographics of the Catholic Church will have been turned upside down.²⁷ Though immigration patterns may eventually alter somewhat the percentages projected, the trend they indicate is evident.

We need to remember also that we cannot undo the past, only try to heal it. But heal it we must, and then get on with the tasks at hand. That observation is true not only on the global level mentioned just above, but also in the daily life of any Marist community.

If our experience of community is to be a model for our Church and world, then good communication, a respect for differences, and a spirit of tolerance will be essential elements in the life of any group living and working cross-culturally. Without the presence of these basic tools, those involved can quickly become polarized and suspicious about the motives and actions of others in the group. Since we will inevitably make mistakes, a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation must be present, too, among the members of the community.

Past international meetings such as General Conferences and Chapters provide us with a number of stories about cross-cultural misunderstandings. For example, John, a young brother from China serving as an observer during our 1997 General Conference in Rome, asked me at breakfast the first morning, “Seán, where is the rice?” I realized immediately that I had overlooked including rice on the breakfast menu. For some Asian people rice is commonly available for the first meal of the day. So I promised to alert the cooks and to have the situation corrected for the next morning.

About the same time the following day, however, John came to see me again and asked, “Seán, where is

the rice?” I said that the kitchen had assured me that rice would be served that morning, and that it must be somewhere on the buffet table.

We found it eventually. Unfortunately, the rice was actually “risotto,” an Italian style of rice cooked in a sauce. That particular morning it happened to be mixed with cream and shrimp! Quite tasty for those who like it, but hardly breakfast fare in Italy, and surely not for the young brother in our story. I still remember John’s reaction on seeing the risotto. “Seán,” he said, “sticky rice, that’s all I’m asking for, sticky rice!”

A second more telling example occurred during our 20th General Chapter. On a day when a brother from the African continent was chairing, a fellow capitulant made a parliamentary intervention that, by its nature, required the chair to stop debate immediately and call for a vote to determine if the Chapter at large wanted to stop discussion and move immediately to a vote on the issue being debated.

Rather than taking those steps, however, the chair merely noted on a list the name of the brother who had made the intervention and moved on to the next speaker.

There was an audible gasp from the parliamentarians in the group.

Nevertheless, the chair continued to recognize speakers, even as the brother who had made he initial intervention climbed onto the table located in front of his place to be sure that his request was not only heard but now also seen by all in the Chapter hall.

Eventually, a recess was called. I asked the moderator why he had not stopped the debate. “Seán,” he said,



“in my culture it is terribly offensive to deny someone the right to speak. I just could not do it.”

I learned an important lesson about cultural differences that day. What some of us might judge to be an efficient means for bringing a lengthy and, perhaps in our opinion, unproductive discussion to a quick conclusion was, seen through the cultural eyes of another, an offensive way of behaving. I wondered later just how many other examples of cultural conflicts we might find if we were to make a detailed analysis of the dynamics taking place at any of our international meetings.

The same type of misunderstanding can occur on the community level, especially when its members represent different linguistic and cultural groups. The potential for this situation developing is becoming increasingly more common today as we adjust to life in provinces formed through the process of restructuring. Many are multilingual and cross-cultural.

In planning meetings for the members of these new administrative units, for example, translation services are necessary. The manner in which birthdays and feast days are celebrated, holidays observed, retreats conducted merits study. It is also naïve, even offensive, to believe that in the future, formation will render everyone the same. Our cultures are too important and formative in our lives to be put aside so easily.

A final point. To be prepared for the demands of Marist life today and in the future, each brother in the Institute would benefit from learning at least one language in addition to his maternal language. Many already speak several, but among those who do not, taking up the challenge of mastering a new language is one concrete step that can be taken to acquire some of the skills that will be needed in the multicultural Marist world that is ours today.

PREOCCUPATIONS

As we conclude this section of Part I of the circular, we can be encouraged by the fact that a growing number of brothers today are concerned about the state and future direction of community life within our Institute.

Many are members of Marist communities that annually take time together to draw up a plan for life to which all involved can give assent. This document then serves as a touchstone for the members of the group throughout the following 12 months, helping them to reflect upon this important dimension of their lives.

In some provinces and districts brothers are searching for new ways of living together. Others are working to open up their communities, to make them the places of welcome and prayer described in Institute documents. At times, these initiatives have included communities made up of brothers and young volunteers or members of Marist laity. Still others among us are simplifying their lives and striving to fashion Marist communities that will come as close as possible to the ideals presented in our *Constitutions and Statutes*.

At the same time, troubling signs exist. For example, there are brothers whose response to the word *community* is defensive, resistant, and silent. Some maintain that community doesn't necessarily mean life together under the same roof, and point to colleagues at work, or family members, or a circle of friends as their source of support.

Still others, citing some obviously troubled community in the Province as an example, protest that they are no longer willing to tolerate what they judge to be a dysfunctional way for adults to live together. "I don't want to live any longer with people who are crazy," they say.



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Though years of experience have helped us to understand just how complex culture can be, difficulties continue to exist.

Some few of us seek to live alone. We list the pressures of ministry or, having been hurt in the past by rigid structures and the inappropriate exercise of authority, conclude that living alone protects us from getting hurt once again and is simply easier.

Community life is often described in Church and Institute documents as a mainstay of consecrated life. But for at least a few of us, it has become, instead, one of the thorniest issues that we have had to face since Vatican Council II.

WHAT RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES ARE NOT!

Community life is easy to define in the abstract. But giving structure and form to it in the concrete circumstances of our everyday life is considerably more challenging. Throughout the history of consecrated life, several models describing the nature and purpose of community have been used to help us with this task. While they may have been useful in their time, most appear to be of little help today.

Some of us, for example, have been encouraged to think of our community as a family, and this is certainly true in our Marist culture. Various images from Scripture and Tradition supported this viewpoint, with an idealized picture of life among the Holy Family at Nazareth heading the list. While life together in any one of our communities can bear witness to some positive aspects of family life, a religious community is not a family.

A family, by its very nature, includes relationships between people of unequal status and power. Consider, for a moment, the exasperated mother of a rebellious teenage boy who disciplines her son with these words: “As long as you continue to live under this roof,

and we pay the bills, you will do as I say and follow the rules of this house!” Such a relationship is hardly marked by mutuality and equal levels of interdependence.

Use of a family model to describe religious community life has also, at times, given rise to hierarchical structures not in keeping with the nature of consecrated life. Haven’t some congregations in the past referred to at least one member of the community as the “Mother,” “Brother,” or “Father” Superior? Is it any wonder, then, that some members over time regressed to behavior patterns more suitable to an earlier age in life, or simply rebelled, projecting onto the community’s leader all their unresolved issues with parents and other authorities.

At the same time, our Marist communities are not therapeutic communities. There are, of course, healing aspects to our life together. We can unburden ourselves to one another, and, where the members of the group are mature and generous, mutual support is forthcoming. While a religious community can and must be a place where we thrive humanly and spiritually, the personal growth of its members can never be the primary reason for its existence.

In contrast, the chief concern of a therapeutic community is the personal growth of those who make up the group. That is the task that brought them together in the first place; it is also the engine that drives the life of the community.

Consequently, the individual and his or her needs have a prominent place in any therapeutic community. Free of most external distractions, its members spend considerable time discussing life within the group and their own conduct. The results? They gain helpful insights into the reasons for their behavior and a better



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understanding of the impact that it has on others. Little time and energy, however, is left for much else.

Our Marist communities were founded so we could live the Gospel and proclaim the Word of God. Our primary mission is to love God and to make God known and loved. In defining ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ, the world outside the community becomes our proper focus.

If we apply the model of a therapeutic community to Marist religious life, we run the risk of turning our focus inward, thus promoting unrealistic expectations about the community and its members, and distorting the true nature and purpose of Gospel-based community living.

Finally, in some provinces brothers have embraced models from the corporate world to help them understand the dynamics of a modern day religious community. While aspects of models that guide the business world may be helpful in better understanding the dynamics that operate within a religious community, the community is not a corporation.

Corporations are often marked by a bureaucratic culture, in which the worth of members is measured by their ability to carry out specific roles and assigned tasks. Job descriptions take on an importance that far exceeds their usefulness. A familiar phrase that you hear from time to time in any group classified as a bureaucracy is: “It’s not my job!”

Life in any one of our Marist communities cannot be governed by a time clock, and a spirit of generosity stands in direct opposition to the objection that “it’s not my job.”

Often, the most essential roles in our Institute’s communities are also those we are least able to measure ac-

curately. We do little to clarify the true nature of religious community in our contemporary world by attempting to reduce what should be a gospel-based community to the workings of corporate or commercial structures.

By this point, you might find yourself asking, “If the community is not a family, a therapeutic community, a corporation, then, just what is it?”

The truth is that no adequate analog for a religious community exists. Unlike other groups, the members of an Institute like ours form community life in response to a divine call. It has caused us to make a life commitment based on a purpose beyond ourselves, rather than a desire for personal comfort. Genuine religious community is aimed at self-transcendence rather than self-fulfillment.

COMMUNITY LIFE AND SOLITUDE

A word about community life and solitude. Both the Old and New Testaments address these topics, as have spiritual writers and theologians over the centuries. Our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes*, in describing the mystery of election, place solitude at the heart of our call to consecrated life:

“God chooses individual men and women and calls each one personally into the desert, where he speaks to their hearts. He sets apart those who listen to him, and through his spirit, leads them into a continuous process of conversion and growth in his love, to send them forth on mission.

This is the birth of a covenant of love in which God gives himself to the person, and that person gives himself to God;



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a covenant which the prophets compared to a betrothal.

The whole dynamic of religious consecration is found at the heart of this covenant. ”²⁸

When all is read, said, and done, however, we must admit that each of us travels alone through life. Whether married or single, a member of a religious Institute or a secular priest, regardless of our philosophy of life, culture, religious beliefs, years of education, or a thousand and one other factors, you and I come into this world alone, and in leaving it we are no less solitary.²⁹

Some of us question our call to community life when solitude becomes a burden. Whether it be early in our days as a brother as we struggle with issues of intimacy, or when facing the sobering reality of personal mortality at midlife, or as we mourn the death of lifelong friends during our final years, we are reminded time and again that we are alone and that community can never lift that weight.

Neither, however, can anything else in this world. Solitude is part of our human nature and of our human condition. We are reminded daily that Augustine was right: “Our hearts will rest only when they rest in God.”

Solitude, and the loneliness that at times accompanies it, provide us with a means for growing closer to God and other people. You and I can so easily become self-involved. Solitude and loneliness have the potential to draw us out of our self-enclosed world. Both help us understand that that world and our concerns are not what is most important; there is One who is greater than ourselves. Dag Hammarskjöld, who for a time served as Secretary General of the United Nations, put it this way: “Pray that your loneliness may spur you towards finding something to live for, something that is great enough to die for.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Directions: Once again, take a few minutes apart to consider the following questions. Jot down any points you wish to remember later. They will come to mind more easily if you have some written notes to prompt you. Notes will also be of great help in any communal or regional discussion of these questions.

1. Identify some of the generational differences that you have come across in community living? In what ways did these differences add to the life of the community; in what ways did they lead to difficulties in the daily life of the group? In what ways did you or can you address generational difference in community life?
2. Culture helps shape the form and nature of our Marist communities: our Marist culture, the culture of community members, the culture of the country in which the community is located. Describe the positive role that culture has played in the life of the communities in which you have lived. What misunderstandings have arisen due to culture?
3. What role, if any, do solitude and loneliness play in your life in community? Do you experience them as a burden, a source of growth, or both? Please explain.

PART II

Religious communities as groups

The members of our 20th General Chapter challenged you and me to take some responsibility for ensuring that our Marist communities are places where human and spiritual growth are possible.³⁰ While not an easy task to address, we can rest assured that God will provide the gifts and graces necessary to complete the work.

The science of psychology can be of some assistance here. During the years since Vatican II, it has been a source of greater self-understanding for many of our brothers and has helped deepen the awareness of most of us about the dynamics that are at work in community life and elsewhere.³¹

But, while psychology has been an aid in living community more fully, in recent years a number of sociologists have reminded us that they too have something to say about the topic. More often than not, psychology has the individual in mind, whereas sociology focuses on the group. For this reason, the overall contribution of the latter to our understanding about community may eventually far exceed what psychology has offered.

GROUPS

A group exists whenever three or four unrelated persons come together and interact on a somewhat permanent basis. An important dimension of any Marist community, therefore, is the fact that it is a group.

Groups come in all sizes and shapes, and serve a variety of purposes. At his place of employment, for example, a man belongs to a work group. The common task that has drawn him and his colleagues together gives definition to this type of community.

Sociologists tell us that a group can also be defined by the degree of commitment it asks. In an *intentional community*, for example, you or I freely commit ourselves to live, work, pray, and relax with a specific group of people, whereas in an *association* we invest only a certain amount of our resources in the group so as to attain some common goal or objective.³²

In the past, there appeared to be no other kind of religious community except an *intentional community*. Membership exacted a price. A spirit of mortification characterized the life of those who made up the group and extensive demands were made on their time and energy.

They also learned quickly that the community's transcendent mission took precedence over their needs. Many appeared to understand intuitively that what personally fulfilled them might hinder the effective functioning of the group's charism.

In our own situation, sacrifice bonded us to the Institute: we were required to dress in a certain way, take up particular works without consultation, accept the superior's will, and follow what might, in retrospect, be benignly described as a rigid daily schedule.



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Often, the most essential roles in our Institute's communities are also those we are least able to measure accurately.

From the time of initial formation, rituals and routines—many dating back to Marcellin's time—also marked our Institute's life. Certain feast days, such as the five great Marial feasts, were celebrated, particular customs observed, and chapters of faults held.

In contrast, the model of an *association* is illustrated by the situation in which a brother, for all practical purposes, is living alone on a more or less permanent basis. He retains his personal independence and a great deal of control over his free time. Often enough, the brothers of his Province or District, and the Institute at large, eventually feel as though they have little right to make demands on him.

This situation is increasingly confusing today for a number of brothers, and also for young men looking to make our life their own. For example, a candidate asked recently, "Just when did living alone as a permanent arrangement, finding my own employment, and deciding independently on the use of almost all my free time, with only tangential contact with the Province and Institute, stop being called the 'single life' and become another form of Marist community?" Religious institutes that move in the direction of establishing themselves as associations risk not lasting beyond the current generation.

By introducing the topics of intentional communities and associations into our discussion, I am not advocating a return to the rigid structures of the past. At the same time, were we to familiarize ourselves with what sociologists have to say about both, we might learn some important lessons about our contemporary Marist life and its future. Are we open enough to allow ourselves to dream about what a Marist intentional community might look like today, as defined here and in light of the cultural differences found in our Institute and all that we have learned over the last 40 or so years of renewal?

The matter of community life is an urgent one in our Institute today. I believe that our Marist mission and way of life will die out eventually in those provinces and districts where ever increasing numbers of brothers are either living alone, or might as well be, considering the little interaction they have with other community members.

I believe that the same outcome can be expected in those administrative units where brothers continue to tolerate a level of activism that can only be described as bordering on the pathological, or believe that choice of community is solely a personal matter, and continue to find reasons to remain in the same community year after year.

Religious life was never meant to consist of a group of people who come together solely to live amiably or interact superficially. Rather, we are called to be a searing presence in our world. This end can be accomplished only if we allow God's will to be mediated through our brothers. This holds true for the composition of our communities as much as it does for the ministries we are asked to undertake in the Institute's name and in other areas of our life.

COSTLY GRACE

Community life is one place where the human weakness that you and I carry is very evident. And so, we must often ask ourselves these questions: Are we willing to place our legitimate human needs secondary to the overall goals of the community? Is that fact apparent in the way that we live and pray and share our lives? Are we willing to take responsibility for the life and direction of our communities, or do we spend our time criticizing those who do?

Is a spirit of discipleship as obvious in our day-to-day life in community as it is in the ministries that we carry out in Jesus' name?



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Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor whose convictions about the message of the gospel cost him his life during the Second World War, wrote movingly about the experience of discipleship. In doing so, he made a distinction between what he called costly and cheap grace.³³

The first is a gift for which we must ask. Its cost is the price of our lives, and it is grace because in return we receive the only true life worth having. In contrast, we pay nothing for cheap grace; it is grace without discipleship, without the cross, without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Unfortunately, a number of us, frightened by the price of costly grace, choose instead the consolation of cheap grace. Incapable of sustaining us as we undertake the adventure of contemporary Marist community life, such grace will always be found wanting.

Faith has consequences. Discipleship demands that we sacrifice our own comfort, take a number of risks, and act with courage. Jesus was most serious when he offered this challenge: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”³⁴ He was equally serious when he promised in return the fullness of life in this world and in the next.

STAGES IN THE GROWTH OF ANY COMMUNITY

Earlier I mentioned that every Marist community is a group. We can assume therefore, that rather than remaining static each one will pass through a series of stages from the time its members first gather until the community comes to an end, due to the departure of some brothers or the addition of new ones.

The first stage in the formation of any Marist community involves the experience of simply *coming to-*

gether. The community gathers. Subsequent stages include *working out differences among community members, establishing norms for the group, and eventually getting on with the task of living and serving together.* Each stage takes some time to accomplish, and in omitting any one of them, we run the risk of forfeiting an opportunity to live together in a way that is profoundly human and deeply spiritual.

For most of us, the first stage in the life of any community we join includes a period of orientation. Beginnings are usually fraught with difficulties; in an unfamiliar situation we all need some time to get our bearings. Entering a new community, for example, you and I might find ourselves trying to find our place in the group. If we are feeling anxious and uncertain, we can easily start comparing our new living situation with the one we recently left. However, just about all of us are on our best behavior as we begin life in a new community. If you and I have some negative impressions about the group and its members, we generally keep them to ourselves.

During this first stage in the community's development, its veteran members need to be careful not to spend all their time discussing people and events with which they alone are familiar. If they do, those new to the group need to point out what is happening or they run the risk of finding themselves increasingly excluded from day-to-day conversation.

The task of drawing up a *Plan for Community Living* is also often addressed at this time. Even if the community had a Plan the previous year, its details should be discussed and renegotiated. Such action is imperative whenever the membership of the community changes.

With every departure and each addition, we have a new community in need of beginning again in a number



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Reconciliation entails a process wherein we choose not to let the hurt we have suffered get in the way of continuing our relationship, and decide to respond to whoever has hurt us rather than hold on to our pain.

of ways. Though some may complain that efforts given to drawing up or revising a *Plan for Community Living* are a waste of time and energy, for a small investment in both at the outset of a year, a community can reap untold benefits throughout the twelve months that follow.

What is the best way to describe the second stage in the formation of a Marist community? *Working out differences*. For growth to take place beyond the first stage of coming together, you and I must be able to disagree as brothers, even heatedly at times, and to resolve our differences in a mutually acceptable manner. Unfortunately, false notions about what the virtue of charity entails have rendered many of us incapable of telling the truth. Instead, we remain silent to keep the peace.

The virtue of charity is practiced when I speak the truth out of my respect for you. I do so whether that truth is good news or bad. I don't have to tell you all the truth, at least as I see it, at one time, but charity requires that I speak the truth. It is far more useful, for example, to respond to a brother honestly during a community meeting than to spend the next week telling everyone else in the house what it was you wanted to tell him. The first response is fraternal, the second patronizing.

Likewise, remaining silent and allowing a person who is angry, withdrawn, or abusing alcohol to control the community with his behavior has little to do with Gospel living. In failing to take action, all who make up the group eventually become crippled.

**REMEMBER:
OUR MARIST COMMUNITIES ARE SYSTEMS**

What happens in the life of one of our brothers has ramifications for all who make up the group. While we generally prefer to classify the person who is causing all

the trouble, at least from our point of view, as the source of difficulty, in remaining silent we collude with that person and add to the group's dysfunction.

Learning to disagree and to resolve differences are skills that can be acquired. And learn them we must! What other alternative do we have? To wring our hands in despair about the state of our local community? Such behavior, as we well know, will do little to change the quality of life within the group.

A struggle for control on the part of some may be evident during this second stage in the growth of the community. A few brothers may test their influence on the group, usually in subtle ways. Others may try to establish a hierarchy of importance among community members based on age, academic degrees, a progressive or traditional attitude toward religious life and its renewal, or other criteria.

What is the best antidote to moves on the part of some members to obtain greater power within the community? Make sure that everyone in the group has a sense of self-worth.

This second stage of development is an uneasy time in the life of any community. A fear of conflict and unwillingness on the part of some to accept differences that exist naturally among any group's members can cause them to surrender all responsibility to a strong leader. As a consequence, many decisions that need to be taken by the group as a whole are simply evaded. When this occurs, the community's growth is hindered.

Norms are established during the third stage in the formation of a Marist community. Having agreed that it is safe to disagree, the community members can speak honestly about their hopes and disappointments, and arrive at a consensus about the details of their life together. Who will manage the group's finances? How



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“The three major characteristics of the founder’s spirituality: his practice of the presence of God, reliance on Mary and her protection, and the two uncomplicated virtues of simplicity and humility.

often and in what manner will its members pray in common? What responsibilities do they have to one another? These are but a few of the many questions that must be addressed.

Obviously, our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* have a particularly important role to play in the life of the group at this stage. If we are committed to forming a community that will be a source of spiritual, emotional, and interpersonal growth, we will need to discuss as a group the directives found in that document and in the *Message* of our 20th General Chapter.

Finally, having passed through the stages of *coming together, working out differences, and establishing norms*, the community will arrive at the last stage in its initial development: *getting on with the task at hand*. What exactly does this stage entail? Having laid a solid foundation for life together, we are now able to live out honestly the day-to-day realities that any group must face. All will proceed well if respect for other brothers in the community is cherished, and right relations among all are actively encouraged.

In this fourth stage, then, we are able to get on, as a community, with the task at hand: being brothers to one another and proclaiming the *Good News* of Jesus Christ to poor children and young people.

A final point. In forming, the members of any community pass through a series of stages. Likewise, when one or more of them depart, a process also takes place.

A prayer service and celebration can help all involved to ritualize the change taking place, and manage the feelings that will inevitably accompany it. All the better if during either gathering, some of those present can tell the person departing what his presence has meant to them and to the community as a whole.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Directions: For a third time now, take a few minutes apart to consider the following questions. Jot down any points you wish to remember later. They will come more easily if you have some written notes to guide you. Having some notes on hand would also be of great help in any communal or regional discussion of these questions.

1. Look back over the last few years to a time when you moved to a new community:

- a. Did the process of your integration into that community resemble the description offered here?
- b. Was the new community able to pass through a stage of “working out differences”? If so, please describe the experience. In contrast, if it was unable to traverse this stage, what obstacles prevented its members from doing so?

2. How would you respond to the questions found in the exam-
en below?

- a. Is God’s will, mediated through my brothers, the source of my call to mission and community, or do I determine both for myself?
- b. Do I accept the fact that my legitimate human needs are secondary to the overall goals of the community? Is that fact evident in the way that I live and pray and share my life?
- c. Am I willing to take responsibility for the life and direction of my community, or do I spend my time criticizing those who do?
- d. Am I open to the feedback that my brothers give me? Can I accept it when it is accurate and respond to my brothers with respect when it is not?
- e. Is a spirit of discipleship as evident in my day-to-day life in community as it is in the ministry that I carry out in the Lord’s name?

PART III

Concrete challenges in Marist community life today

What are the important challenges that you and I face in Marist community life today? While I do not intend to draw up an exhaustive list, I would like to call attention to several of them.

First of all, as mentioned earlier, we have the task of clarifying what we mean by the word *community*, in light of the multicultural world in which the Institute finds itself, and the traditions handed down to us since our founder's time. Community life wears many different faces in our Church and world today; not every religious Institute defines this expression in quite the same way. We need to come to agreement on a distinctive definition for Marcellin's brothers.

Next, the responsibilities of the community leader or superior merits some discussion. In a number of provinces and districts his role has been reduced to little more than a guest master, a far cry from the animator he is meant to be.

Achieving greater simplicity of life in the local community in which you and I live and in the communities

of our respective provinces is still another challenge many of us face today. Our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* are clear about the matter. How, though, can we best implement the vision we find there?

Finally, there is the ever-present challenge of difficult people in community: injustice collectors, chronic complainers, negativists, and exploders, to name a few. While their numbers are small, the impact they have on any local community can be very great indeed.

So also the dilemma we face in deciding how best to assist a brother addicted to alcohol, food, or the Internet, or one who is passing through a particularly confusing and painful time of growth in his life. What is our responsibility toward each of them, and for the community at large?

With that said, let's look briefly at each of these four challenges.

FURTHER DEFINING MARIST COMMUNITY LIFE

There are many ways to live out community life. The story is told, for example, about a Dominican priest who asked his Jesuit colleague how many Jesuit communities there were in the world. Without the slightest hesitation, the Jesuit responded, "It all depends upon the number of Jesuits in the world at any one time!" The comment may be unfair to our Jesuit confreres, but the point of the story is evident.

In this letter, my aim has been to identify our unique Marist way of living community. One point is quite clear: in our Institute, community entails living together physically, face to face, and being involved intimately in the life of the group. We read that message in the chapter on Community Life found in our *Constitutions*



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and Statutes; it is reinforced elsewhere in the same document. Article 82, for example, in the chapter dealing with our apostolic life, has this to say about community:

In an apostolic community

Ours is a community apostolate.

It begins with the witness
of the consecrated life we live together.

The whole community shows its apostolic solidarity
by affirming and encouraging each of its members
in his apostolic ministry.³⁵

When it comes to community, each Institute has its own traditions. Consequently, there are unique blessings as well as challenges in our Marist way of living it. Today we have the task of identifying those skills necessary to live well our life together and empowering each of our brothers to use them.

There can be no doubt that community was central in Marcellin's vision of our life. In his circular letter of August 12th, 1837, he wrote, "How pleasant, how flattering it is for me to think that in a few days I shall have the wonderful pleasure of saying to you, with the psalmist, while embracing you, 'Quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum.' It is a delightful consolation to me to have you all together again one in heart and mind, as a single family, seeking only the glory of God and the good of his holy religion."³⁶

The founder also modeled many of the virtues that serve to build community life. Jean Baptiste tells us of the following incident between Marcellin and a young brother. "One day, having given a young brother his Letter of Obedience to go to a community not far away, Marcellin opened his desk drawer to give him a little money. As there were only two and a half francs in the

cash-box, the young brother pointed out that he didn't need any money, since he could go to his house without spending anything.

“That is possible, my brother,’ was Marcellin’s reply, ‘but there is always the chance of an accident and I wouldn’t like you to be in need without being able to relieve you. It is true that we have nothing left, but Providence will not desert us.’ With these words, he gave the brother half the money.”³⁷

The founder’s concern for his brothers and their well-being, his willingness to do with less for their sake, his realism and fraternal spirit are all very evident in this account.

THE COMMUNITY LEADER OR SUPERIOR

Our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* tell us that the community superior or leader “creates a climate of understanding and harmony among his brothers. His role is to encourage and coordinate the common effort and to ensure both its continuity and unity.”³⁸

Despite these inspiring words, few brothers in the Institute today are lining up to take on the role of a community or local leader. Some feel ill-equipped for the challenge and insist that they lack the necessary skills. As one told me recently, “In my Province today, to be a local superior you need the skills of a spiritual director, a therapist, and an expert in conflict resolution, and have the good sense to know that at the end of the day some people are not going to change!”

In contrast, my job description for a local superior is a rather simple one. Before describing it, though, I must say that a grace is available for those who accept the will of their brothers and take on this important ministry of



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Unfortunately, false notions about what the virtue of charity entails have rendered many of us incapable of telling the truth.

service. We need but ask for that grace and it will be ours; the Lord does not burden any of us without also providing good humor and all else that is necessary for the task.

A local Marist leader has three responsibilities: one, to interview the brothers in his community; two, to animate the group's prayer; three, to call community meetings.³⁹ He does not have to take responsibility for implementing all three, but he must initiate each. In so doing, he comes not only to appreciate more fully the lives of his brothers; he also comes to understand more profoundly the dynamics that are present when any group of people lives together.

For example, a community leader does not have to plan and take responsibility for directing every prayer service that the group holds, but he is responsible for organizing the brothers in the house and providing them with the resources needed for well- prepared and meaningful prayer.

The same is true of community meetings. The local superior does not have to chair these sessions; others in the group may be far more skilled to do so. But he must establish a regular time and place for the community members to meet and discuss their life together.

While most community superiors accept these two aspects of their ministry, a number will shrink from interviewing the brothers. Some protest: "I am neither a psychologist nor a social worker." To which I would reply, "Thank God!" For as important as these roles might be within a number of cultures, a community leader is meant to be, first of all, a brother among his brothers. His interest in them and in the details of their lives is fraternal. He serves them best as a listening ear, as a source of encouragement when they are discouraged, and of motivation when they need assistance.

What is the best advice I could give a local leader about how to interview his brothers? Return for a moment to the last time you had a conversation with a friend. What you may recall immediately is the easy give and take that took place. Bring that same relaxed rhythm to an interview with a brother in the community and all else will follow.

SIMPLICITY OF LIFE

In our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* we read:

“Guided by the voice of the Church,
and within the framework
of our specific vocation,
we stand with the poor and their just causes.
We give preference to the poor,
wherever they are, whatever be our ministry.
We should be glad to be in places and houses which
oblige us to share their situation,
and we should take advantage of opportunities to
come into contact with the realities
of their daily life.”⁴⁰

Later in the text we come across these words, “Our residences should be furnished in a way that gives visible witness to poverty.”⁴¹ Finally, “Concretely, we live our personal and communal poverty in the context of a simple, hardworking life, without chasing after non-essentials.”⁴²

As disciples of Jesus, we are called upon continually to put aside those sterile comforts that serve only to domesticate our spirits and quench our thirst for God. Adopting a simple, even austere, lifestyle not only frees us from the concerns inherent in private ownership but can also enable us to be more effective in our service among those who are materially poor.⁴³ While situa-



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tions vary from country to country, and culture to culture, wherever there is a Marist community, it should be evident to all that its members live the spirit and practice of the Beatitudes in their day-to-day lives.⁴⁴

Once again self-centeredness and selfishness can easily get the upper hand here. In addition, we can quickly put aside the values of the Gospel and embrace those in the culture that are in opposition to the message of Jesus. An abandonment of gospel values is particularly evident when it comes to the accumulation of goods.⁴⁵

For a number of years, brothers in several provinces and districts had the practice of packing their earthly possessions at the end of each year and storing them in a large trunk prior to leaving for summer assignment. This custom had a twofold purpose. First of all, since appointments for the following year were usually given out during the Province retreat held late in the summer, packing at the end of the academic year helped those moving to other communities to avoid any last minute rush.

Second, the practice allowed each brother to simplify his life at the end of each school year. After all, he had to fit into the confines of that trunk all the possessions he would be taking to his next assignment.

As years passed, this annual custom of packing a trunk has fallen into disuse, but others have replaced it. For example, recently, in one Province, a middle-aged brother moving from one community to another needed a truck to transport all that he had accumulated over the course of a quarter century. On seeing this scenario unfold, a contemporary remarked, “We have come a long way in the course of renewal – from the one trunk to the one truck brother!”

On a more serious note, simplicity of lifestyle so often mirrors the simplicity of mind and heart that Mar-

cellin considered the defining virtue for his Little Brothers. Regardless of the ministry in which I find myself, and irrespective of the socioeconomic level of those whom I am called to serve, each of us has an obligation to give witness to this simplicity in our day-to-day lives. Moreover, you and I will never be credible witnesses to the young and others in our wider Church if our way of living is little more than a mirror of the middle class values found in some cultures, no matter how acceptable they may be for others.

As mentioned earlier in this circular, when making our vows, we pledge ourselves to live fully and radically the *Good News* of Jesus Christ.⁴⁶ Our *Constitutions and Statutes* remind us that the witness called for by that commitment should be as evident in our community life as it is in all other aspects of our lives.⁴⁷

DIFFICULT CONFRERES

The question of difficult people in community is a complicated one. A circular of this nature is not the place to provide a manual for “Coping with Difficult Situations and Confreres in Community.” With that said, I offer a few observations.

First, when it comes to difficulties in community, there are no simple solutions. If there were, we would have found and used them before now.

Next, you and I need to admit that many of our own actions might very well fall under the heading of “difficult” on one day or another. Each of us can be irritable, obstinate, complaining, and downright obnoxious from time to time.

The following example will illustrate this point. As a young brother, I spent several years studying psycholo-



gy. The third year of the program in which I was enrolled was particularly stressful. Students were expected to work approximately 24 hours each week in a hospital some 45 miles from the university, serve another ten hours doing counseling with undergraduate and graduate students at the clinic located on the school's campus, carry nine credits a semester, participate in weekly supervision with a range of therapists, and be involved in individual and group counseling themselves.

One evening, about half way through that year, I arrived home about nine o'clock. The other brothers in the community had finished supper earlier, so I went to the oven, took out the plate that had been put aside for me, and sat down to eat while reading the newspaper.

A few minutes later, three friends in the community came into the dining room and sat down to keep me company. They had done the same often before, so I was unprepared for what came next. After a short while, one of them said to me, "We need to talk to you because you are becoming impossible to live with." He went on to list a number of situations in which I had been unusually irritable and short-tempered, and withdrawn from the group. He concluded by saying, "We are afraid that if this situation continues, either you will leave or very few people will want to live in community with you."

As difficult as it was to hear that honest description of my behavior during the previous few months, those three brothers did me an enormous favor that evening. Due to their intervention, I reexamined my schedule and began to make some adjustments. As a consequence, I was not so tired during the weeks that followed, and therefore better able to participate in more of the community's activities. Equally important, I knew now that I had three people in that community who would keep me honest in regard to the changes I

had promised to make. It took several months to accomplish them, but I was better off as a consequence and so were the other members of my community.



CHRONICALLY DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Chronically difficult people present a challenge to any community because more often than not their behavior appears to drive just about everyone crazy. Still, care must be exercised when describing someone as difficult. We need to realize that in saying that a fellow brother has a negative attitude we are not describing the whole person. Instead, we are hoping to better assess the situation that we are facing.

What are some of the behaviors that brothers often classify as difficult? They include chronic complaining, injustice collecting, negativism, stalling and indecisive behavior, exploding, and making unrealistic promises.

Each of us might have several candidates who appear to fit comfortably into one or another of these categories. Before jumping to conclusions, however, let's remind ourselves that anyone of us who has ever let off some emotional steam or ventilated to a good friend at the end of a long and trying day might easily be classified by a stranger as a chronic complainer.

And so, a few questions before we go any further. First, let's ask ourselves: have we tried frank open discussion as a way of addressing the difficult behavior? Many of us will talk with everyone else in the community about the problem, but avoid raising the issue with the brother in question. To persist in this behavior is to guarantee that nothing will change.

Next, let's ask: am I dealing with a person who by temperament is naturally forceful. You or I might be

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overly sensitive, and therefore uncomfortable with anyone who expresses strong feelings. We become frightened whenever someone is passionate, angry, or frustrated. Does the fact that a fellow brother is forceful give me the right to classify his behavior as difficult? So, let's also ask ourselves: Is it his problem here or am I dealing with my own?

Another question: has the person acted differently on several other occasions? If so, we might want to reassess whether or not he is truly difficult.

Finally, did something happen just prior to the brother's acting in a way that we found offensive? Perhaps he received some disappointing news or was under an unusual amount of stress. Neither reason excuses his objectionable behavior, but either one of them might help us to understand why he acted in that manner and to avoid thinking of him as chronically difficult.

With a genuinely difficult person, though, the answer to each of the four questions just posed is consistently "no." What can you or I do when faced with such a situation? If we want some relief, we can begin by changing our reaction to his behavior. That means reacting to the chronic complainer not by avoiding or ignoring him, but rather in a way that moves him from complaining to problem solving.

Likewise, the negativist, that person who manages to snuff out any new idea before it can see the light of day, who tells us continually that it has been tried before and failed, and who, as a last resort, takes aim at the local and Province leadership, can also be tamed. If we simply state our own realistic optimism, or ask the person what is the worst that could happen should we set out on our proposed course of action, we can change the context of any conversation with him.

By altering the manner in which we react to chronic complaining and negativism, you and I often find that the situation begins to improve. Each of us, however, also needs to realize that we are under no obligation to endure silently the behavior of any community member that is destructive of life together or personally abusive. Rather, we need to take steps to improve the situation. For example, while the members of a community do not have a responsibility to diagnose alcoholism in a fellow brother whose pattern of drinking alcohol alarms most of them, they can work with the Province administration to design an intervention that will motivate that person to seek an evaluation.

PAINFUL SITUATIONS

There are, of course, some few members in every religious Institute whose emotional problems are the source of great personal suffering. Their psychological difficulties are so severe that they warrant medical and/or psychiatric intervention. Extreme mood swings, wherein a person is either deeply depressed or euphoric to the point of mania, offer one example. Another example: a thought disorder, wherein a person distorts reality to the point that he makes no sense, or is so suspicious of others that he becomes immobilized. Once again, the role of community members in such a situation is to work with Province authorities to insure that the person receives the help he needs.

Finally, having said this, I must also point out that from time to time any of us can encounter a brother in community whose behavior is quite destructive, but who appears to have no motivation whatsoever to change. Oftentimes, the word “characterological” is used to describe the difficulty that he is experiencing.

Though his behavior may give rise to a great deal of pain in the lives of others, a brother with this type of



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We cannot exaggerate the intimacy and union that we experience with Jesus and one another when we celebrate Mass. Nowhere else is the body of Christ so physical, carnal, sensual and available for union.

problem feels little pain himself. Hence, he has no incentive to change. Many of us enable him to continue as he is by building a life around him rather than with him. Thus we help him avoid the consequences of his obnoxious behavior.

For example, it does little good, in my opinion, to describe as deeply spiritual a brother who is nasty and uncharitable to just about everyone he meets. I have no doubt that God loves each of us unconditionally; however, I find it hard to accept the fact that a person who is deeply spiritual can continue holding onto some injustice that happened long ago, or terrorize people with his moods. And that holds true no matter how many hours he spends in the community chapel.

In concluding, let me point out again that we are fortunate as an Institute in that the number of truly difficult people found among us is quite small when compared to the significantly larger number striving to live together in community generously and with a spirit of sacrifice. We owe the same charity to all our brothers. In the case of those who are genuinely difficult, that charity includes changing our reaction to their behavior and taking steps that will direct them to the help they need.

QUALITIES FOUND IN A HEALTHY MARIST COMMUNITY

With some idea of what a Marist community is not, a sense of the stages it moves through in its initial development, and a quick look at some of the challenges we face in life together today, we turn our attention now to what one of Marcellin's communities can and should be. More importantly, we examine the central place that forgiveness and reconciliation must hold in the life of any community of his brothers.

Today many young people have an interest in the radical possibility of adults living together in community so as to witness to reconciliation and peace. Isn't that what our Marist communities are meant to do? To be a group of brothers, and, at times, lay men and women who also share Marcellin's charism, coming together as a community to live the *Good News* of Jesus Christ. What does that definition imply? First and foremost, that every Marist community is a center of spirituality and prayer. A good initial impression and lingering memory of any visitor to one of our communities should always be that he or she has been among people who pray.

What makes prayer so important in the life of any of our communities? One, it has a way of transforming us. If we pray, we are better able to practice patience, withhold judgment, and love generously – some of the very qualities that the founder asked us to hold dear, qualities that foster a spirit of reconciliation. Two, prayer transforms our way of seeing reality, leaving us simpler, more humble and compassionate. All these qualities are great gifts to the life of any Marist community.

Our *Constitutions and Statutes* tell us that the Eucharist has a central place in our life of prayer and in our communities.⁴⁸ We cannot exaggerate the intimacy and union that we experience with Jesus and one another when we celebrate Mass. Nowhere else is the body of Christ so physical, carnal, sensual and available for union.⁴⁹

Eucharist is more radical than the Word of God as found in the Scriptures. The latter is sacramental but less physical than the body and blood of Christ. What is alarming in so many of our Marist communities today, however, is not only that the Eucharist is rarely celebrated, but that it appears to be hardly missed at all.



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We need to find new and innovative ways to make this prayer of the Church, so important in the lives of Marcellin and our early brothers, once again central in our own. Celebrating Mass with our brothers allows us to be physically embraced by God; who would not long for that experience daily? The current International Eucharistic Year provides us with an opportunity as an Institute to restore the Eucharist in those places where it has all but disappeared from community life, and to strengthen it in others.

Second, while a religious congregation is not a family, our family comes along with us when we join one. No, it is not present physically. But all that our family taught us about self-esteem, communication, faith and spirituality, relationships, and a number of other areas accompanies us to the novitiate, and to every subsequent Marist community in which we live.

In leaving our families to set out in life, most of us take with us some rudimentary tools we need for independent living. Over time, we begin to realize that we are ill-equipped for many of the challenges that lie ahead. For those who come to religious life, the formation process is meant to help remedy that situation.

However, as I mentioned earlier, while initial formation may have prepared us to face the future, it did little to provide us with the necessary skills for life together in community. What are some of those skills? An ability to disagree, to give and receive compliments, to be at home with feelings of care, affection, and tenderness, to speak honestly, and to extend and accept forgiveness more readily. While cultural differences must be respected, schooling in these and other competencies needed for life in community today merits a place in our programs of initial and ongoing formation.

Third, when it comes to life in one of our Marist communities, a sense of humor is a great help. Some of

us take ourselves all too seriously; we lack an ability to laugh at ourselves. How do we expect to get through life's rough spots? Humor helps us to reinterpret the meaning of some events and lessens the effect of the frustrations and reversals that are part of everyone's day-to-day existence.⁵⁰

A sense of humor among us is necessary for another important reason. Our way of life is meant to make people happy. Not in the sense of hilarity, but in that deep feeling of contentment experienced by people who have meaning and purpose in their life and marvelous companions with whom to share that life. I can think of no better advertisement for religious life.

Fourth, "active concern" toward the other members of the community – taking the initiative and not just reacting to what others do – goes a long way toward building healthy bonds within any group of which I am a member. The story is told about a man who once spent a week visiting a friend. Each morning while out walking the two of them passed a street vendor. The friend always greeted the man with a respectful, "Good morning." However, the vendor never responded to the greeting.

Eventually, the man who was visiting asked his friend why he persisted in saying "Good morning" to a person who continued to ignore him. "Because it is the right thing to do," said his friend. "I hope that eventually he will respond as he should." The lesson was telling: the visitor's friend was appealing to the excellence of the vendor, whether the vendor appreciated his own excellence or not.⁵¹

Fifth, the presence of several "little virtues" among the members of any Marist community contributes greatly toward enhancing the group's quality of life. What are some of those "little virtues?" In addition to what we traditionally understand by the phrase "little



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virtues,” today we need to add: answering the door or telephone, providing a welcome to all who visit, remembering birthdays and other special occasions, offering a word of thanks or congratulations, simply saying “hello” to those with whom I live.

An ability to celebrate is another important “little virtue” that greatly enhances community life. Ask yourself these questions. Do you enjoy being together with the other members of your community? When was the last time your community took some time together solely for the enjoyment of being with one another?

Groups lacking in a spirit of celebration are hardly communities. Those who belong to them are forced eventually to look outside the group to meet most of their emotional needs. Each of the “little virtues” mentioned above doesn’t cost much, but every one of them goes a long way toward creating an atmosphere in any Marist community that makes coming home a blessing.

Life-giving Marist communities do not magically spring into existence. Their strength and success are due neither to friendship nor even to a high degree of compatibility among the members of the group. While the particular mix of people in a community can make the challenge of life together more or less formidable, the presence of life-giving qualities in any group is the result of the hard work of its members. Similar to a friendship or a good marriage, Marist community life requires that we respect those with whom we live, make sacrifices for the common good, and work toward consensus.

We also deceive ourselves when we argue that responsibility for the community’s quality of life can be passed along to others in the group. Each of us has a daily obligation to refresh our commitment to those with whom we live. So let’s ask ourselves this question: what have I done today to improve the quality of life

among the members of my community? If my answer is “Precious little,” then I have a great deal of work to do.

Finally, a spirit of reconciliation needs to be at the heart of any community that calls itself Marist.⁵² From time to time, one learns of a situation where enmity between two brothers has caused them not to speak to each other for years. Or some injustice at the hands of a superior in times past has caused brothers to suffer and then choose to nurture their wounds, keeping their anger alive, and rejecting any notion of reconciliation. Eventually, they become so wedded to their hurt that they lose any ability to embrace the future with freedom and hope.

Anger is a hedge against humiliation, a protest against the loss of self-esteem.⁵³ It is one thing to feel anger, though, and quite another to do something about it. With anger, as with other emotions, the goal I set for myself usually determines the action that I will take. If I want to punish you, I might insult you, or withdraw my affection and retreat into stony silence.

However, some of us, having been taught not to voice our anger, fail to express it in any helpful way. The forgiveness that so often waits on the other side of the experience gets frustrated.⁵⁴

Reconciliation is another way of addressing our anger. It entails a process wherein we *choose* not to let the hurt we have suffered get in the way of continuing our relationship, and *decide* to respond to whoever has hurt us rather than hold on to our pain. What was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it. While these decisions and choices are ours to make, cultural differences, lack of an adequate vocabulary for expressing emotional reactions, or a painful past history of managing conflict can make it more difficult for some of us to initiate the process of reconciliation. Not to do so, however, most often consigns us to the pain of our anger.



While forgiveness involves a choice and a decision, it also entails a process. Any hurt takes time to heal; trust betrayed in a relationship is rebuilt only gradually. At times, therefore, we benefit from ritualizing the process of reconciliation. Through symbol and word, in an atmosphere of prayer, we admit that our relationships are fragile, and, despite that fact, recommit ourselves to the one that was breached. The healing that results from taking such action is not limited to the persons most directly involved; reconciliation is a grace for the entire community.

Forgiveness is also a two-edged sword. There are few situations of hurt in life where only one party is to blame. In revisiting my hurt, I must also admit that I contributed to it. Thus, genuine forgiveness robs me of my hurt. I can no longer use it against you. Are there some disappointments and hurts in life that are impossible to heal? Not if we are open to God's grace and willing to take the time to be reconciled. In all of this, we do well to remember the Lord's directive about forgiving seventy times seven.

Reconciliation, reminding us of our weakness, helps nurture in us a compassionate and loving heart. Such a heart is necessary if we are to be able to look on the face of any person in community and see him as my brother. In gradually developing that capacity, we come to know full well that regardless of the time of day it is, it is no longer night for us.

LOVE AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Those who believe that love is easy can be separated into three groups: one, saints who through long years of painful practice have made love a habit; two, manipulators who confuse self-gratification with real love; three, hopeless romantics for whom love is nothing more than an illusion.⁵⁵

This distinction is described in another way by Fyodor Dostoevsky in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. There we read about the encounter between the “woman of little faith” and Father Zosima, the holy monk. She has come to see him because of her doubts about God’s existence.



Zosima tells her that he cannot prove the existence of the Almighty but that it is possible to be convinced, by the practice of active love. “Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly,” he tells her.

“The more you succeed in loving, the more you’ll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you attain genuine and complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will ever be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain.”

The woman replies by telling Zosima of moments when she dreams of giving up all that she has and becoming a sister of mercy. The reason for her hesitancy? She cannot deal with the ingratitude of those whom she seeks to serve.

The priest’s response goes to the heart of the matter. “Love in dreams thirsts for immediate action, quickly performed, and with everyone watching. Indeed, it will go as far as the giving of one’s life, provided that it does not take too long but is over as on stage, and with everyone looking on and praising. Whereas love in action is a harsh and dreadful love.”

The meaning of this tale? Life in community today requires a willingness to live a harsh and troublesome love rather than one that occurs in dreams. It was this type of love to which Father Champagnat was referring to when he said to our early brothers, “You know that I live and breathe only for you. I ask God every day to

give you everything that is good, and I am ready to make any sacrifice to see that you get it. “⁵⁶

If you and I can continue to live gratefully and generously even when we receive nothing in return, then we will begin to understand more deeply the divine nature of love. The love of God continues unabated even as we take him for granted. Our loneliness is but one indication of our thirst for that God, a reminder that our hearts were made for him and for one another. By making Jesus the center and passion of our lives, you and I come, in time, to share in his redemptive loneliness; and in that loneliness we are healed and made one.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Directions: Once again, take a few minutes apart to consider the following questions. Jot down any points you wish to remember later. They will come to mind more easily if you have some written notes to prompt you. Notes will also be of great help in any communal or regional discussion of these questions.

1. What is your personal definition of Marist community life? Please explain what it is that makes the elements included in your definition so important to you.
2. Describe a difficult person with whom you shared community life. How did you manage the situation then; how might you manage a similar situation today?
3. Are there past events in your life that need healing, or a relationship that calls for mending? Draw up a plan indicating the steps that you will take over the next month to set the process of healing and reconciliation in motion.

CONCLUSION

Brothers, as we come to the end of this circular, we find ourselves back where we began with the question of discipleship. For in being and doing in the likeness of Jesus, we come to understand better our identity as Little Brothers of Mary and to discover and treasure community life. Contemplation plays an important role here, but contemplation as a way of seeing that has its source in God, rather than a passive resting in the Almighty.⁵⁷

Our rediscovery of Scripture in the years that have followed Vatican II has changed our vision of God significantly. No longer consigned to the role of distant purveyor of history, He is at last able to be himself. Rest assured that God is fully invested in our world's transformation. The gospel stories remind us that where life was diminished, Jesus restored it; where the human spirit was imprisoned, he made his presence felt by liberating it.⁵⁸

The claims of the poor and those living on the margins of society were so great that Jesus would not stop preaching and doing the *Good News*, even at the cost of his life. He was condemned precisely because he made it clear for what and with whom he stood. Indeed, the God we contemplate in Jesus is a God whose love is unconditional, whose faithfulness is without qualification. Yes, ours is a God who walks with and among His people.⁵⁹

As Christians, you and I are called to a life of community as an important aspect of our identity, not only as Marcellin's Little Brothers but also as disciples of Jesus. In his discourse during the Last Supper, Jesus challenged his apostles and all who would come after them to witness to future generations that he had been sent into our world by his Father. Throughout history, the



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unity found among the disciples of Jesus has been cited frequently as proof of his presence.

In today's world, the witness that Jesus asked us to give is as necessary as in ages past. And today, through our life together as brothers, you and I also have a unique opportunity to offer a sign of hope to our wider world. In many parts of that world, the basic desire of most people to share and live in mutual trust and cooperation is thwarted on a daily basis. Alienation and loneliness are the result. As men religious who have made a public commitment to witness to and proclaim the *Good News* of Jesus Christ, we can give evidence by our life together that the world can and must be otherwise.⁶⁰

The *Message* of our 20th General Chapter reminds us that we are called to build communities where the growth of one another is our common concern, places where trust, healthy interpersonal relationships, and a family spirit are evident. In such communities young brothers are helped to mature; our older men experience the respect and affection of their brothers. Forgiveness is given readily; wounds are allowed to heal. The visitor feels a sense of welcome.⁶¹

These communities are schools of faith for ourselves, for the young, for all who hunger for God. They are communities established for the sake of mission, and open to the service of our world.⁶²

With those words, we can bring this circular to a conclusion. In any discussion of Marist community life today, we must not let ourselves become distracted by the promise of quick fixes but rather focus on what is most important. Some, for example, will suggest that the number of brothers who make up a community is an important ingredient in the mix. Smaller communities, they insist, are far superior to larger, more institu-

tional arrangements. Others, of course, hold just the opposite point of view.

The size of the community, however, is not what is most important. Rather a spirit of generosity, an open heart, a passion for the Lord, a willingness to think the best rather than the worst of others, a zeal for ministry, simplicity of life: these and similar qualities are what help make Marist community life what it should be:

Community life is a grace of the Holy Spirit.
We have come together
without choosing one another,
so we accept one another as the Lord's gift to us.

In our constant efforts
toward reconciliation and communion,
which we must begin over and over again,
we become a sign of unity for everyone
who sees the way we live.

Still, we will always be aware of the gap
between this grace
which God is constantly offering us,
and the reality of our everyday life.
So we pray that we may remain united,
despite all the difficulties involved,
in the name of the Lord Jesus.⁶³

When all is said and done, interest in our brothers, acceptance of and respect for them, care for each one and concern for his well-being are the ingredients necessary for healthy community life among Marcellin's Little Brothers, a community life that moves us to mission. It is well to remember that these qualities transcend age, culture, temperament and many other elements that work against life together.

Since the first days of our Institute, we have had marvelous companions with whom to make the journey



Marvelous companions
Br. Seán D. Sammon, SG

of Marist life. Beginning with our early brothers, François, Jean Baptiste, Louis Marie, Sylvestre, Laurent, Hippolyte, and so many others, and continuing until the present, we have example after example of good men living our life fully, with passion, zeal, and conviction. These were men whose only desire was to do God's will; men for whom prayer and the Eucharist, Mary, and life together were central. Each of us needs to be those men today: marvelous companions for a new generation of brothers; men for whom the ministry of making Jesus known and loved among poor children and young people is all consuming.

In closing, a word of thanks for all that you continue to do to build community life among us. Know that each of you is often in my thoughts and prayers and those of the General Council members. We are privileged to be your brothers. May God continue to bless and keep you, and make you His own, and may Mary and Marcellin be our constant companions and source of strength.

Blessings and affection,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Seán', written in a cursive style.

Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS
Superior General

ENDNOTES

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- 2 See *Fraternal Life in Community* (Rome: Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 1994) no. 59, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/ccsclife
- 3 *Fraternal Life in Community* 9.
- 4 Mary Daniel Turner, SND de Namur, “The Inseparability of Community and Mission” in *The Report of the Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Community* (Chicago, IL: The Center for the Study of Religious Life, 2002) p. 50.
- 5 “Spiritual Testament of Joseph Benedict Marcellin Champagnat” in *Constitutions and Statutes* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Marist Press, 1990) p. 129.
- 6 John Malich, FMS, *Community: Life Giving or Stagnant* (Canfield, OH: Alba House Cassettes, 1997).
- 7 See O. Henry, *Gift of the Magi*, <http://www.night.net/christmas/Gift-Magi.html>.
- 8 Personal communication, Michael Flanigan, fms, December 31, 2004.
- 9 “Spiritual Testament of Joseph Benedict Marcellin Champagnat,” p. 129.
- 10 *Const 47, Fraternal Life in Community* 11.
- 11 *Const 47, Fraternal Life in Community* 10.
- 12 *Const 47, Fraternal Life in Community* 11.
- 13 *Const 48*.
- 14 Psalm 127.
- 15 *Fraternal Life in Community* 10.
- 16 *Const 32*.
- 17 *Const 41, 43*.
- 18 *Const 24*.
- 19 *Const 82*.
- 20 *Const 23*.
- 21 *Const 53*.
- 22 Gary Riebe-Estrella, SVD, “The Ground of Community: Christology or Theology?” in *The Report of the Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Community* (Chicago, IL: The Center for the Study of Religious Life, 2002) pp. 41-47.
- 23 Mary Daniel Turner, SND de Namur, “The Inseparability of Community and Mission” pp. 48-60.
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- 25 *Fraternal Life in Community* 37; also “Choose Life” in *Acts of the XX General Chapter* (Rome, Italy: General House, 2002), 18.

- 26 Cited in Tom Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002) p. 15.
- 27 Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, p. xiv.
- 28 *Const* 11.
- 29 Job 1:21.
- 30 *Choose Life* 24.
- 31 *Fraternal Life in Community* 38.
- 32 See Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).
- 33 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999).
- 34 Mark 8: 34-38.
- 35 *Const* 82.
- 36 *Letters of Marcellin J.B. Champagnat* (Rome: Casa Generalizia dei Fratelli Maristi piazzale Champagnat, 2, 1991) p. 248.
- 37 Frère Jean-Baptiste, *Vie de Joseph-Benoît-Marcellin Champagnat (Édition du Bicentenaire)* (Roma, Maison Généralice des Frères Maristes, 1989) p. 439.
- 38 *Const* 52.
- 39 *Fraternal Life in Community* 31.
- 40 *Const* 34.
- 41 *Const* 61.
- 42 *Const* 32.
- 43 *Fraternal Life in Community* 44.
- 44 *Choose Life* 25. *Fraternal Life in Community* 44.
- 45 Maurice Berquet, FMS, “Use of Material Goods: a Plan of Discernment” in *FMS Message*, 33, pp. 42-44; also Benito Arbues, FMS, *Concerning our Material Goods* 30(4), October 31, 2000 (Rome: General House, 2000).
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- 47 *Const* 43, 63.
- 48 *Const* 69.
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- 51 John Johnston, *Look to the Future: Build Communities Today that are Innovative, Creative and Holy* (Rome: Tipografia S.G.S., 1998) p. 63.
- 52 *Const* 51.
- 53 Whitehead, *Seasons of Strength*, pp. 117-127.
- 54 *Ibid.*

- 55 See Ronald Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart* (New York, NY Doubleday, 2004).
- 56 *Const* 49.
- 57 Mary Daniel Turner, SND de Namur, “The Inseparability of Community and Mission,” p. 51.
- 58 *Ibid.* p. 51.
- 59 *Ibid.*, pp. 48-60.
- 60 *Choose Life* 22.
- 61 *Choose Life* 24.
- 62 *Choose Life* 25.
- 63 *Const* 63.

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