

# CIRCULAR



## **Making Jesus known and loved**

Marist apostolic life today

Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS  
Superior General

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**Institute of the Marist Brothers**  
**Volume XXXI, no. 3**  
**6 June 2006**



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Fratelli Maristi  
Piazzale Marcellino Champagnat, 2  
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Tel. (39) 06 545171  
Fax. (39) 06 54517217  
publica@fms.it  
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The Lord, your God,  
will circumcise your hearts  
and the hearts of your descendants,  
that you may love the Lord, your God,  
with all your heart and all your soul,  
and so may live.

For this command which I enjoin on you today  
is not too mysterious and remote for you.  
It is not up in the sky, that you should say,  
“Who will go up in the sky  
to get it for us and tell us of it,  
that we may carry it out?”

Nor is it across the sea, that you should say,  
“Who will cross the sea  
to get it for us and tell us of it,  
that we may carry it out?”

No, it is something very near to you,  
already in your mouths and in your hearts;  
you have only to carry it out.

I have set before you today  
life and prosperity,  
death and doom.  
Choose life,  
that you and your descendants may live.

*Deuteronomy 30: 6, 11-15, 19*



## INTRODUCTION

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6 June 2006  
*Feast of Saint Marcellin*

Dear Brothers,

This circular is the last of three that I planned to write about our identity as Marcellin's brothers and that of our Marist lay partners today. The first, *A Revolution of the Heart*, looked at the topic from the perspective of the founder's spirituality, while the second, *Marvelous Companions*, viewed it through the eyes of community life. This third circular letter examines identity within the context of the Church's mission and our Institute's apostolic works.

It's true we have on hand a number of Marist resources dealing with what is commonly called our apostolate. Our *Constitutions and Statutes*<sup>1</sup>, for example, includes not only a chapter on the subject but also many additional references to the topic throughout the text.

*In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat*<sup>2</sup>, a publication well-known to Marist educators, was written af-

ter a process of consultation with brothers and laymen and women involved in Institute works throughout the world. Thus the question arises: Why a circular about mission and the apostolic activities that flow from it?

For three reasons.

First of all, mission lies at the heart of our way of life. Our identity as an Institute is built around it; in light of mission our life together in community takes shape. It stands to reason, then, that a renewed appreciation of our charism and greater consensus about the focus of our apostolic works must be achieved if we are to fashion a fresh and compelling identity for ourselves as brothers today and understand more fully the emerging and important role and identity of lay Marists in the life and work of our Institute.

Second, within the Church at large, and our Institute in particular, a spirit of mission *ad gentes* appears to have waned since the close of Vatican II. Documents written during the course of that historic gathering challenged the then commonly held belief that salvation was to be found only within the Catholic Church. As a consequence, many, including some seasoned missionaries, began to question the meaning and purpose of their efforts to evangelize.

Within our Institute also the effects of this change in focus have become evident over time. For example, in 1989 we had 553 brothers classified as being involved in mission *ad gentes*; their median age was 51 years. In 2004, however, the 596 brothers similarly engaged had a median age of 64 years. While four years into the new century there were actually 43 more brothers serving in mission *ad gentes* than there were 15 years earlier, the group's median age had increased appreciably. All things being equal, there is little reason to anticipate that these trends will change in the near future. With



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what long-term outcome? During the years just ahead the number of active missionaries from the West will be very small indeed.

Some would suggest that the current weakened state of mission *ad gentes* in both the Church and our Marist Institute is due to a lack of zeal. The situation, however, is far more complex; no single explanation can clarify it fully. And so, mission *ad gentes* merits our study for at least two reasons: one, to help us better understand what has happened in this important area of Church and Institute life over the last four decades and, two, to decide what action to take in response.

Third, Marcellin was fond of saying, “To love Jesus and to make Him known and loved, that is what a brother’s life should be.” Well said then, and well said now. But what is this challenging description meant to look like in our day, in an Institute that is increasingly multicultural, and situated in 76 countries throughout our world?

And what form should it take, in light of our call to serve poor children and young people, the advanced median age of brothers in some administrative units, the changing nature of institutions, new needs that have emerged among the young in parts of our world, and the growing Marist lay partnership movement underway throughout the Institute? These are but a few of the issues that I would like to examine in the pages ahead.

Throughout your reading of the text, keep both Marcellin and Mary in mind. Why Marcellin? Because today we need his vision and spirit of daring more than ever. Called imprudent by some for going into debt while building the Hermitage, he remarked, “That is the way I have always done things; if I had waited till I had money before beginning, I should not have laid one stone on another.”

When the main building was under construction, a friend who was visiting at the time asked him what account he intended to use to pay for this ambitious undertaking. “I shall draw the money from where I have always drawn it,” came the confident reply; “from the treasury of Providence.”<sup>3</sup>

Keeping Mary in mind is equally important. At the Visitation, she carried Christ to John the Baptizer with simplicity, generosity, and charity; she presented him to the shepherds and the Magi in the same spirit. And Mary waited until the first signs of faith stirred among the apostles and then stepped aside so that the focus could fall on Jesus.<sup>4</sup> We do well to heed her example and imitate her ways.

## STRUCTURE OF THIS CIRCULAR

This circular consists of four parts. The first aims to provide an understanding of the historical and theological foundations of our apostolic works. Consequently, I begin by looking at the meaning of charism and the relationship between consecration and mission, and then move on to briefly examine what Marcellin and our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* have to say about the topics of mission and the nature of our works.

In part two, I address the topic of identity and contemporary Marist apostolic life. In so doing, I touch upon a number of topics: the similarities and differences that exist between the vocation of one of Marcellin’s brothers and that of a Marist lay partner; the privileged place of the Catholic school and the need for new apostolic undertakings; the place of our Institute’s apostolic efforts among the Church’s other works; and the place and role of institutions in our efforts to spread the gospel.



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No matter  
where  
the brothers  
of my Province  
or District  
ask me to serve,  
I need to carry  
with me  
a heart  
for the poor.

Part three is devoted to the founder's ardent desire that we make Jesus known and loved among poor children and young people. What does that directive mean today when we find ourselves in 76 countries and involved with an even greater number of cultures? Also, what pitfalls must we avoid as we work to put our concern for God's poor at the heart of all our works?

Perhaps most noticeable in this third section of the circular is my consistent use of the phrase "poor children and young people" rather than the more common description "children and young people, especially the most neglected." I have chosen the first over the second for several reasons. To begin with, in his letters the founder often referred to poor children and young people when discussing the aim of our Institute.

Also, the use of phrases such as "the least favored," and "a preferential but not exclusive option for the poor," appears to do little more than tone down what has been a clear and consistent call on the part of our Church and of a number of general and province chapters since the close of Vatican II. We need instead to decide as a General Administration, Provinces, and Districts how to best respond to this challenge.

With that said, we must also remind ourselves that in working to answer the calls to be among the most marginalized we are talking fundamentally about a change of heart. No matter where the brothers of my Province or District ask me to serve, I need to carry with me a heart for the poor.

I bring the circular to a close with a discussion of mission *ad gentes*. Today a number of scholars are suggesting that the period in which people have converted to Christianity in significant numbers is coming to an end.<sup>5</sup> If their intuition proves true, then it's all the more necessary for us to have a clear sense of meaning and pur-

pose as an Institute today. Without this, we will be unable to make courageous decisions about our apostolates and so many other areas of our life.

To fully understand the meaning and place of mission *ad gentes* in our Marist life today, we must also clarify what it means to be Church. Since Vatican II, in many parts of our world we have moved away from the model of a triumphant Church and begun to describe ourselves as a communion, the People of God, a prophetic servant.<sup>6</sup> When thinking about mission, we have also come to understand that we can use images other than “sending out”<sup>7</sup> — images such as gathering, and solidarity.

The notion of solidarity, for example, helps you and me to appreciate the fact that God entrusted Jesus with the mission not only to be with us and reveal our God, but also to live a fully human life. Jesus shared the life of the ordinary people of his time. Their struggles for survival were his; so also their disappointments and celebrations, their sense of history and their experience as a people loved and saved by God.

Jesus’ mission, then, was not something that he took on over and above becoming human; his mission was to share our life. His sense of direction came from his solidarity with the common people of his day.<sup>8</sup>

Being at the heart of Jesus’ mission, solidarity must also be central to the Church’s mission as well as to my work and yours. Like him we must be part of the life and circumstances of the people among whom we have been called to serve, all the while understanding that sharing in the life of a community is not a preliminary to mission but rather central to its meaning.<sup>9</sup> But then again, doesn’t that notion stand to reason? Community and a spirit of service are essential elements of any life that merits the name Christian.



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With the possible exception of initial formation, since the close of Vatican II no topic has caused as much discussion, and at times dissension in some regions of the Institute, as our apostolic works.

You and I would do well, then, to look at our lives and works through the eyes and with the heart of that simple country priest and Marist Father whom we call our founder. He brought his Little Brothers of Mary to life for the sake of a mission. He envisioned our apostolic life as being at the heart of our identity as brothers.

In making this point, I am not implying that Marcellin saw us as an ecclesiastical work force. Rather, that he would insist that all aspects of our lives — prayer, community, the structures in place for the governance and animation of the Institute, and so many others — are present in service to mission.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL CHAPTER

The message of “turn, repent, live” found in Chapter 30 of the book of Deuteronomy inspired the members of our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, helping them to establish a focus and structure for their meeting and enriching its outcome. The phrase *Choose Life!* became their watchword, its spirit evident in their final *Message*.

During the time since the close of that meeting, we have become increasingly aware of what the cost will be to each of us personally and our Institute at large if the same profound experience of conversion offered to the Israelites is to be ours: nothing more and nothing less than the circumcision of our hearts.

This price will be exacted in all areas of our life, including that of our apostolic works. Those works have as much to do with an attitude of the heart as with any specific activity; they can never be reduced solely to a series of tasks, albeit done in the Lord’s name.

## ONGOING DISCUSSION

With the possible exception of initial formation, since the close of Vatican II no topic has caused as much discussion, and at times dissension in some regions of the Institute, as our apostolic works. Whom and where we are meant to serve and what we are called to do are questions with which members of our Provinces and Districts on all five continents continue to struggle.

We face a two-fold challenge today when it comes to any discussion about mission and apostolic activity. The first is *to avoid self-deception*. When confronted with the need to make decisions about our apostolic involvements, you and I need to be sure that it is God's work that we are about and not our own. During any process of discernment, for example, we may experience nostalgia, fear, or be concerned about offending one group or other. While these elements can be understandably a part of the process, they must never be the criteria used for apostolic decision-making.

Arriving at a state of spiritual indifference is a necessary part of any undertaking that deserves to be called discernment. If you and I are ever to address fully the challenge of Marist apostolic life today, we must pray for this grace of indifference.

The second challenge that faces us today in the areas of mission and apostolic life is to *read the signs of our times*. We need to be fearless in carrying out this task and that means not only studying and analyzing these signs but also taking necessary action in light of our findings.

An example. The members of our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter stated this conviction: "...education is a privileged place for evangelization and human promotion." At the same time, they also offered a challenge: "We have a burning desire for our institutions to be clear signs of



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Currently,  
worldwide,  
there are nearly  
200 million  
children  
excluded from  
basic education  
and 800 million  
adults who are  
illiterate.

Gospel values and promoters of social justice...and we proclaim the right of education for all and wish to involve our Marist mission in this campaign.”<sup>10</sup>

Like our founder, when speaking about educational institutions, Chapter members went beyond calling for adequate programs and facilities, a curriculum suited to the needs and abilities of students, and academic excellence. They described schools and other Marist institutions as communities where young people are taught to take the gospel seriously. Our efforts to combine religious faith with the project of educating and forming the next generation should be evident to all who visit any one of our apostolates.

As Marcellin’s brothers and Marist lay partners we are called to make Jesus known and loved among poor children and young people. Faced with the world of France after the Revolution of 1789, Marcellin was quickly aware of a need for new ideas and fresh apostolic approaches. Like many founders before him he responded creatively using the means available to him. The Church at large has so often taken the same approach to its missionary role.

Today, for example, we live in a world where globalization is shaping the context in which we operate, and so we are called once again to live out our apostolate in both renewed and new ways. Advances in technology offer opportunities unavailable to most people only a few decades ago. Today, however, for a number of reasons, these benefits are beyond the reach of millions living in conditions unworthy of their human dignity. Currently, worldwide, there are nearly 200 million children excluded from basic education<sup>11</sup> and 800 million adults who are illiterate.<sup>12</sup>

This situation was described in more detail by a group that gathered in Rome in November 2005 to participate in a meeting of the Pontifical Science and Social Science Academies addressing the topic of *Globalization and Ed-*

ucation. Its members concluded that education remains extraordinarily uneven within the world's population, with the "quality gap" widening between schools attended by the poor and those whose students are not poor. Furthermore, they pointed out that primary education in particular remains dramatically insufficient in some parts of our world, and that the classic basic skills so often taught at that level — reading, writing, and arithmetic — are no longer sufficient in a global environment.<sup>13</sup>

The 2005 United Nations Report on Youth also cited globalization among its list of five priority areas of concern for children and young people around our world. The other four were: the influence of information and communications technology, HIV/AIDS, unprecedented involvement in armed conflict, and inter-generational differences.<sup>14</sup>

The difficulties facing us, then, are clear. What remains in question is the nature of our response. Will the steps we take to address challenges in mission and apostolic life be innovative and forward-looking, even to the point of being unexpected or carrying with them the risk of entering unexplored territory?<sup>15</sup> Or will history judge our plans as being little more than an attempt to restore the past?

So, we must ask ourselves these and other questions:

- What is the purpose and place of the Catholic school today in the many countries and cultures where the Institute has a presence, and how might this institution be renewed and transformed to better meet the needs of poor children and young people?
- What initiatives on behalf of justice should we undertake with the emerging generation?
- What response can we make to newly emerging needs among poor children and young people: those without



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Education remains extraordinarily uneven within the world's population, with the "quality gap" widening between schools attended by the poor and those whose students are not poor.

homes or families, those alienated from the societies in which they live, those enslaved, exploited, without hope?

- What is our role in educational programs aimed at fostering greater understanding, reconciliation and healing among young Catholics and their peers of other faiths, as well as among the communities and nations to which they belong?
- And, finally, what do the changes taking place in our world mean for the mission entrusted to our Institute?

While we must avoid the pitfalls of the past, we cannot sidestep the challenge of working together with others to create a new moral vision, one suitable for a multicultural world, where internationality is the norm rather than the exception.

In 1903 our brothers in France faced their own crisis of innovation. As a result of what were commonly known as the laws of secularization, in that year alone more than 900 of them left the country. About an equal number remained behind. During the ensuing years, the members of each group would have had their moments of doubt and trial, but all made an enormous contribution to the history of our Institute, the Church, and the world at large.

In a fundamental way, those who went forth from France helped shift the focus of our Institute's efforts from Europe to a much wider world. With what long-term result? The complex multicultural corps of disciples, brothers and lay Marists alike, that we have today, serving on every continent.

Those who set out on mission *ad gentes* more than a century ago had little formal preparation for what lay ahead. However, they did have strong faith, a willingness to rely on Mary and her protection, the virtue of simplicity, and a spirit of daring and zeal. Simply put: they had

Marcellin's dream and his generous heart. Equally important, they responded to the signs of their time in a manner that was innovative and forward-looking.

As trying as the events of 1903 must have been, in retrospect we realize what a blessing they turned out to be for our Institute and its mission. Today, once again, as a group we need to make the spirit of 1903 our own. In doing so, we will not only rekindle our passion for mission *ad gentes*, but we will also stretch our horizons, becoming better able to respond to the needs of the Church at the margins in our day and age.

## CONCRETE CHALLENGES

We face a number of challenges today in the area of our apostolic life. In more than one Province, for example, brothers remain divided about the appropriate focus of our work. Some believe that our energies are best spent working in schools and other institutions that for years have been assisting the Church and young people with distinction, having the potential to continue to do so well into this new century. Others in the same administrative units are equally convinced that new and urgent needs among many of today's young people are clear "signs of the times" that are calling us elsewhere at this moment in our history.

In other Provinces and Districts a number of brothers appear to have lost their way when it comes to our apostolate. In the absence of a Province plan in this area, their work often lacks a focus and their contact with children and young people is haphazard at best. Some, too, having moved away from the world of the young, fear that any initiative on their part to re-enter it will only result in failure.

Finally, in a few Provinces and Districts there are brothers who have lost any sense of mobility. Having spent almost their entire religious life serving in the same



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work or region of their Province or District, they are now frightened of change and, thus, unwilling to move on, even to meet an obvious need. Sad to say, while continuing to be involved in a work of the Institute, they may no longer be living a life of mission.

With that said, let us begin.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*Please take a few moments to read and answer the questions below. They appear here to help you reflect on what you have read in the last few pages. Have a pen or pencil and a pad of paper near at hand in case you want to make any notes, jot down a phrase or thought you would like to remember, or write an extended reflection. Hold onto these notes; they will be helpful to you later, either for review or in any discussion about what you have read.*

1. What does the word mission mean to you personally, and how is it generally understood among the brothers in your Province or District? In light of your definition(s), what specific apostolic works in your administrative unit do you judge to be related to our mission?
2. Describe any tensions surrounding mission and apostolic life that exist at the present time in your Province or District. What, in your opinion, is their root cause, and what can be done to address it? Now, reflect for a moment about those areas of common agreement about mission and our apostolate in your Province or District at this time in its history. How was consensus reached on these matters?



## PART I

---

### Foundational points

Several years ago I met a priest at a workshop here in Rome; he was Rector of one of the city's English language seminaries. During the course of our conversation, I learned that he had also been a student at one of our Marist schools in the former Province of Great Britain. He talked at length and with evident gratitude about his Marist education. As we came toward the end of our exchange, this now middle-aged man summed up his experience with these words: "I was a working class boy when I first met your brothers. As I look back today to that time in my life, I realize that those men gave me much more than an education. Yes, they did far more than that: your brothers opened a window on the world for me and for so many others."

Wasn't this outcome, in part, what the founder had in mind when in January 1830 he wrote these tender and encouraging words about our apostolic work to Brother Barthélemy: "How happy I would be if I could be a teacher, and devote myself even more directly to the education of these impressionable children."<sup>16</sup>

Marcellin's message to Barthélemy continues as follows: "What a wonderful and sublime occupation you have! You are constantly among the very people with whom Jesus Christ was so delighted to be, since he expressly forbade his disciples to prevent children from coming to him. And you, dear friend, far from preventing them, are making every effort to lead them.

"Tell your children that Jesus and Mary love them all very much: those who are good because they resemble Jesus Christ, who is infinitely good; those who are not yet good, because they will become so. Tell them that the Blessed Virgin also loves them, because she is the mother of all the children in our schools. And tell them that I love them very much too; and that I never once say Mass without thinking of you and your dear children."<sup>17</sup>

A few years later, in late July 1833, Marcellin wrote about the work of his Institute once again.<sup>18</sup> This time, however, his letter was addressed to Bishop Alexandre Raymond Devie of Belley. The founder was requesting a delay in the date on which the brothers would take charge of a school located near the town of Chaveyriat. This letter is notable because of the founder's remarks about the aim of his Institute; he wrote: "I am more and more attracted to this good work which, upon close examination, does not diverge from my aim, since it is primarily concerned with the education of the poor."

Among the founder's letters are others that make references to the apostolate. Three, for example, were written in response to a request that brothers work at an institution for the hearing-impaired located in Saint-Etienne.<sup>19</sup> Marcellin was willing to accept this project but wanted first to have his brothers trained. Impatient because of the delay, city officials turned for help instead to the Brothers of the Christian Schools.



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Why cite these letters to Brother Barthélemy, Bishop Devie, and those associated with the institution for the hearing impaired? To provide Marcellin with an opportunity to speak in his own words about the aim of our Institute. Also to illustrate the fact that at the core of our Marist charism lie these three elements: one, the experience of the love of Jesus and Mary for each of us; two, an openness and sensitivity to the signs of our times; and, three, a practical love for children and young people, especially those most in need.<sup>20</sup>

### **“WE MUST HAVE BROTHERS...”**

The founder’s plan to establish a community of teaching brothers goes back as far as his seminary days. Once he was settled in his first parish assignment in LaValla, a number of factors caused him to put that plan into action.

First of all, he became deeply concerned about the state of education in France at that time. And with good reason. Following the Revolution, the nation’s school system fell into crisis. Primary institutions, evident almost everywhere prior to 1789, had all but disappeared,<sup>21</sup> and the majority of the teachers of Marcellin’s day were described by at least one historian of the period as being “irreligious, drunkards, immoral and the dregs of the human race.”<sup>22</sup>

LaValla itself did not escape the consequences of this sorry situation. The founder quickly concluded that despite Napoleon’s educational reforms, the quality of instruction at the boys’ school in town was not what it should be. Likewise, a report about the Loire region, where LaValla is located, painted this troubling picture about the state of education: “Young people are living in the most profound ignorance and given to the most alarming dissipation.”<sup>23</sup>

Marcellin's preoccupation about the state of education in France at that time as well as Louis XVIII's 1816 directive that every parish make primary education available to all children, including those whose families were unable to pay, must have weighed heavily on his mind and heart the morning he was called to the bedside of a dying Jean Baptiste Montagne.

In many ways Marcellin's encounter with this young man helped him see more clearly the mission that the Spirit had set out for him. Here was a victim of exclusion. His apparent need for consolation and instruction in the faith determined the founder's response and eventually consumed his life.

While there can be no doubt that in setting up our Institute, Marcellin was responding to the acute need for adequate religious instruction among the poor children and young people in his region, there is reason to believe that his vision was broader than that. For the founder, education was more than a process used to pass along some facts and figures, or even points about our faith. For Marcellin Champagnat, education was a powerful means for forming and transforming the minds and hearts of children and young people.

For example, he wrote, "If it were only a question of teaching children secular subjects, the Brothers would not be necessary; if our only aim were to give religious instruction, we could confine ourselves to being simply catechists.

"But we aim at something better; we want to give them a Christian spirit and Christian attitudes and to form them to religious habits and the virtues possessed by a good Christian and a good citizen. If we are to do these things, we must be teachers; we must live in the midst of the children; and we must have them with us over a long period."<sup>24</sup>



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In addition to his gifts of personality and the events of history, the founder's charism was a powerful influence shaping him and the direction of his life.

The founder wanted the efforts of his early brothers to make a significant difference in the life of any child or young person entrusted to their care. And so he encouraged them to pray for those they were called to serve, to love them, and to earn their respect. From Marcellin's point of view, his brothers and all associated with them were to be apostles to the young. Consequently, the time his followers would spend among children and young people was to be significant, their presence marked by a spirit of fraternity more than anything else, and their willingness to speak about the love of Jesus and Mary clearly in evidence.

## CHARISM

More than once you and I have been told that in addition to his gifts of personality and the events of history, the founder's *charism* was a powerful influence shaping him and the direction of his life. But what actually does the word itself mean? Answering that question is no easy matter.

First of all, throughout history charism has been defined in a variety of ways. Some have used the word to describe a particular type of personality or to characterize certain movements. Others have insisted that it refers to specific works thought to be in keeping with a founding person's inspiration. Unfortunately, neither definition sheds much light on the character of our way of life today or the role and place of charism within it.

Arriving at an adequate definition of the word charism is important for quite a different reason. Without a charism you and I would be unable to appreciate fully either Marcellin's call in life or our own. For our purposes, then, charism is defined as a free gift of the Spirit given for the good of the Church and the use of all.<sup>25</sup> We should not confuse it with grace. A charism is

bestowed because of God's love for the world, grace because of God's gratuitous love for the person.<sup>26</sup>

Saint Paul wrote at length about the subject of charisms. Their universal presence and uniqueness intrigued him. He pointed out that one charism is given to this person, and another to that, but for the good of all.<sup>27</sup> Paul also helped us understand that the charism that is part of the life of each one of us is an important element in the ongoing change of heart that should mark our life. For him the presence of love was the best indicator that a conversion had taken place, a love that was evident more in actions than in empty words. Writing to the Christian community in Corinth, Paul made the same point: Love is patient, kind, does not put on airs.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, aside from Paul's texts the term charism appears infrequently in the New Testament. Consequently, most of us today hardly ever think of ourselves as having a personal gift of the Spirit for the good of all. And, so, you and I face the challenge of understanding better the many ways in which God chooses to be present in us for the good of everyone.

## CHARISM WITHIN A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE

When the word charism is used in reference to a religious Institute, it takes on a meaning different from when applied to an individual. There are two reasons for the dissimilarity: an Institute's charism has *endured over time*, and has been *shaped by many different people*. The presence of those two factors, *endured over time* and *shaped by many different people*, moves a charism from the realm of the personal to that of the universal Church.

During the years following Vatican II, the writings of Pope Paul VI contributed significantly to our knowledge about charisms and helped clarify their meaning



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for our day and age. “*The charism of religious life,*” he wrote, “far from being an impulse born of ‘flesh and blood,’ or derived from a mentality which conforms itself to the modern world, *is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who is always at work within the Church.*”<sup>29</sup> The Pope went on to identify several characteristic signs of a charism’s presence: fidelity to the Lord, attention to the signs of the times, bold initiatives, constancy in the giving of oneself, humility in bearing with adversities, and a willingness to be part of the Church.

The charism that entered our Church and world through Marcellin Champagnat, therefore, is much more than certain works thought to be faithful to his original vision, more than a style of prayer or a particular spirituality — as important as both might be — and more than a composite of the qualities that marked our founder’s life.

Our Institute’s charism is nothing less than the presence of the Holy Spirit. Allowing that Spirit to work in and through us can give rise to some surprising outcomes. The following story illustrates this point.

In 1686, after more than 30 years of exile in Bilbao, Spain two Irish women, members of the Dominican congregation, set out once again for the land of their birth. They did so at the urging of the then Provincial of the Friars of Saint Dominic; he judged it safe enough to establish once again a convent in Galway in the west of Ireland.

Rising to the challenge Juliana Nolan and Mary Lynch made their way home in an open boat. They did so with full knowledge that upon their arrival in Ireland they would face many unknowns. When the full and final history of Dominican life in the Church is written, these two women will hold prominent places. They endured exile, war, political upheaval, the crushing anti-Catholic penal laws, hazardous journeys, and financial

insecurity to reestablish in the land of their birth the Dominican way of life. Mary was 60 as she took up this task; her companion Juliana was 75.<sup>30</sup>

Who but the Holy Spirit could give any of us the courage to do what these two women did? Genuine renewal comes at a cost and at times the price we are asked to pay can be very high indeed. If we are seriously interested in the renewal of our Institute today, however, we need to put aside excuses such as age, temperament, fear of the future, etc. and get on with the task at hand.

Some of the best elements of apostolic religious life are zeal, a spirit of faith, endurance, and the audacity to take on a great challenge. These qualities were surely evident in the life of Marcellin Champagnat.

The founder was the first to grasp and live out the Marist charism, and he did so before it was institutionalized in customs and rules. And the very same charism continued to be evident in his life during the years after the Rule of 1837 was written. The charism of our Institute has also grown through two additional periods, one encompassing the experience of Marcellin and the early brothers together, and the other, the tradition flowing from that experience.

Marcellin Champagnat saw all of life's events, the failures as well as the successes, through the eyes of faith. Similarly he was able to take a risk where others would have counseled prudence, for he knew the difference between risk-taking and recklessness.

The founder's life includes many examples of the presence of the Holy Spirit: he began recruiting for his Little Brothers of Mary within two months of his arrival in LaValla. A short time later he bought the house we know today as the *Berçeau* and set up a community.



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Marcellin also set out to build the Hermitage only seven years after founding us and just a year or two after the Institute had passed through its first serious vocation crisis. In constructing the place, the founder planned not just for the recruits that he had but for the many more he believed would follow. He dreamed large dreams and was willing to spend himself in order to bring them to life.

His belief in the continual presence of God helped him bear experiences and events in life that would have crushed others. He also trusted completely in Mary's protection and intercession; she was truly a fellow pilgrim and sister in faith for him. Once her petitioners had done their best, it was her responsibility to see them through.<sup>31</sup>

Today, you and I must ask ourselves: Do we actually believe that the Spirit that was so active and alive in the founder is at work in us today and do our actions demonstrate that belief? For example, do we imitate Marcellin by drawing our inspiration and strength from this charism? François did just that when he prayed for the grace to become a "living portrait of the founder." He was asking God to make evident in him and in his brothers the very same charism that we are talking about today.

## CHARISM AND STRUCTURES

Over time charisms give rise to structures. They become its institutional face and guarantee its valid expression. Our rule of life of 1837, known in revised form today as our *Constitutions and Statutes*, is but one example of the way in which a charism is institutionalized.

While all charisms develop structures, the latter can also change from time to time. Such a development occurs in response to changed circumstances or when the

structures in place no longer capture the experience of the Institute and its members. We call this process renewal. Sometimes it occurs slowly over time; on other occasions it is thrust upon us by circumstances.

The past four decades of religious life have been marked by a number of dramatic changes. More than a few observers would identify Vatican II's call for the adaptation and renewal of religious life as being the source of the upheaval that has occurred. Indeed, so pronounced has been the change that has taken place in our way of life that quite a number of commentators have suggested that we are undergoing a paradigmatic shift in our understanding about religious life. What does that mean exactly, and what bearing does it have on charism?

Paradigms are constructs that help you and me make sense of our experience. Theologian Jon Sobrino compares them to the hinges on a door. Moments of crisis and unhinging occur when the old and worn-out hinges can no longer support the weight of the entire door. Such a situation calls for the creation of new hinges so that the door may once again turn, and turn well.<sup>32</sup>

Paradigms are useful in so far as what they help explain outweighs what they fail to explain. When the reverse is true, a paradigm shift takes place. A new model is required to explain the change that has occurred. For example, to most of us over the age of 50 the word family most often means a father, mother, and children. When the "family" in question does not fit that paradigm, we tend to qualify it by saying "a single-parent family," "a foster family," "an extended family," and so forth. However, in a number of countries today where the paradigm of a "nuclear family" made sense for so long, people are searching for a new model to help them understand the changed nature of the family.



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Most of us have read about various past paradigms of religious life including those that existed during the age of monasticism, the time of the mendicants, and more recently the era of apostolic religious Institutes.

If the paradigm or model that helps explain our way of life is shifting today, the expression of our charism cannot help but be affected. During a time of reform in religious life, we are called to undertake a process of discernment and to return to the spirit of our original charism.

The challenge we face during a time of renewal or paradigmatic shift is different: re-imagining our charism anew in light of the signs of the times. And that means having to deal with the Holy Spirit. No easy task. The capitulants to our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter reminded us of this fact when they pointed out that as an Institute we had yet to make a gospel-based discernment aimed at bringing about the transformation of our apostolic works.<sup>33</sup>

Vatican II taught us that you cannot contain the Holy Spirit. The charism of our Institute needs to be lived and preserved not only by those of us who are members; it must also be developed and deepened in union with the People of God, who are themselves in a state of continual growth.

The Council also reminded us that we are not to put limits on God's generosity. Prior to Vatican II conventional wisdom held otherwise. Most people thought that charisms were restricted to particular religious Institutes and their members. Ignatius's charism appeared to reside with the Jesuits alone, Francis's solely with Franciscans, Dominic's inspiration available exclusively to members of his Order of Preachers. Today, however, we realize that the charism that came into our world through Marcellin Champagnat is touching the hearts and capturing the imagination of both brothers and laity alike.

A final point. We can never reduce charism to tradition alone. On the one hand, it places restrictions upon us; but on the other, it challenges us to go beyond ourselves. We are called to maintain a careful balance between both. To do so helps everyone understand the difference that exists between the apostolic work of one group and another

The charism of any group, our own included, is a vibrant, life-giving and self-correcting tradition, having its roots in the interaction of past tradition with the call of the Holy Spirit to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

For example, our Institute came into existence, in part, to meet an urgent and unmet human need in the name of Jesus. Our Marist charism was a defining ingredient in the mix that was needed in that day. It is just as important today for determining our apostolate as an Institute, in light of the signs of the times and the calls of the Church. As we carefully read those signs and listen to those calls, our charism will help us answer this question: what works can honestly be judged to be ours?

From my perspective, there are three fundamental characteristics of our apostolate.

To begin with, it calls for making Jesus known and loved. Consequently, educational institutions such as the secondary schools in which many of our brothers and lay partners serve need to be more than fine academic centers with an excellent record of university admission. They should also be places where young people have the gospel proclaimed to them in word and deed.

In some parts of our world, however, circumstances may cause us to take a different approach to the work of evangelization. The teachings of Vatican II remind us that God is present in traditions other than our own,



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and that each person must make his or her own decisions in matters of faith and belief. Therefore, in religiously pluralistic situations, we bear witness to the Kingdom of God by living out our religious tradition and commitment, and by encouraging all with whom we are in contact to practice their faith according to their religious heritage.

Second, our apostolic efforts are directed toward children and young people. Various Institutes have been called into existence to work among different groups of people in need; our call is to the young.

And, third, among youth we are called to work specifically with those who are poor and marginalized. If we don't bring God's Word to them, who will?

Are there exceptions when it comes to the population whom we are called to serve? While our focus is on the young, and the poor among them, the possibility of other works is not completely excluded in particular cases. The brothers of a Province or District, for example, may permit one of our brothers to take up for a time a work not in keeping with our charism but obviously of great need in the local Church. Our charism, though, helps us to keep clearly focused when it comes to the service we provide for the Church.

During the early years of our Institute, the brothers, and even the founder himself engaged in some works that were not in keeping with our overall aim. The founder's practice of taking into the Hermitage a number of elderly persons, including some who were incurably ill illustrates this point well.<sup>34</sup> Marcellin received donations to support this effort from a benefactor named Marie Fournas.

Writing to her in the spring of 1833, the founder had this to say: "Since our house is becoming more

crowded we need a separate place for this good work, which means an outlay of seven or eight thousand francs; otherwise we will be obliged to give up this good work, in which we want to become involved, *but without interfering with our main purpose.*"<sup>35</sup> For Marcellin Champagnat, the aim of our Institute was clear. Yes, if possible, he was willing to respond to other pressing needs of his day. But he did so only to the extent that these efforts did not distract from the original purpose for which he founded his Little Brothers of Mary.

Before moving on, I want to point out that at times in the past we defined our apostolate too narrowly. As a consequence, we were known more for a particular task, teaching, than for who we were, brothers meant to proclaim God's Word to poor children and young people.

Many suffered unnecessarily during the years in which the work of teaching became almost synonymous with the identity of Marcellin's brothers. Many of those who were unable to carry out this task due to age, health, or the fact that their apostolic gifts with the young lay elsewhere, felt or were made to feel as if they were not full members of the Institute. We cannot undo the past, but we can heed its lessons.

While our apostolate to poor children and young people needs clear definition, we must also guard against being too restrictive. In addition, we need to remember that while our apostolic life includes the specific works that we do, it is made up of so much more. Our life of prayer and community plays a role here. It does little good to be performing wonders in the classroom or in my work with street children if, at the same time, I ignore the brothers with whom I live and fail to have Jesus as the center and passion of my life.



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## CONSECRATION FOR MISSION

As apostolic religious, we are called to a life of service. Several images might come to mind when we think of the word *service*: sharing our time, talents, and education with others; showing a spirit of generosity; providing care for children, the aged and infirm, or other groups. All these examples fall under the heading of service.

Accepting the fact that service has an altruistic side to it is easy. Not so easy, however, is acknowledging the reality that someone who performs a service may be doing so out of self-interest. People in political life, for example, are not known for performing their service selflessly. At the very least, most of them hope that any favor that they do for a constituent will result in one more vote on election day. We have come to expect this type of behavior from politicians and, indeed, such ambitions are legitimate for people in the political world.<sup>36</sup> However, much more than a desire for success, Jesus and his message together with a spirit of selfless service must be the motivation for everything that we do. In taking on an attitude of selflessness or disinterest, we insure that it is the Gospel of Jesus and not ambition that enlivens us in our apostolate. When it comes to the spiritual life, those with a spirit of *disinterest* are not uninterested. Instead, they place the focus on others rather than on themselves, and make themselves available to whatever the Lord might ask of them.

As Christians, we are invited to enter into the Paschal Mystery, and to live out the dying and rising of Jesus in our everyday lives. As with any call to love, a Christian is invited to surrender, to imitate Christ in his pattern of self-emptying in order to be fully transformed by divine life.

While Paul VI spoke at length about charism, John Paul II preferred to use the term consecration when discussing mission. Unfortunately, these two words —

consecration and mission — have at times become juxtaposed, with some maintaining that religious life’s identity lies with consecration, while others insist that its heart is found in mission.

A religious Institute like our own exists among the People of God with a commitment to a gospel mission that our founder has defined for us and to the way in which this mission has been handed down to us throughout our history. We are consecrated for mission; that fact is central to the covenant relationship that we have with God and one another. And that covenant — like every life commitment — must be cherished, guarded, and developed by those who have entered into it.<sup>37</sup>

Consecrated life itself is a mission. As a mission, it stands to reason that it should be visible. Our love for God expressed in the radical living out of the evangelical counsels, a passionate concern for those who are poor and needy, and a commitment to community life must be translated into behaviors that others can see and understand. Such behaviors are also invaluable for new members, orienting and giving them a sense of belonging. Without such common behaviors, there is no visibility; without visibility, there is no witness.<sup>38</sup>

As brothers we face a challenge in this area today. During the process of renewal, we discarded a set of behaviors that for many years had helped distinguish our Marist way of life from that of others. For example, we dressed in a particular and common way, observed certain customs universally and celebrated the same five “great Marian feasts.” As time passed we began to realize that many of these old ways of being and acting had outlived their usefulness. Unfortunately, while we have put aside a number of old ways of being and acting, we have not yet reached consensus about and adopted new behaviors appropriate for today’s reality and apostolic needs.



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As I mentioned during my opening address to the brothers assembled for our recent General Conference in Sri Lanka, our respect for diversity is, perhaps, one reason for our failure to reach agreement in this area. Those who participated in Vatican II anticipated the emergence of differences *among* religious institutes as the process of renewal took its course, and judged this development to be positive. As these institutes returned to the charism of their founders and foundresses and adapted to the needs of their times, they were inevitably going to look different from one another. More recently the document *Vita Consecrata* has affirmed this point of view.

However, what the Council did not anticipate fully was the amount of diversity that would take place *within* institutes themselves. For some groups today these internal differences are considerable. If significant diversity continues to exist over time within our Institute or any other in terms of the members' outlook on areas such as the vows, the meaning and place of community life, spirituality, then the task of forming a common identity and the possibility of corporate witness will be all the more difficult.

As we work toward forming a common identity and decide upon new ways to express that identity as an Institute, we must accept the fact that while diversity will continue to exist between our Institute and others, less diversity within the Institute will increasingly be more the norm.

There is another reason, though, for our slowness to adopt new common practices and behaviors: our fear that to do so would signify a return to the past, an attempt to restore what might have been appropriate a half-century or more ago. Have no fear of that happening. The practices of the past were suitable for the past. However, if we are ever to re-establish the wit-

ness value of religious life we will need to find new signs to help us do so, and we will need to carry out that challenge as a group.

Our failure to identify and evaluate all that we have learned during the process of renewal has had its consequences. We have avoided, for example, asking ourselves questions, such as: How do our current practices express our love for Jesus Christ and our commitment to the Church in a credible way? How do they support and enhance our mission? Do they promote greater passion for the gospel and for the service of the poor?

The Holy Spirit has ultimate responsibility for carrying out the mission in which we share. Our Institute, like all other religious communities, is an effect of the Spirit's indwelling among God's people, a charism in that respect. As members of the Institute you and I must ensure the Spirit's freedom to act in and through us.

As religious brothers consecrated for mission, we are called to follow Jesus' example. For Him, there was no self-seeking or ambition in his preaching, neither in his miracles and healing, nor in his arguments with the Pharisees and Sadducees.

As brothers, you and I also have a responsibility to give witness to the person of Jesus more fully and intensely. We must stand out in both the Church and the world for the selfless service we render in Christ's name. Failing to remain true to our choice of radically identifying with Christ, we will become but another group of political or social activists or followers.

A story, credited to Charles Péguy, makes much the same point. It tells of a man who died and arrived in heaven where an angel began to interrogate him. "Where are your wounds?" the angel demanded.



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Dreams are one thing; having the zeal to bring them to life is quite another.

Unable to hide his perplexity, the man said, “Wounds? I don’t have any wounds.” The angel sighed wearily and asked, “Was there nothing worth fighting for in life? Nothing worth the gift of your life?” What we suffer for others helps define us and makes us who we are.

## MARCELLIN TODAY

Today, almost two centuries after our foundation, if Marcellin Champagnat were to arrive at the front door of the Province or District House in any of our administrative units and set out from there on pilgrimage to view the works of his brothers and lay partners, he would undoubtedly be impressed and give thanks for what we are doing in the name of the Gospel.

He would also probably be stunned by the resources that we have on hand today — spiritual, human, and financial — to continue his apostolate of helping poor country children and young people become good Christians and good citizens. In his day and age, the founder could not have imagined all the blessings that God would bestow on his Institute, as well as on its members and works.

In the midst of all that he would see and hear, though, I believe Marcellin might also raise some troubling questions. Honest questions, but disturbing, nonetheless. Questions such as: Does sufficient evidence exist to prove that you and I are bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to poor children and young people here at the outset of the third millennium? When the Christian young people entrusted to our care move on from our programs and institutions, have they come to know and love Jesus Christ? Are the teachings and values of his *Good News* evident in their day-to-day lives?

And where children and young people of other faiths are among those for whom we have responsibility, when they leave us, do they take with them the ability to dialogue, a spirit of tolerance, and a greater appreciation of their own beliefs?

Brothers, what we do, we do well. Never doubt that fact. Visit any Marist work today and chances are you will find a group of dedicated and hardworking confreres and laymen and women fruitfully involved in a project of great merit.

We run the risk, though, of becoming the victims of our own success. We can immerse ourselves in what we are doing to such an extent that we fail to take time either to evaluate our performance or to ask whether or not we should be doing that work in the first place. Consequently, periodic assessments are essential, always bearing in mind that we are not called to be successful, but rather faithful. Our *Constitutions and Statutes* puts it this way:

*Our Institute, a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church,  
is an ongoing grace for the world.  
Our simple, brotherly communities  
constantly call others  
to live by the spirit of the Beatitudes.  
Our apostolic commitment and our generous gift  
of our own life  
encourage those around us, especially young people,  
to build a more just society,  
and reveal to everyone  
the meaning of human existence.<sup>40</sup>*



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In the midst of the doubts and preoccupations that must have been his, he was sustained by his simplicity, unfailing trust in God's presence, and reliance on Mary and her protection.

## MARCELLIN AND THE QUALITIES OF A MARIST EDUCATOR

Marcellin's personality had a profound effect on our first brothers. We know that they loved him like the older brother and father that he was. He was a mentor to each of them in the best sense of that word.

There can be no doubt that the founder was an equally attractive model when it came to the apostolic life. Here was a man in love with God. Nurtured by prayer, his passion for Jesus and Mary grew ever more profound. As an apostle he lived out his ideal so intensely that others were attracted to be like him and live like him. Marcellin Champagnat's heart burned to proclaim the *Good News*.<sup>41</sup>

Here also was a man who dared to dream; in the midst of the challenges that faced Church and state in post-revolutionary France, the founder imagined possibilities well beyond the vision of many of his contemporaries.<sup>42</sup>

Dreams are one thing; having the zeal to bring them to life is quite another. Here again the founder was blessed. His determination and drive, often referred to as "a love of work", as well as his creativity and daring<sup>43</sup> gave him the courage to purchase the small house in LaValla, equip it as best he could, seek his first recruits and get on with the task at hand.

His was a practical Christianity; he had the ability to find solutions that fit the problems that faced him and a flair for bringing out the best in others. And in the midst of the doubts and preoccupations that must have been his, he was sustained by his simplicity, unfailing trust in God's presence, and reliance on Mary and her protection.

Today the Spirit that was so active in our founder longs to live and breathe in you and me. The presence in each of us of the charism that first came into our Church and world through Marcellin Champagnat gives credibility to our claim to his tradition. Whether we serve in a school or another setting with young people, that charism is evident in our distinctive Marist style: a simple presence among the young; an unpretentious approach to all whom we meet; a spirit of family; a love of work; and all done in the manner of Mary.<sup>44</sup>

Keeping in mind the points discussed thus far, we need to move on now to explore several topics related specifically to our Marist apostolic life today.



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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*Once again, please take a few moments to read and answer the questions below. As before, they appear here to help you reflect on what you have read in the last few pages. Have a pen or pencil and a pad of paper near at hand in case you want to make any notes, jot down a phrase or thought you would like to remember, or write an extended reflection. Hold onto these notes; they will be helpful to you later either for review or in any discussion about what you have read.*

1. Imagine that you were Marcellin Champagnat visiting a cross section of the apostolic works of your Province or District today. What is your first impression based on what you see and hear? Now walk around, talk with those involved in these works and those being served. Later in the day as you reflect on your visits, and in light of the vision presented in our *Constitutions and Statutes*, what makes you proud of these apostolic initiatives? What leaves you troubled? What would you like to see more of, and what is missing?

2. What makes you believe that the charism that was so alive and active in our founder exists today within you and within the brothers of your Province or District and your lay partners? What evidence exists to support your claim?

3. Trace the history of your awareness of the presence of this charism in your own life; jot down a few thoughts about a time when the presence of our Marist charism was particularly powerful in your life and experience.



## PART II

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### Identity and Marist apostolic life today

Vatican II was a defining moment for Roman Catholic laity as well as for those of us in religious life. The proclamation of a universal call to holiness that rang forth from that gathering was addressed to both groups. Here at last was an unambiguous statement that all Christians are baptized into mission: the mission of proclaiming God's Kingdom and its immanence.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, laymen and women were viewed almost entirely as helpers to those considered the Church's true servants: bishops, priests, and religious. Thought to have no mission themselves, the laity were permitted to assist those who apparently did. As a result of decisions made during the Council, however, laymen and women moved from the position of helper to that of full partner in mission, and took on more fully the roles associated with the sacrament of baptism: priest, king, and prophet.

Prophecy is central to the Church's mission. Called by God, prophets are sent to remind us about God's saving interventions in the past, challenge us to conversion in the present, and urge us to build up a new human community as God promised.<sup>45</sup>

While the role, identity, and mission of the Catholic layman or woman were clarified somewhat during the course of Vatican II, the same cannot be said for those of us who are members of religious Institutes. In many ways we emerged from the Council in a state of confusion.

In retrospect, consecrated life's pre-conciliar identity can look rather elitist, with the pursuit of individual perfection given most often as its *raison d'être*. Those among us who passed through a novitiate experience before the mid-1960s might remember learning that the purpose of the Institute was the glory of God and the sanctification of its members. This description was followed by a statement about our works, the specific apostolate for which our Institute was founded.

Prior to Vatican II that Institute, like the rest of religious life, was a closed society with clear norms and rules. The latter helped foster a strong sense of group identity among us. Not surprisingly, the role of the superior at the time was to ensure that we adhered to the norms and kept the rules.

In the post-conciliar Church, our way of life is no longer presented as a state of perfection as such but rather as one way in which believers can grow in love and holiness. Furthermore, the following of Christ is seen more clearly as the ultimate norm and supreme rule for all religious communities rather than adherence to a list of regulations.



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## MARIST LAITY

The late Pope John Paul II held the conviction that the Church of this era would eventually become known as that of the laity. Assuming that he was correct, we do well to ask ourselves how we as brothers can best help realize the mission of laymen and women in our Church and world today.

Marist partnership is but one answer to this question. Recognized more fully during the years since Vatican II, its foundation lies in the common mission and prophetic call that we all share as a result of the sacrament of baptism. Partnership, however, runs much deeper than participating in a common work; it is about the sharing of faith and a common set of values, being in love with Jesus Christ, and the collective experience of having Marcellin Champagnat capture our heart and seize our imagination.

Furthermore, partnership with those who share our apostolic life is a characteristic of Marist identity, witnessing to the fact that our Church is capable of an ecclesiology of communion. Today that witness is more important than ever.

All too often in the past, Church actions have betrayed an ecclesiology based on power and position — an outcome antithetical to Gospel principles.<sup>46</sup> As men and women who share a common charism, through our life and work together we are called to bear witness to the fact that the situation can and must be otherwise.

Few should be surprised by the point of view just expressed. As mentioned earlier, among the many gifts of Vatican II was this realization: the founder's charism belongs to the Church and not just to his Little Brothers. Consequently, today many laymen and women challenge the notion that that charism is a treasure belonging to the

brothers alone. Each and every Marist lay partner, they point out, also has his or her own life story to tell, has made his or her own journey of faith, and has his or her own unique experience of the founder and his spirituality.

If we were to listen to those stories, hear these tales of faith, and come to appreciate more fully the many experiences of Marcellin and his spirituality among us, we would be better able to share what we hold in common and respect the differences<sup>47</sup> that exist between the identity of one of Marcellin's Little Brothers and that of a Marist layman or woman.

## DIFFERENCES

Some among us are uncomfortable with any talk about distinctions and express concern that the word "difference" may come to mean more than it implies, that it will beg a comparison.

To deny differences where they exist, however, robs us all of the unique and complementary nature of both the brother's vocation and that of the Marist layman or woman, and undermines our ability to arrive at a clear understanding about the identity of each.

Differences are evident in the Church at large. For example, the Spirit of God provides a variety of vocations, charisms, and apostolates. Differentiation of roles is in keeping with an organic model of the Church. Saint Paul put it this way: "The body consists not of one member but of several."<sup>48</sup>

Diversity also exists within religious life. Yet no one suggests that religious orders in existence for several centuries are any better than those of more modern origin, or that monastic congregations are somehow superior to mendicant or apostolic groups.



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In discussing the similarities and differences that exist between those of us who are Marcellin's brothers and our lay partners, we need to welcome not only all that we share in common but the ways in which we differ as well.

## **CO-RESPONSIBILITY<sup>49</sup>**

To foster lay partnership today we need to be brothers to one another and to our partners in mission. And that means listening to and learning from one another, sharing our spiritual and apostolic inheritance, and fostering an attitude of cooperation.

Consequently, when we use the term "our" apostolates, we are describing a partnership between Marcellin's brothers and Marist laity. The time has come to move beyond simply inviting lay people to join us in these works to seeing them as co-responsible for them.

Over the past few years and in a number of Provinces some laywomen and men have taken on roles of leadership within these works. Those of us who are brothers have been called upon to support them through Marist formation, the witness of our religious lives, and the promotion of Marist apostolic values. As we help the laity live more fully their call in life, we will come to understand ever more clearly the grace of our own vocation as brothers.

## **NOT EVERYONE IS ENTHUSIASTIC**

Among those of us who are brothers, though, there are some who have embraced the idea of Marist partnership only with reluctance. Seeing it as another sign of diminishment, they judge it necessary due to a decline in the number of brothers. More than a few of our

lay partners have sensed their ambivalence. At one gathering of brothers and laymen and women, for example, a teacher in one of our Marist schools said to the group: "I sometimes get the impression that if you brothers had sufficient numbers to staff these works, we would not get a second look!"

The Marist partnership movement, however, has little to do with diminishment. Rather it is but one development among many in the overall evolution of our way of life. Moreover, this movement will fail to mature without the presence and active involvement of both brothers and laymen and women. Therefore, efforts aimed at vocation promotion and those spent fostering partnership must complement each other.

The movement toward Marist partnership can be better understood as reflecting a universal need in today's complex and troubled world. Addressing that need is vital in our mission to adequately prepare today's poor children and young people for the coming of the Kingdom, a coming that will require a plurality of perspectives and experiences, both trans-cultural and international.

## **NOT EVERYONE IS A PARTNER**

At the same time, not every layman or woman involved in a Marist apostolate is a Marist partner. For some, their work is simply a job. They are willing to perform their tasks well but have little or no interest in making their own Marcellin's vision or his spirituality.

We might consider those involved in Marist apostolates as falling into two groups: those who are at the heart of a particular work, and others for whom the work is merely a satisfying job.



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To passively allow such a situation to continue would be unfortunate. Each of us has a responsibility for promoting the unique set of values that has always marked a Marist apostolate and guided our work with poor children and young people.

Father Champagnat, for example, spoke about our need to have a personal concern for our students and to earn their respect. To do so, we must have a relationship with each of them that is genuine and straightforward, and do all that we can to help them develop a well-balanced moral conscience and a solid set of values on which to build their lives. Over time, we come to resemble an older brother or sister and establish the type of family spirit on which the founder insisted. “To bring up children properly,” he so often said, “we must love them; we must love them all equally.”<sup>50</sup>

These values must be evident in the life of anyone who embraces the name Marist. Likewise, they should be unmistakably present in any institution claiming to carry out an apostolate in the tradition of Marcellin Champagnat. If such is not the case, we have an obligation to better promote these values.

Mary who reared Jesus of Nazareth is our model for this work; we allow her to inspire our faith and to shape our pedagogical approach. Here was a prophet and a friend of God. Like her, you and I are called to make the relationship that we have with God the foundation upon which to build our life.

## **FUTURE PLANNING**

Increasingly, our colleagues, alumni of our schools and other works, those who were vowed members of the Institute for a time as well as their families, the men and women who make up the Champagnat

Movement of the Marist Family, lay volunteers, our students, and others are rediscovering the spirituality of Marcellin Champagnat. The fact that so many continue to find that spirituality a source of inspiration testifies to its continuing vitality and power to animate our apostolates.

Today, however, we might go a step further by beginning to develop networks among those who are carrying out a Marist apostolate. Whether they teach in an educational institution, run a literacy program for school drop-outs, work with children living in the street, teach catechism, or take part in one of the many other Marist sponsored apostolates, such a network would provide all involved with personal and spiritual support.

The shape and form of these Marist apostolic networks may vary from place to place. Arriving at the most workable model will require wide consultation, honest discussion, and careful decision-making, but I am convinced that the existence of such a model will help us make a unique Marist contribution to the new evangelization of young people now getting underway.

## THE IDENTITY OF OUR INSTITUTE

How can you and I go about strengthening our Institute's identity? By deciding upon a clear focus for its life and work.<sup>51</sup> This decision does not imply that every one of us must engage in the same work or live and work in the same place or under the same conditions. Rather it means that anyone who takes a look at us can quickly answer the question, "For what is this Institute known?"

For the identity of any group becomes evident when we can describe: one, its character or essence, the "stuff" of which it is made; two, those features that dis-



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tinguish it from other groups; and, three, its degree of sameness or continuity over time. A number of developments that occurred in the wake of Vatican II weakened one or more of these elements, leading to some confusion about the identity of religious life in general and in particular our own identity as an Institute.

For example, in some Provinces and Districts, during the years following the Council, brothers were permitted to take up works that — while falling within the definition of the Institute’s primary apostolate — were different from our traditional involvements. In addition, in a few instances, for a variety of reasons, some were allowed to take up apostolates other than the one for which we were founded.<sup>52</sup>

Subsequently, many in this latter group lost a sense of *being sent* by the Institute. Provincials and District superiors of the administrative units involved also found themselves less capable of making commitments on the part of their Province or District to ministries that addressed compelling and unmet human needs, needs quite similar to those that had so captured our founder’s heart and moved him to action. They simply lacked available personnel.

A scenario such as the one described above will eventually become self-defeating for our Institute or any other. Why? *Because the vitality and viability of our Institute depend upon, at least in part, its ability to demonstrate a consistent reason for its existence and engage in a credible corporate mission.*<sup>53</sup> Similar to other apostolic congregations, we came into being, in large measure, to meet a concrete need. An apostolate lay at the heart of our founding moment.

Painful and challenging as some might find the exercise, we need to remind ourselves today that it is my brothers and the Institute and no one else that sends me

on mission and to a particular apostolic work. To lose this important aspect of our way of life will eventually transform any apostolic undertaking into little more than a job, leaving the provincial and his council addressing tasks more commonly associated with an employment agency than an apostolic religious institute such as our own.

Like other religious institutes, we are a social group.<sup>54</sup> As such, we have greater potential for effectively carrying out the apostolate of our Institute when we work together. In most cases, people united in a common effort and working side by side have a greater impact than that achieved by most individual initiatives. Corporate commitments, even when they are short-term, make a statement about a group and its nature that individual involvements do not.

At the same time, radical gospel living in an Institute such as our own exacts a price. Ideally, in making a free choice to live fully the Word of God, you and I become deeply involved in the Institute's life, and, in turn, allow our brothers a significant claim over our person, time, and talents. We resist the temptation to view our way of life as existing primarily for the well-being and development of the individual.

In recent years, the steady and widespread move on the part of some of us into diocesan and parochial positions has also had a detrimental impact on the identity of apostolic religious life. It has typically risen up in the Church to serve urgent or unmet human needs. As a consequence, historically, our Institute and others like it have been independent of, but complementary to, the hierarchical structure of the Church.<sup>55</sup>

However, the decreased number of secular clergy in some countries today, at a time when the parish continues to be defined as the primary locus of ecclesiology,



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has led to some of our brothers being pressed into service administering parishes and taking up other roles that have not been ours traditionally. This development, as well as the decline in the number of institutions that we sponsor, has compromised the prophetic role that we as brothers have in our Church.<sup>56</sup> To remain faithful to our charism and purpose, we need to re-examine this development and its long-term outcome, and redirect our efforts where necessary.

At the same time, we must recognize that some of our older brothers have accepted parochial positions for various practical reasons. Forced to retire from teaching, they have taken up work in a parish so as to remain active. Their efforts allow them to continue to make a contribution to the Church as a whole, and to the Institute and those they serve as well.

New models of religious life may well be emerging in parts of our world where elements other than a common mission, life together, and spirituality bind a group of people and help them make sense of their commitment to the gospel. However, our Institute must continue to give priority to – and support actively by word and deed – those among us who wish to pursue together a common and corporate apostolate as we work to breathe new life into our original founding inspiration.

## **THE PLACE AND PURPOSE OF INSTITUTIONS**

In addition, in recent years, some of us have come to regard institutions with suspicion. Often enough with good reason. To remain vital, every institution must undergo periodically a process of evaluation and, when necessary, transform itself. Most also need to be reminded now and again of the reason for their foundation. Unfortunately, none of us can guarantee that any institution will avail itself of these necessary corrective measures.

Institutions, though, have the potential to be a powerful means for social change. They also serve several other purposes: giving those associated with them greater visibility in the local community and providing them with a place where they can come into contact with young people who might have an interest in joining our Institute.

During the process of renewal that has been underway since Vatican II, the leadership in some of our Provinces and Districts determined that our service in one or another institution had run its course. They passed on to others the responsibility for these foundations. In retrospect, however, we may have moved on too quickly from some institutional commitments. In so doing, we not only lost a point of contact with the young, but also our ability to set the future direction of these facilities in keeping with our congregation's charism.

Let's keep this fact in mind: institutions that continue to be faithful to their founding vision and those that can be transformed so as to be more responsive to the signs of the times can be a valuable resource to us and to our mission. In years past, a number of these Marist institutions were founded for the education of poor children and young people. It is to this topic that we now turn our attention.



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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*Please take a few moments to read and answer the questions below. As before, they appear here to help you reflect on what you have read in the last few pages. Have a pen or pencil and a pad of paper near at hand in case you want to make any notes, jot down a phrase or thought you would like to remember, or write an extended reflection. Hold onto these notes; they will be helpful to you later either for review or in any discussion about what you have read.*

1. What has been your experience of lay partnership? List three benefits of this movement for those involved, or for our Institute, or for our Church? What obstacles remain to be overcome in the area of lay partnership?
2. Take some time to describe the institutions in your Province or Districts. What do they look like; what do they do? What signs tell you that an institution needs to reform?



## PART III

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### Mission, apostolic life, and the poor

**I**n recent years – often in powerful and moving ways – a great deal has been written and spoken about the works of our Institute and those poor children and young people who make up a sizable part of the world’s current population. What is the relationship between the two? Even more important, in light of our charism, vow of poverty, and the calls of our Church and General and Provincial Chapters to serve those living at the margins of society, where are we being called to put our apostolic energies as a group now and in the future?

No doubt there are administrative units throughout the Institute where the brothers and lay partners within them have answered these questions to their satisfaction. Having done so, they may also have put into place a plan of action aimed at helping them realize what they have decided.

The majority of our brothers, however, have not as yet arrived at final answers to the very same questions. Indeed, in their attempts to do so, sharp differences in

opinion have often emerged. There are, for example, Provinces and Districts whose members have yet to achieve consensus about the meaning of the term “the poor.” So too, in other administrative units, the suggestion that we shift our efforts to work directly with children and young people on the margins of society has been judged by some as showing a lack of appreciation for much of the past. They ask, “Are we being called to abandon a system of schools that has taken years to build and the sacrifice of many to maintain?” These institutions, they point out, have been an effective means of evangelization thus far, allowing us to provide an invaluable service to the Church as well as to the social fabric of the countries in which they are located.

Finally, there are a few Provinces and Districts in which brothers appear to have exempted themselves from serious reflection and discussion about the service we are called to render to poor children and young people. They have either redefined the phrase *the poor* to suit the circumstances in which they find themselves, or wittingly or unwittingly taken on characteristics of their culture that are antithetical to gospel living. A number also fail to see the contradiction that arises when their standard of living or that of their community exceeds what is found in the day-to-day life of their lay colleagues.

This situation is particularly troubling when those involved are citizens of a nation or live in a region that is economically disadvantaged. Some, for example, realizing that their area is already considered poor in the eyes of the world community, may insist that characteristics such as the simplicity of life called for by our *Constitutions and Statutes* are a given due to local circumstances. Others rationalize, convincing themselves that a different set of rules applies, and a few fall back on culture to insist that because of their religious com-



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mitment their fellow citizens expect them to live better than the average person.

Regardless of where we live, or the degree of wealth or poverty present among the peoples whom we serve, all of us are required to live in a way that is marked by an obvious simplicity of life, a willingness to roll up our sleeves and do manual work as needed, and an attitude of respect toward all those who work in our apostolates and houses, regardless of their task.

No one, then, who claims to be a member of Marcellin's Institute is excused from addressing the topic of our works and their relationship to the population of poor children and young people in our world. And there are several ways to begin this effort.

Fostering a spirit of dedication and zeal in our apostolic life is one. Taking on as much as possible the conditions of the poorest of those whom we serve is another way to help us understand more fully the realities with which they must live. Making our own the experience of those who have been marginalized also gives us more credibility as evangelizers.

Such was Gandhi's experience as he immersed himself increasingly in his mission of resistance in the cause of justice. Even though he and his wife had vowed celibacy after eleven years of marriage, it was only after he donned the homespun cloth and took to the streets as a poor man that he became a credible witness, and the masses of India began to follow him. As long as he stood apart from the majority of his fellow citizens, he attracted few to his cause. However, once he took on the circumstances of their lives, many stepped up and joined him.<sup>57</sup>

More often than not as you and I work to simplify our lives, our spirit of zeal grows more intense. En-

couraging us to be “fire upon the earth<sup>58</sup>”, the members of our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter reaffirmed education as a privileged field for evangelization and human promotion. They also expressed their gratitude to all, brothers and lay partners alike, who are active in our schools and other Marist undertakings. At the same time, they challenged you and me to make sure that each of our institutions is known for its promotion of gospel values and principles of social justice.

Continuing along the same lines, Chapter members reminded us that living out fully our preferential option for the poor is an unfinished task. It is hard to deny the accuracy of their observation. After all, we have yet to carry out in every Province and District, and at the level of the General Administration, the type of gospel-based discernment that will be necessary if we truly want to bring about the transformation of our works.

We have little to be discouraged about, however, since we are not alone in facing these challenges. In but one example: several years ago while reflecting in a similar vein about the use of material goods, the members of the Union of Superiors General pointed out that their dreams for refounding their institutes would remain just that, dreams, if they failed to consider also the way in which they acquired their goods, their financial management of those goods, the amounts they accumulated, the use of their patrimony and money, and the way in which they shared what they had.

In the pages ahead, I plan to address several specific points about our works as an Institute, and the poor children and young people whom we are called to serve. To do so, I will first try to clarify what we mean by the phrase “the poor.” I realize that some may throw up their hands in exasperation upon reading that last line and insist that the matter was resolved for



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us as an Institute long ago. Perhaps for some among us, but apparently not for all. Until we reach consensus about this matter at the fundamental level of language there will be no common practice, only continued misunderstanding and conflict.

Next, we need to reach agreement on the meaning of another expression: *an option for the poor*. This notion has its roots in Scripture and Catholic social teaching, and was a source of inspiration for several articles in our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes*. The principles upon which an option for the poor is based have also been guiding elements in the renewal efforts of a number of our Provinces and Districts during the years since the close of the Second Vatican Council.

Our task will be made easier if we can understand more fully the reasons why some past efforts to implement an option for the poor met with resistance in parts of the Institute. Though this reaction mirrors the experience of the Church at large, how do we explain it?

After all, popes since the close of the Council as well as documents written and decisions taken at many national and international Institute meetings held during the same period have emphasized this point: an option for the poor is both a central and an essential element in the process of renewing our way of life.

Finally, I will conclude with suggestions about some concrete steps you and I, as well as our Provinces and Districts, can take to more fully embrace the gospel mandate, our founding inspiration, and the Church's recent appeals for us to devote our efforts to the care of poor children and young people.

Before going any further with this topic, however, I must admit that in recent years a number of our brothers have wondered aloud about the fact that our call to serve

children and young people who are poor was hardly stressed at all during their years of formation. “Why now,” they ask, “has it become such a central issue?”

This is an honest question and deserves a response. To begin with, any process of renewal and transformation in which a group gets involved always brings business as usual to a stop. It also leaves a considerable number of those concerned feeling a bit lost at sea. They realize that they cannot go back to where they came from, but at the same time they are not really sure where they are headed.

Since the close of Vatican II, our Institute has taken seriously the Church’s call to study our origins and also to be attentive to the signs of the times. The founder’s letters have been arranged systematically and the context in which each was written explained clearly. New translations of some Institute documents have appeared and others have become available for the first time in all four official languages of the Institute. Having these resources on hand has given all of us insights into the founder and his original design that were not available during earlier years.

Second, as has also been mentioned often, our Church has in a special way invited men and women religious to turn their attention to the economically poor in recent years. These calls have been consistent and consistently passionate.

Rather than resist them, we need to take on the spirit of our founder. Marcellin was not a reckless man. But he was bold, innovative in his responses, and fearless in his actions. Our founder surprised his contemporaries time and again. A simple example: though Marcellin was almost always in debt throughout his life, when he died the brothers discovered that he had left them relatively debt free. With the excep-



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tion of one outstanding loan — that was quickly retired through the generosity of a benefactor — our early brothers had no debts from our founder. Would that we had the courage today to live the practical Christianity of this refreshingly simple man and saint.

## THOSE WHO ARE POOR

Regardless of how you or I might decide to define poverty, or the face it wears in our local situation, when the founder spoke about the poor, he clearly had in mind children and young people who were economically deprived. We need to keep this point in mind because there are more than a few forms of poverty in our world today and at least as many definitions. But as Marcellin's brothers we are not called to respond to every one of them.

Some social scientists employ quantitative indicators to determine who is poor. Using this system, a person's income as well as the degree of his or her access to potable water, nourishing food, adequate housing, health care, educational opportunities, efficient and non-corrupt government services, and a host of other items are used to identify those who are marginalized and those who are not.

Others stress qualitative factors when measuring poverty. For example, many people who are poor suffer from low self-esteem. This type of self-doubt is both an outcome of and a contributing factor to their poverty. When people lack self-respect, it is not uncommon for others to look down on them. Such a situation can be particularly painful for poor children and young people.

Taking still another approach, the authors of the 2005 United Nations' *World Youth Report*<sup>59</sup> suggest

that uncertainty is the decisive condition for people who are poor, especially those just starting out in life.

Brother Benito, in his circular, *On the Use of Material Goods*, pointed out just how much the social milieu in which we find ourselves can influence our understanding about what poverty means.<sup>60</sup> He invited us, for example, to judge the actual necessity of many of the expenditures made to create what we might describe as a Marist school of some excellence.

There is little reason, at times, to wonder why brothers who live and work daily among people who are materially poor have become skeptical and consider all our talk about those who are poor and the vow of poverty as little more than empty rhetoric.<sup>61</sup>

In Marcellin's time, though, financial hardship was evident in the lives of those whom he and our early brothers served. Not only does he say as much in his July 1833 letter to Bishop Devie of Belley<sup>62</sup> that was cited earlier, but he reiterates the point in July of 1839 when writing to the mayor of Charlieu. A line from the founder's letter reads, "We pray that the Lord will ultimately bless the efforts you are making to provide religious instruction for the poor children who would have been deprived of it because of the indifference of most of their parents."<sup>63</sup>

Marcellin's preference for poor children was evident not only in what he wrote but also in the way in which he and our early brothers lived. For example, those assigned to the school in the town of Charlieu apparently had to contend with less than ideal conditions. Brother Avit tells us that for several years the three brothers involved were forced to keep changing the building in which their classes were held.

However, the arrival of a new mayor, Mr. Guinault, appeared to bring some relief. He had their class-



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At this time in its history, however, the Church has taken the initiative to encourage men and women religious to direct their efforts in the main toward those who find themselves in situations of poverty.

rooms and kitchen moved into a one-story structure located next to the secondary school and told them of his plans to add a second story the following year so as to provide a residence for them. They were obviously pleased with this news since for quite some time, the three had been sleeping in the city hall located in the middle of town!<sup>64</sup> We might say that the simplicity of life of these men was obvious to one and all; they truly shared the lot of those whom they served.

## CHALLENGE

Consecrated life did not come into existence solely to eradicate poverty. If that were the only rationale for this way of living the gospel, then it would pass into history whenever the plight of persons who are poor was alleviated. Clearly, institutes like our own came into existence and continue to flourish for reasons in addition to the service their members may render to persons who are poor.

At this time in its history, however, the Church has taken the initiative to encourage men and women religious to direct their efforts in the main toward those who find themselves in situations of poverty. At their 1971 Synod, for example, the participating bishops called action on behalf of justice “*a constitutive dimension of preaching the gospel.*”

Work with persons who are poor is also part of the spirit of the founding charism of our Institute, and an extraordinary number of General and Province Chapters have taken decisions that will orient us more fully toward work with children and young people in situations of impoverishment and marginalization. So, as if the founder’s vision were not enough to convince us about where the focus of our efforts should be today, we also have the Church and many other factors moving us in this direction.

Since our earliest days these three essential aspects of our identity as Marcellin's brothers have been clear: living and working in the midst of young people; evangelizing primarily through education and at times by other means; and demonstrating a particular concern for poor children and young people, those living at the margins of society. Let's take each in turn.

What would happen if we were to suddenly shift all our resources toward programs set up on behalf of the elderly rather than keep them concentrated on the young? We would lose an important aspect of our identity, one that has distinguished us from others for almost 200 years now. Few would know who we were anymore.

Likewise, we have always insisted that the schools and other programs that we administer for the young represent a great deal more than an alternative to what the state and private agencies can offer in terms of education and child care. If suddenly we were to define our schools as private academies set up to increase the probability of university admission, we would lose another essential aspect of our identity. For our schools per se are not what is important, but rather the fact that they are meant to be places where young people come to love the Lord more fully.

The very same reasoning can be applied to our call to work with those most in need. Our efforts to respond courageously to that invitation must be evident not only in our documents, but also in all that we say and do.

## **AN OPTION FOR THE POOR**

The notion of an option for the poor has at its heart this biblical understanding: those living on the mar-



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gins are the privileged instruments of God's providence.<sup>65</sup> Time and again God has chosen the weak to stun the strong, the foolish to confound the wise.

Both the Old and New Testaments contain many examples of the unlikely and excluded playing a vital role in human salvation. Moses, for example, protested that he was slow and hesitant of speech. Despite that fact, he was chosen to lead God's people. Jesse's youngest son David, left out in the cold tending the sheep when Samuel came looking for a successor to Saul, turned out to be Israel's greatest king.

In the New Testament, it was Mary, Anna, Simeon, Peter, James, John, and Mary of Magdala who were able to recognize the Messiah. As members of the *anawim*, or poor of Yahweh, they were not scandalized that he came as a Suffering Servant rather than as a conquering king.

An authentic option for the poor is made up of three movements: solidarity, analysis, and action.

## SOLIDARITY

For our purposes and in light of our charism, the word solidarity is used here to describe a deliberate choice on your part or mine to enter into the world of children and young people living on the margins of society. By so doing, we come to share their struggles and disappointments as well as their joys and hopes. Article 34, lines 4 through 9, of our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* puts it this way:

*Attuned to the voice of the Church,  
and in touch with our own vocation,  
we stand in solidarity with the poor  
and their just causes.*

*We give them first preference  
wherever we are and whatever be our task.  
We love the places and the houses  
which enable us to share their lot,  
and we take every opportunity  
to be in contact with the reality of their daily lives.*

Solidarity with poor children and young people can lead to a transformation of the heart, forcing you and me to re-examine a number of our assumptions about the use of material goods, what is entailed in simplicity of life, and our obligation to speak out about any injustice we encounter. Once again, article 34, lines 1 through 3, of our *Constitutions and Statutes* reminds us:

*In being true to Christ and to our founder,  
we love the poor.  
They are God's blessed ones;  
they draw down His gifts upon us  
and evangelize us.*

Solidarity, however, is not a right that we can insist on or take for granted. Rather, it is a gift offered by persons who are poor and living on the margins of the societies in which they find themselves. And they give it in their own good time and way, and only to those who come among them free of attitudes like paternalism or superiority. If it were wrapped up in a package, the card sent with the gift of solidarity would carry this message: *despite evident differences in background, color of skin, or language, you are seen as being one in mind and heart with those of us who are poor.*

A personal example may help illustrate this point. During my final year as a scholastic and first few years of teaching, I was involved as a part-time volunteer helping rebuild two tenement buildings in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City. At the time, this area was economically depressed with much of its



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housing abandoned or in marginal condition. The fact that the total purchase price for the two apartment blocks that we were renovating came to but \$2000 (US) is evidence of the financial hardship and other difficulties that faced the neighborhood's residents.

One Saturday afternoon during a break from the construction work, I began to talk with a young woman from the neighborhood whose name was Gloria. During the course of our conversation she said, "Seán, we appreciate all that the brothers are doing for us here, but you will never be one of us." Surprised, I asked her what she meant. Gloria went on to say, "You have an education and so can leave here tonight. I don't resent the fact that you have the education you do; you have worked for it. But those of us who come from the neighborhood don't have the same freedom that you and the other brothers have." Solidarity is a gift; we cannot presume it.

## **MODERN DAY ANAWIM**

In the mind of Old Testament authors, then, the word "poor" was not confined to those who have little or no money. It included groups who were economically deprived but also those who lacked social status and/or were treated unjustly by foreign rulers or the authorities in their own land.

These people were oppressed because they were poor and were therefore at the mercy of the unscrupulous. They were also poor because they had been cheated and deprived of their rights. Furthermore, their status as widows, orphans, refugees, etc. made them susceptible to exploitation.

This was the group to whom the prophet Zephaniah was referring when he reminded the Israelites that

even in the worst of times there would remain a faithful remnant in their midst. Known as the *anawim*, or poor of Yahweh, this community of faith waited in expectation for the coming of the Messiah.

The men and women who made up the *anawim* found their security and worth, not in the trappings of the material world, but in God. Jesus was referring to them in his Sermon on the Mount: “Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”.<sup>66</sup>

Jesus, too, emptied himself and became poor, so that we might become rich. In his own day and age he did not have to pretend to be in solidarity with those who were marginalized, for he was one of their number. He ministered to the sinner, the sick, the outcasts of society.

So, too, he challenges us to strive continually in our day-to-day circumstances to redress the grievances of those who are abandoned, alone, alienated; to protect the dignity of the poor and stand with the oppressed as they struggle to achieve their freedom.

When we embrace an option for the poor you and I begin to resemble those who waited expectantly for the coming of the Lord. In so doing we take our place among the members of a modern day *anawim*, a group of the faithful who proclaim God’s Kingdom and its imminence and pledge to live his *Good News* radically. The challenge presented to us today by the Church and the documents of our Institute is not just a call to work with those who are poor; rather, it is an invitation to join their ranks through simplicity of life, a prophetic witness, ultimately, a revolution of the heart.



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## ANALYSIS

The spirit of the second dimension of an option for the poor — analysis — is also captured well in article 34 of our *Marist Constitutions and Statutes*, lines 10-15:

*Concern for the poor  
impels us to search out  
the root causes of their wretchedness,  
and to free ourselves from prejudice  
or indifference towards them.  
It makes us become more responsible  
in the use of our resources,  
which we must share  
with those among them  
who are most destitute.*

*We avoid giving them the scandal  
of living in a way that is too comfortable.*

The work of analysis begins with a process of discernment and self-reflection. You and I begin to wonder: For what reason has this particular group of children and young people been marginalized, and what have they suffered as a consequence? We also take a look at how we might be colluding personally with this situation of injustice. Put simply: what are you or I doing that helps make certain that those consigned to the margins of the society in which we live are kept in their place?

Problem-solving follows. We commit ourselves to work together with those whom we serve to find remedies for the present situation. Then, we join our efforts with theirs to convince others that these solutions are useful and can be implemented. These two steps — finding remedies and enlisting the aid of others in implementing them — are best carried out together with those whose rights have been denied. If they are ever

to overcome their feelings of helplessness, persons who are poor and marginalized must be empowered to speak and act on their own behalf.



## VOW OF POVERTY

Some of us might equate the practice of our vow of poverty with a full understanding of the plight of those who are poor and marginalized.<sup>67</sup> We need to exercise caution here. Without doubt, our vow challenges us to live simply and to work for the common good. For example, article 32 of our *Marist Constitutions and Statutes* has this to say:

*Concretely, we live our personal  
and communal poverty  
in the context of a simple, hardworking life,  
without chasing after nonessentials.*

The vow also teaches us the importance of relying on God<sup>68</sup>. Throughout his life, the founder never ceased to instill that lesson in our early brothers. “Place your confidence in God,” he counseled them. “Believe that Providence will bless and support you and see to your needs.”

Marcellin, of course, had unlimited confidence in God. How else could he manage to remain peaceful in the face of debt and all sorts of other difficulties? As if God were rewarding that trust, at his death the founder was able to leave our early brothers more than 200,000 francs worth of real estate, free of debt except for a few thousand francs still owed for one property purchased the year before he died. And, as if God was determined to reward Marcellin’s confidence to the very end, a generous benefactor discharged that debt a short time later.

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Simplicity is another important element that is found in the vow of poverty. And here again, the founder serves as an example. He contented himself with the lot of others, did not put on airs, and was uncomfortable when others singled him out. His life serves as a good example for our own. As if to make that point, our *Constitutions and Statutes* reminds us that:

*Our poverty also shows in our simplicity,  
which ought to characterize our way  
of being ourselves,  
our whole lifestyle and our apostolic actions.  
It asks us to develop our talents to the full,  
to share what we are and have,  
most especially our time.<sup>69</sup>*

The vow of poverty trains our eyes on the common good rather than individualism. It reminds us that the only currency that we have in life is time, and challenges us to use it well. How do we spend ours? Serving young people, or ourselves? Lived well, this vow opens our hearts and minds to the gift of solidarity.

The founder loved persons who were poor. Consequently, he wanted us to serve them first of all. The simple and oftentimes rugged existence of our early brothers kept them close to the reality of the lives of their students and their families. In the Institute today, however, the situation is vastly different. We must be careful not assume that our vow of poverty gives us both an understanding and an experience of the plight of persons who are materially poor and marginalized.

For example, there is an enormous difference between making a decision, for one reason or another, not to eat today and actually having nothing to eat. In light of my vow of poverty and out of a desire to be in solidarity with persons who are poor, you or I might choose

to eat but one meal each day for an extended period of time. In so doing, however, we must never forget this important fact: tomorrow there will be a meal for me and for you — even though but one. Can every poor person say the same thing with any assurance? Probably not. The most any one of them might say is, “I wish I could have eaten something today, and only God knows whether I will get anything to eat tomorrow.”

These are two radically different experiences. We patronize persons who are poor when we persuade ourselves that, because of our vow of poverty, we share their plight. We have a freedom that poor women, men, and children do not. Consequently, receiving the gift of solidarity should humble us rather than make us proud.

## RESISTANCE

Not everyone within the Church or our Institute today is fully convinced that an option for the poor and its broad implementation is such a necessary element in the process of renewal. How can we best explain this phenomenon, and how can we help all involved to better understand the meaning and place that such an option has in the life of each of us, our Institute, and the Church?

As we begin, we need to keep in mind the fact that the notion of option for the poor has been a major part of the overall plan for the Church’s renewal for at least the past 30 years. And while Pope John Paul II, at times, qualified his use of the term, beginning during the 1980s and thereafter he included occasional references to a preferential option for the poor in some of his addresses when visiting Latin America. He also made reference to it in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*,<sup>70</sup> and again in 1994 in the Apostolic Letter entitled *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*.<sup>71</sup>



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Those who are excluded, the seemingly inconsequential people of the societies in which we live, do play a vital role in the history of human salvation. As has been mentioned before, the distinctive feature of a biblically inspired option for the poor is the belief that, despite all appearances to the contrary, those who are at the margins have a special gift to bring to the rest of us. Consequently, we should go out of our way to give time and attention to those children and young people who are not part of the mainstream, and to find a way of drawing them in.

In our day-to-day lives, then, you and I must ask ourselves: Can we make space within ourselves to hear the dissonant voices? Can we find space for those who are seen more often than not as untouchable in the world at large, the global society in which we are more and more involved?

## **DON'T ASSUME**

What is it that causes a number of our brothers and lay colleagues to be reluctant to embrace an option for the poor? Surely not ill will. Rather, more than a few are fearful of the type of radical change they believe would be initiated in our Institute and Church if such an initiative were to be taken up. Hence, they may avoid or evade the subject either by toning it down or misinterpreting its meaning.

Others fear a loss of respect. As a Church, for example, we have frequently used institutions associated with education, health care, and communication as we worked to insert Christian values into the societies in which we lived. Surely this is true of us as brothers: we have used our schools and institutions and others for which we are responsible to foster gospel values and the principles of our faith among the students entrusted to our care.<sup>72</sup>

But as the proprietors of these educational institutions, we have also become, in country after country, part of the established order, gaining the respect of many because of the quality of the schooling we offer. With respect comes privilege, and over time many of us are reluctant to part with the latter. Consequently, we may succumb to the temptation to preserve the main structures of the societies in which we live even when change is warranted.

We are not the only ones uncomfortable with change. Members of the wider Church community have reacted with incomprehension and anger in recent years when members of some religious orders have moved on from or reduced their involvement with familiar apostolates to take up works that involve direct service to those who are economically poor.<sup>73</sup>

## ACTION

Our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter members encouraged us to search for new projects to express our preferential option for the poor. They also reminded us that initial and ongoing formation of brothers and laypersons should constantly be attentive to the world of the marginalized.

Hence, today, if we have not already done so, we need to put aside the rhetoric that has at times dominated discussions about serving those among us who are impoverished, and instead imagine what a creative and courageous response to this challenge might look like, in the many concrete situations in which our Institute finds itself. Our response also needs to be as bold and far reaching as the new mission *ad gentes* initiative now underway within the Institute.

And so, first of all, we need to take on the founder's apostolic mentality. His aim, as has been stated before,



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was to provide the type of evangelization that would form good Christians and good citizens. But how are we to go about this today in the many situations in which we find ourselves?

Second, we must recognize the good work that has been done by so many since the foundation of our Institute up until the present time, in both traditional and new forms of the apostolate. And we must thank God for his extraordinary blessings on our efforts. Yes, we have worked hard but it is God's grace that has made it all possible.

Third, we need to examine closely the many honest attempts that have been made over almost five decades now to enlarge our apostolic efforts to include more and more those living on the margins of the societies in which we live and serve today. A number of these initiatives can serve as models for what might be possible in the future.

Fourth, we must admit at the outset of our planning that there is no one solution to the challenges we face in apostolic planning for poor children and young people. Furthermore, the conclusions we arrive at will not be equally applicable in all parts of our Institute. But we must insist, at the same time, that no one is exempt from the hard work entailed, the honest questions that must be faced, and, at times, the spirited exchange that will result when opinions clash, misunderstandings arise, and feelings are strong.

We should neither fear nor avoid these realities. They are part of life; they are part of any honest discernment. When all is said and done, though, we must aim at having some creative and realistic plans on the table, and work toward accepting the fact that they will vary from region to region, Province and District to Province and District throughout our Institute.

Father Champagnat may have been a practical man, but he was also honest to a fault, willing to take risks, single-minded in the goals he had for his brothers and our Institute.

Fifth, at the very least, each Province and District and the General Administration needs to have a long-range plan for mission among children and young people who are poor, a plan in which each of its members participates. The recently developed Plan for the Evangelical Use of Goods is an important means for accomplishing this end.

We also need to avoid extremes in approaching the work that lies ahead. There will be those who say, “We must leave all that others have put into place over many years, turn away from the past, get a completely fresh start.”

Others will argue that the realities of the local economy and the finances of the Province or District, a unique circumstance within the country itself, or even a fear of offending just about anyone mean that we must proceed at a snail’s pace. Let’s be honest. As an Institute we have been discussing these questions for almost a half century. If we have not done so already, the time has arrived to agree on a bold, future-oriented course of action that we are capable of implementing. The day has long passed when we can afford to set up plans that appear to please everyone and actually satisfy no one, particularly those whom we are called to serve.

Sixth, knowing full well that it is at best a partial solution, each Province and District needs to develop a comprehensive long-range plan for mission among children and young people, including the poor and marginalized; a plan that will affect each person, community, apostolate, and institution within the administrative unit.



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I say a comprehensive plan because the tendency of many among us in the past has been to set up one or two new initiatives in response to the Institute's periodic reminders about our call to serve those living at the margins. Such a solution has an impact on a few, but fails to achieve the overall change of heart called for by genuine gospel living.

Today, our response must be more radical and broad-based, affecting everyone within the Province. At the same time, if it is to be effective, it must also be viable, in terms of our human, financial, and spiritual resources.

Organizing and implementing such a plan will call for wide consultation, take a commitment of time and energy on the part of everyone, and require careful study of the Church's social teachings, the Institute's documents, and each Province and District's resources. Implementing any final plan must also be carried out with care, with each step building upon what has gone before. Change is never easy. If pushed too quickly, resistance only builds; if implemented too slowly, enthusiasm eventually dies.

At the same time we must admit that while every member of the Province or District needs to be involved in this effort; all need not play the same role. Some, by reason of temperament and/or the skills they possess, are well suited to be of direct assistance to poor children and young people.

Likewise, there are those among us who because of these very same factors—traits of personality and/or the particular constellation of skills they possess—are more appropriately steered in a direction other than day-to-day involvement in the lives of persons who are poor. All members carry the same responsibility for being involved in the overall Province or District plan in this area, but not all need to be involved in the same way.

In all of our efforts to serve children and young people who are poor we must also be ever rigorous in examining the motivation for our decisions and actions. Are they honestly taken in the service of those who have less or because of a need that we might have to feel virtuous?

Facts and figures do not change hearts, experience does. Living and working among poor children and young people, or being part of an effort aimed at working toward this goal, can at its best transform us and cause us to rededicate ourselves to work on behalf of justice. Witness Archbishop Oscar Romero. He knew the statistics before he had contact with the lives and reality of those who suffered in poverty. However, his heart began to change only when he came into contact with individual men, women, and children whose misery was evident and the cause for it equally so.

Ideally, then, having transformed our hearts, we will develop a heightened compassion for all whose lives we touch. However, living and working among children and young people who are poor is another area of life where self-deception is a danger. If such a commitment leads me to be self-righteous or prescriptive, I would do well to examine my own motives for doing what I am doing. The presence of God is always evident in those whose lives are a living example of the Beatitudes, for truly their hearts have been transformed by those they serve.

## REMARKS

Mission and ministry were obviously on the minds and in the hearts of the members of our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter when they wrote their *Message*. They pointed out that genuine renewal for our works has its origin in our passion for Jesus Christ and his Good News.<sup>74</sup>



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Chapter members also recognized that many among us have set out already on the journey that leads to a change of heart. And so they reiterated that we form communities for the sake of mission, and encouraged us all to take steps to renew each community so that it might be a place of forgiveness and reconciliation<sup>75</sup>, a school of faith for ourselves and for the impoverished young people we are called to serve. Open your communities to the service of the world, the Chapter delegates challenged; make them places of gospel life in service of mission and give credibility to your witness by the simplicity of your life style.

The members of our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter reaffirmed education as the privileged means for evangelization and human promotion. At the same time, they expressed a burning desire that our institutions be clear signs of Gospel values and promoters of social justice. Proclaiming the right of education for all, they challenged us to involve our Marist mission in this campaign.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, they also recognized the hard work done to date in several areas. Individual brothers have simplified their lives; some Provinces and Districts have undertaken an assessment of their apostolic resources with an eye toward further orienting the efforts of their administrative unit towards those who are poor and marginalized. We cannot be faulted for a lack of trying, but also need to admit that so much more remains to be done.

Our newly established base at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva with Franciscans International is an example of a new apostolic initiative on the level of the General Administration. Its aim is to give us a forum in which to have a say in policies established and decisions taken at the level of the world community that alleviate the suffering and misery of the young.

Collaborating initially with members of the Dominican and Franciscan congregations and a number of lay men and women, we will work to influence United Nations policy as it affects the lives of children and young people around the world. As an Institute we need to maintain our effectiveness in working on their behalf and address the challenges involved at two levels: direct service to those on the margins, and efforts to turn away the forces that are responsible for their misery in the first place.

If we are looking for a place to put our energies so as to continue the renewal of our apostolic life, we need look no farther than ourselves. I remember well, for example, being asked several years ago to clear out the room of a middle-aged brother who had died suddenly. He was an active man, involved fully in his apostolate, creative and personable with many friends and colleagues.

I was stunned when I saw how little he possessed. A few sets of clothes, some books and personal effects. Within an hour everything was packed and labeled. I wondered the reaction of anyone who had been asked to do the same for me, had I died as suddenly as this man had. Surely the work would have taken more than an hour. I realized also that he had what he needed to live and work while I had so much more that was unnecessary.

And so, a few questions: First of all, what must you and I do to revitalize our Institute's mission and its works? If making Jesus the center and passion of our lives is the way to accomplish this, what are we doing to ensure that this will take place? Yes, it is the Lord who will ultimately move us to respond generously to urgent human needs in keeping with our founding purpose. We need to be sure that we are not putting obstacles in his way.



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Second, by our choice of corporate ministries, way of living, and public witness, you and I both need to stand against those values in our cultures and the world at large that undermine our efforts to bring about a radical personal and institutional conversion. Among these values today we see individualism, materialism, consumerism, corruption, and a lack of respect for human life.

Make no mistake about it: genuine renewal of consecrated living and of our works will, over time, move us to the margins of society. The will of God, undoubtedly, is what will determine the outcome of our efforts to renew both, but we must also begin to reverse the process underway in so many parts of our world today to assimilate our way of life into popular culture. At the same time we must strive to be recognized primarily by our obvious joy in serving God, simplicity of life, and visible presence among those most abandoned by society. We can reach this ideal only by avoiding the all too familiar and tragic betrayal of consecrated life that occurs when we give our heart away generously at the time of first profession, and then take it back, bit by bit, with each passing year.

This task will be a challenging one. Our public commitment to live the evangelical counsels more intensely is a first step in that direction. By vowing to hold all goods in common, live out our human sexuality in a celibate chaste manner, and allow our Institute and its members considerable claim over our time, talents, and energies, we witness to values that differ from those held by many of our contemporaries.

By ensuring that our educational institutions are schools aimed at forming prophets, graduating young men and women who have taken the gospel to heart, and carrying out our apostolate in a spirit of selfless

service, we witness further to counter-cultural values. Would that eventually our institutions were known as places where we took in every child who knocked at our door!

In concluding the section on Mission and Solidarity in their *Message* from our General Chapter, those who participated in that assembly reminded us about our ongoing need to take part in the missionary efforts of the Church at large.<sup>77</sup> It is to this topic that we now turn our attention.



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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*As before, please take a few moments to read and answer the questions below. They appear here to help you reflect on what you have read in the last few pages. Have a pen or pencil and a pad of paper near at hand in case you want to make any notes, jot down a phrase or thought you would like to remember, or write an extended reflection. Hold onto these notes; they will be helpful to you later either for review or in any discussion about what you have read.*

1. What has been your own story when it comes to working with persons who are poor? What have been the challenges and the gifts of this experience? What is your own response to the calls of the Church and our recent General Chapters to orient our Institute toward the poor?

2. Now, consider the history of your own Province or District when it comes to working with persons who are poor. Have initiatives in this area been welcomed or resisted by brothers of the Province or District? What is your own response to these efforts?

3. Sketch out the details of a Province or District-wide Pastoral Plan for serving people who are poor. What steps would you take to involve all the membership and everyone in the administrative unit as well as some lay partners?



## PART IV

### Mission *ad gentes*

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**W**hy bring this circular to a conclusion with a discussion about mission *ad gentes*? Because it is one of the elements that rests at the heart of our identity as Marcellin's Little Brothers. The mission in Oceania was the first gift given by the Church in 1836 to the newly approved Society of Mary; the founder's name topped the list of volunteers ready to be sent out to the Pacific. His zeal for mission *ad gentes* is part of the legacy he left us. "We are for all dioceses," he said more than once. "The universal Church is the field of our society."<sup>78</sup>

When it comes to mission *ad gentes* today, however, you and I must contend with a set of realities different from those that confronted Marcellin and his fellow priests of the Society of Mary. And so we must ask: what factors have influenced the evolution of mission *ad gentes* between then and now, and what forces are at work today moving us in a new direction.

For the sake of clarity let me begin by defining the term mission *ad gentes*. Prior to Vatican II the word *gentes* was used to refer to those outside the Catholic

Church. Judged to be living in unbelief and sin, conventional wisdom destined them for eternal damnation. Today, thankfully, their situation has changed for the better. We are now more fully aware of the fact that throughout history God's saving action has been continually present in the many cultures that make up our world and in the faith of all peoples.<sup>79</sup>

At the outset of our discussion, we can also benefit from some information about our Church's history with mission *ad gentes*. For example, efforts in this area have not always been marked by consistent activity. In fact, Matthew's stirring passage in which Christ sends out his disciples to the nations appears to have been taken up on a large scale only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>80</sup>

In the past, too, those who have made their own the role of a missionary have generally used the already existing structures of their day to achieve their goals. We know for a fact that the apostle Paul followed the trade routes and highways of the Roman Empire in his work of evangelization. Likewise, missionary efforts beginning during the latter part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century were connected with plans for expansion on the part of a number of then existing European powers. The voyages of the explorers provided missionaries with needed transport, as well as protection and some financial support.

Understandably, the history of any one of these periods also shaped the language associated with mission *ad gentes*. For example, we can trace back to the period of colonization phrases such as "winning souls for Christ," and "rescuing from the clutches of Satan those about to be lost." They reflect the spirit of a militant and triumphant Church in search of converts that was part and parcel of the age of exploration. From about 1850 up until the early 1960s, many missionaries drew their inspiration from this model of



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Church. Its message was clear: the Church was to be planted in pagan lands and unbelievers were to be conquered for Christ.<sup>81</sup> Most of us thought of missionaries as heroic men and women who had left homeland and family to work overseas. Trained to exercise initiative and endure hardship, they were more often than not independent people who prided themselves on their toughness and audacity.

The process of colonization also had an influence on the methods missionaries used to evangelize. In the belief that they were somehow civilizing the indigenous people of the region to which they had come, many missionary priests, sisters, and brothers sought to impose their own civilization, its form of education, customs and traditions, on the local cultures of those they catechized.

We would be wrong to conclude, however, that mission *ad gentes* was little more than a byproduct of efforts to build an empire in centuries past. For missionaries often sided with the local people against their colonizers and became the most vocal critics of the empire building done during this period. More than a few worked hard to preserve the local culture by writing down indigenous oral languages even as the explorers were trying to wipe them out.

Today our understanding about mission *ad gentes* has matured and is more nuanced than in the past. For example, though we recognize that we as Christians continue to give witness to God's reign, we also accept the fact that those who do not follow our faith likewise bear testimony to the saving act of God in their midst. The Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, the Confucians, the followers of Tao, the adherents of cosmic religions, the humanists and others can share with us their faith-experience of God and the fundamental values of their lives.

## TODAY AND IN THE DAYS AHEAD

If the close of Vatican II marked a turning point in our theological understanding about the nature and purpose of missionary work, our assessment of the world as we enter the twenty-first century has made us more aware of the fact that missionary activity in the future will have as its prerequisites a readiness to listen to others and an openness to share our faith with them. However, it was not the work of the Council alone that contributed to our present understanding. The process of decolonization that got underway about midway through this past century together with the rise of many new nation states played a role as well, especially on the continent of Africa.

Other forms of turbulence followed on the heels of Vatican II. Changes associated with mission *ad gentes* proved to be perplexing, and the pace at which they were unfolding unsettling. Some among the faithful, and more than a few missionaries themselves, eventually called for a moratorium on mission as understood at that time.

A 1981 symposium sponsored by a group known as SEDOS<sup>82</sup>, however, marked a significant turning point in our post-Vatican II approach to mission *ad gentes*. During the course of that meeting a shift in focus took place: away from questioning the purpose of mission and toward concentrating instead upon how mission was to be carried out. This was an important breakthrough that would have implications for years to come.

Despite this step forward, questions continued to surround the topic of mission *ad gentes*. In an attempt to bring greater clarity to the situation, the late John Paul II called for renewed fervor in this area of the Church's life. (Writing in) In his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, he set forth the theological foundations of mis-



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sion in the hope of helping all in the Church focus on what the Council Fathers originally had in mind when they wrote about the topic. The Pope then went on to describe the horizons of mission today, as well as the means for achieving them. He closed with a reflection on missionary spirituality.

## CHANGES IN OUR WORLD

We saw earlier that mission *ad gentes* has been lived out in a number of different historical contexts. The same is no less true today. New understandings about mission *ad gentes* did arise during the course of Vatican II and the years that followed, but changes in the world in which mission *ad gentes* is being carried out have also had an effect upon how we think about the topic.

Two such developments have a bearing on our discussion here. The first is the advent of globalization and the second is the fact that the phenomenon of conversions to Christianity in significant numbers appears to be fast coming to an end.<sup>83</sup>

The word globalization defies easy definition. Many of its critics describe it as a destructive force that disregards culture, impoverishes people, undermines democracy, imposes Western values, exploits the environment and enthrones greed. Others, holding a different point of view, look more favorably on globalization. They judge it to be a desirable development that breaks down frontiers, overthrows tyrannical governments, frees individuals, and financially improves the lives of those it touches.<sup>84</sup>

However, in general usage, the word globalization has become shorthand for describing the emerging world order since the end of the Cold War in 1989. Extraordinary advances in communications technology, the beginnings of a new alignment of nation states, and

several other developments appear to be pointing us towards a more interconnected and interdependent world in the years just ahead.<sup>85</sup>

Unfortunately, the majority of the world's population today finds itself excluded from this new world order. As a Church and as members of a religious Institute within that Church we will need to address this inequality during the days ahead. However, whether we sing the praises of globalization or detest what we see as its evils, it appears to represent the world order with which we will have to contend in the future.

What some refer to as the “settling of religious geography” is another significant change in our world today influencing mission *ad gentes*. According to those who hold this position, the days during which we saw large numbers of persons converting to Christianity have come to an end.<sup>86</sup>

To begin with, men and women who join faiths like Christianity and Islam come largely from local, oral traditions sometimes known as indigenous religions. And throughout history they appear to have moved rather easily from the faith of their fathers and mothers to one of the significantly larger and worldwide religions. But once having made this move, they are unlikely to change their affiliation again.

There are two exceptions to this rule. Those who have not as yet been fully integrated into their new faith or those who, for one reason or another, have been alienated from it may, in fact, join another Church. The fact that, despite intensive efforts to evangelize during the last 100 years, the percentage of the world's population which is Christian is about the same as it was a century ago adds some support to the notion of a settled religious geography.<sup>87</sup>



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It was in the mist of all these developments surrounding mission that John Paul II wrote *Redemptoris Missio*, mentioned earlier. In this encyclical, dated December 7, 1990, the Pope set out to restore missionary morale, and also made a clear distinction between mission *ad gentes* and other types of missionary activity.

He did so by suggesting that mission is carried out in three distinct situations. First of all, he spoke about mission *ad gentes*, seeing it as a mission either to groups who do not know Jesus and his gospel or who live in Christian communities not sufficiently mature to put the faith on a firm footing locally and proclaim it to others. Next, the Pope described a situation almost at odds with the one just mentioned: pastoral care to Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures already in place. Finally, he identifies communities where groups of the baptized have simply lost a living sense of faith. The Pope refers to this last group as being in need of a “new evangelization” or “re-evangelization.”

For John Paul II, the real meaning of mission *ad gentes* is obvious: it is about working on the frontiers. And he would insist that we no longer have the luxury of defining those borders solely in terms of geography. Instead, he suggests that there are a number of different worlds which together form “the nations.” Among them the Pope includes the worlds of youth, women and children, the poor, mega-cities, the media, groupings based on ethnicity and culture, those having as their focus justice, peace and ecology, the arts, culture and sciences, and those searching for a deeper meaning in life.

In writing his litany of definitions of the word *gentes*, at times John Paul identifies culture as an important characteristic of mission *ad gentes*. But he does not claim it to be the only basis for defining our task. For

him, the phrase mission *ad gentes* means working on the frontiers of the Church, with a number of definitions of frontier being possible.<sup>88</sup>

However, not everyone agreed with John Paul's point of view as expressed in *Redemptoris Missio*. They feared he was too broad in his definition.<sup>89</sup> In part, however, he may have been trying to move us away from an understanding of mission *ad gentes* as bound up with territory and toward an understanding of mission *ad gentes* as global.

We face this same challenge today as an Institute. The founder was right when he said, "The universal Church is the field of our society." Based upon our actions, however, an observer might question whether or not we agree with him today. We are an international Institute that often fails to act like one. As with those who are the citizens of our respective nations we find it difficult at times to move beyond the parochial and to embrace an international and trans-cultural perspective. But that is the world that is emerging today; it is the world in which the children and young people whom we serve will have to find their place. We need to be on the forefront of these developments, providing leadership, and not bringing up the rear.

Making a transition from old to new ways of thinking about the Church's mission and our apostolate will not be easy. It will mean not only altering the way in which we look at these important aspects of our lives but also adjusting our structures accordingly. Stated simply, we must work toward a change in corporate mentality. Ultimately we must face this question: what does forming good Christians and good citizens among poor children and young people mean in today's world, and what are the best means for doing so?

Throughout this process of reflection and analysis we must maintain mutual respect for one another and



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be open to listening to different points of view. At the same time, we need to accept the fact that, eventually, action must be taken. Change cannot come too suddenly, but bold initiatives need to be part of the picture also. In their absence we can easily become satisfied with living on the accomplishments of the past.

As an Institute and as administrative units making up that body, we must avoid this tendency to turn in on ourselves. For the loss of a missionary spirit is one of the first signs that a group has begun a slow process of death. In contrast, the members of any Province, and indeed all who are associated with it, are invigorated by a sense of pride in the courage shown by those who set out on mission abroad.

Therefore, no Province can afford to excuse itself from mission *ad gentes*. Nor can its commitment in this area wait until all matters on the home front are in order. To be truly Christian, truly Church, and truly Marcellin's brothers requires that we be part of the Church universal.

History has shown us that our way of life can only maintain its vitality if it is open to change and at times radical transformation. To cling to the past is to gradually lose touch with the life of the Spirit leading the Church into the future. To do so today would be a tragedy for our Institute and its mission, but more so for the young people who have been entrusted to our care.

## A PROJECT FOR OUR INSTITUTE

*In the next four and a half pages, I repeat in an adapted form a few sections from the letter of invitation to our new mission ad gentes project that I sent out to each brother earlier this year. I do so simply to emphasize some of the points raised in that communication. The full text of the letter appears in Appendix A.*

During our seventh General Conference in Sri Lanka, a description was given of a new mission *ad gentes* project for our Institute. Those present were provided with an overall description of it as well as some details about the project's origin and structure and a timeline for its implementation. Later discussion during the Conference gave rise to a number of helpful suggestions for sharpening and improving the proposal.

During the months that followed, there have been other reports about the project and just prior to Christmas 2005 I wrote a letter to each brother inviting him to consider what this proposal meant for him in his life today, in light of the calls of our Church and the needs of our Institute and the poor children and young people whom it is meant to serve.

In that letter I pointed out that the mission *ad gentes* project that was presented at the Conference is in keeping with the long history of our Institute's undertakings in this area. For its justification we need look no further than Article 90 of our *Marist Constitutions and Statutes*. That text reminds us that,

*Like the Church, our Institute is missionary,  
and therefore we should have a missionary attitude  
like Father Champagnat who affirmed,  
"We are ready to work in every diocese in the world."*

From the time of the founder onward, then, our Institute has had the ongoing practice of sending brothers on mission. In 1903 alone, for example, approximately 900 of our brothers left France in response to the newly enacted laws of secularization. They set out with a spirit of courage, faith, and daring, for there was little else available to help them prepare for the challenges they were about to face. The audacity of these men during a time of crisis that



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called for innovation has enabled our Institute to be an evangelizing presence in 76 countries around the world today.

Finally, over the course of many years the General Administration has taken steps to actively promote overseas mission. Witness the international formation houses located in Grugliasco and Bairo, Italy that from the time after the Second World War until the mid-1960s took on the task of preparing brothers for mission *as gentes*. The juniorate of Saint Francis Xavier, located in Grugliasco, was the first to close its doors when in May 1960 the General Council took the decision to sell it. Bairo, the home of both the postulancy and novitiate, continued for a few additional years.<sup>90</sup>

So also, for more than 20 years now brothers willing to volunteer for mission on the level of the General Administration have been invited to contact the Superior General to let him know about their willingness to serve. A list of names has been created and those on it have been called upon most often during times of turmoil, such as after the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

We read in article 46 of the *Choose Life* document from our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter that the time has come for writing a new chapter in our missionary history. We believe that the new mission *ad gentes* project we have proposed is one response to that challenge and a serious attempt to help build the future of Marist life and mission for this new century.

Yet questions may still arise concerning the origin of this recent proposal and wonder how it fits in with the calls of the Church today, the signs of our times, and the directives of our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* and recent General Chapters. More importantly, some may express concern about the proposal's impact on the

Provinces and Districts from which these new missionaries will come. How many are we looking for, how quickly do we plan to identify them, and what preparation for this undertaking do we have in mind?

## THE PROJECT'S ORIGIN

At the heart of the new mission *ad gentes* project is this dream: over the next four years, to mission 150 or more brothers to new apostolic works throughout the countries of Asia and also to send a smaller number to those restructured Provinces that have not yet achieved the necessary levels of vitality and viability that are needed if they are to have a future.

This proposal is also in keeping with the current calls of the Church and the signs of our times. For example, the late Pope John Paul II writing in *Vita Consecrata* expressed optimism about religious life and its future. He offered this challenging insight: *You do not have only a glorious story to remember and recount, but a great story to build! Look to the future...*” By undertaking this new initiative, we are adding to that great story.

The General Council believes as do so many of our brothers and Marist lay partners that our way of life has an important, indeed an essential place in our Church today. Most of what has transpired over the last 40 years or so has been helpful, assisting us to look at the past, take stock of the present, and eventually move on toward the future. Now is the time to create the Marist life and mission we are envisioning for tomorrow.

## WHY ASIA?

Several reasons motivate us to make Asia the target of this new missionary initiative. First of all, our Marist



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*Constitutions and Statutes* point out that our *Institute* has a particular concern for countries which have not been evangelized and for the young Churches. (Const. 90). Second, article 46 of *Choose Life* encourages a spirit of mission *ad gentes*. Furthermore, it invites Provinces to work together to further such a mission, and asks that brothers be enabled to move easily from one Province to another for the sake of projects of solidarity, evangelization, and education.

Third, the late Pope also issued this challenge during the years before his death: “Just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent of Asia.”<sup>91</sup> His words were very familiar, for about a decade before he had written the following in article 37 of *Redemptoris Missio*: “There are countries and geographical and cultural areas which lack indigenous Christian communities. In other places, these communities are so small as not to be a clear sign of a Christian presence; or they lack the dynamism to evangelize their societies, or belong to a minority population not integrated into the dominant culture of the nation. *Particularly in Asia, toward which the Church’s mission ad gentes ought to be chiefly directed, Christians are a small minority, even though sometimes there are significant numbers of converts and outstanding examples of Christian presence.*”<sup>92</sup>

Fourth, Asia is home to approximately two-thirds of the world’s population and yet we have fewer than 200 of our 4200 brothers serving there. The United Nations also identifies south Asia as the world’s poorest region when it comes to young people. They are there in great numbers: almost half the population of south Asia today is below the age of 24. Of that number, almost half again live on less than two US dollars a day.

Finally, Marist Asia is in the process of restructuring and our brothers in that region are currently considering at least two models of reorganization that will lead to increased viability and vitality. While the scope of this proposal extends far beyond the borders of present day Marist life in Asia, we want to work in cooperation with the existing administrative units of the area as we plan and implement the program. A number of brothers there have been of significant help already.

I believe firmly that this call for a new mission *ad gentes* project in Asia is from the Spirit. I pray too that a century from now when historians look back and write the history of this period in our Institute, they will be able to say that we undertook the challenge with courage, daring, and hope, and that throughout Asia at that moment in time there will be an abundance of evidence of our presence and works.

### **A NEW APPROACH TO MISSION *AD GENTES***

Without in any way criticizing past approaches to mission *ad gentes*, we need to admit that a fresh start is called for today. For example, the mere fact that you or I are living and serving the Church in another country and culture can no longer be accepted as proof that we are engaged in mission *ad gentes*. More persuasive would be our involvement in a serious effort to embody our faith in the local culture and to engage in serious dialogue with those who do not share that faith. Whereas in the past geographical frontiers were an important criteria for defining mission *ad gentes*, during the days ahead, an ability to dialogue in and with a culture other than our own, show mutual respect, and foster reconciliation will be equally significant.

Such an approach to mission does not mean that our Institute and others should put aside geography as a



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factor when defining mission *ad gentes*. Rather it suggests that when it comes to mission *ad gentes* today there are not only foreign missions but also a global mission. In taking on the first we accept responsibility for the evangelization of people in some distant lands. In doing so, we also undertake a global mission, committing ourselves to certain fundamental values that are vital to the well-being of society and of creation as a whole. In our world today this means a commitment to human rights on a global scale and a willingness to work with others to develop an equitable political and economic world order and the integration of creation.

Today vastly improved means of communication and rapid transport allow also for a number of different models for mission *ad gentes* within our Institute as a whole. There will always continue to be those among us who leave their country of birth for their entire lives to proclaim the Good News either in lands where it has not been heard or where the Church is not strong enough to sustain itself. These missionaries make a home for themselves among the people whom they serve. This is a classical understanding of mission *ad gentes* and one that continues to be inspiring today. When the motivation of those who make this way of life their own is directed outward, their total self-giving stands as a model for us all.

Within the Institute today, however, two additional models of mission *ad gentes* are emerging. The first is made up of brothers and lay partners who spend a significant amount of time serving in a foreign mission situation, and who then return to their homeland carrying with them a missionary vision and spirit.

The second group consists of those who never leave their country of origin. The frontiers they pass over are not geographical but rather social and cultural. These brothers and lay partners take up a work of the Institute

among the most marginalized children and young people in their society. Their home is among the most abandoned, those whom no one is serving today.

With that said, we should be hesitant to give up any commitment we have to work overseas. First of all, the majority of brothers in our Institute are from the West, and yet the vast majority of the world's population lives in the non-Western continents. Second, to live in one of the different cultures of the South and East for any appreciable period of time poses a powerful challenge to the Western values and worldview which are so dominant within our Institute and the lives of so many of us.

To adopt a new model of mission you and I must undergo a radical transformation. Just as the process of restructuring set us on a journey toward greater internationality and trans-culturality, so too the new mission *ad gentes* project is doing the same. Both undertakings not only carry within them the potential to move us all into this new century and prepare us for what is to come, they also provide us with the means for effecting the change of heart for which we all long.

This is not an easy time in the history of our Institute, nor is it easy for many of us as individuals. Some initiatives of the last several years have troubled us and left us wondering when we might expect things to once again settle down.

Despite the confusion we must admit that the steps taken to restructure our Institute and our new mission *ad gentes* initiative have managed to rouse many of us from our sleep and caused us to ask some fundamental questions about our way of life and how we are living it here during the first years of this 21<sup>st</sup> century. The challenge before us now is this: What will be our response?



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Will it be that of the rich young man who found the price too high for fullness of life, on God's terms and not his? Or will it be that of Mary, the mother of Jesus and our Good Mother and sister in faith? After questioning the angel she agreed, "Let it be done unto me according to what you have said." The choice is yours and mine to make. Let us pray for the grace to choose wisely.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*Once again, please take a few moments to read and answer the questions below. As before, they appear here to help you reflect on what you have read in the last few pages. Have a pen or pencil and a pad of paper near at hand in case you want to make any notes, jot down a phrase or thought you would like to remember, or write an extended reflection. Hold onto these notes; they will be helpful to you later either for review or in any discussion about what you have read.*

1. During the last few years a spirit of mission *ad gentes* appears to have been waning within our Institute. While the number of brothers on mission overseas is actually somewhat higher than 15 years ago, their median age has risen appreciably. Can you identify factors in your Province or District that appear to discourage brothers from taking up the challenge of mission *ad gentes*? What can be done to counteract these factors?

2. The Institute's new mission *ad gentes* initiative in Asia appears to have captured the imagination of many within and outside of our Institute. What is it about the project that is causing this reaction? What is your own outlook on the Asia mission *ad gentes* initiative and how do you believe it will affect the future of our Institute and its mission?



## CONCLUSION

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**A**nd so, we have come to the end of these reflections about the mission of the Church and our apostolic works as Marcellin's Little Brothers of Mary and his lay partners. The areas we have looked at, albeit briefly, were varied, but each has an important place in any treatment of the topic at hand.

When it comes to the Church's mission and our apostolic works as an Institute, we realize how often we fall short of the ideal we have set for ourselves. At those times, the knowledge that Jesus Christ entrusted his mission to some very human men and women can be a great consolation. We have only to read the story about Peter's betrayal, the skepticism of Thomas, and the fear of the apostles huddled in the upper room to realize that they too suffered from uncertainty, were frequently confused, and experienced doubt, even though they could see and hear the Lord directly.

The Holy Spirit has always been and will continue to be the principal agent for carrying out the task entrusted to us. That Spirit, present in all who listen to and

proclaim the Word of God, works in and through us to help us accomplish marvelous deeds.

The word *evangelize* literally means to *bring good news*.<sup>93</sup> Saint Luke sums up what is meant by this expression when he has Jesus quote the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”<sup>94</sup>

The founder was a living example of evangelical zeal. His passion sprang from his intense awareness of the love that Jesus and Mary had for him and for all of us. Time and again, he told our first brothers, “Whenever I see young people, I long to catechize them, to make them realize how much Jesus Christ loves them.”

Like our founder, we believe in the ongoing presence of God. We rely on Mary and her protection and take on her attitudes of humility, simplicity, and, and selflessness. Thus we are better able to selflessly seek out young people wherever they may be, in particular those whose need for Christ is evident in their material and spiritual poverty.<sup>95</sup>

Continuing a tradition passed on to us by our founder, we provide those entrusted to our care with an education that is holistic. Its aim is the formation of mind, body, and heart. Presenting the Good News both in personal terms and in the form of Jesus’ vision of the human community, we affirm what is life-giving for our students and help them to look critically at the values underlying their behavior and choice of priorities.

In educating a new generation in and for solidarity, we form them to be agents of social change and encourage them to take responsibility for the future of hu-



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manity. We challenge them to work for greater justice within their own circumstances and societies, and to be more aware of the interdependence among nations.

If you and I are looking for greater clarity about the identity of our Institute today, we need but turn our attention to our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes*.

First of all, its text tells us that whatever our apostolic work may be, we evangelize both as persons and as communities.<sup>96</sup> We accomplish this end by the witness of our lives, and by personal contacts that are marked by a capacity for listening and an exchange of ideas. Likewise, when they are living examples of brotherly love and consecrated life, our communities serve as an evangelizing presence within the local Church.

Second, our *Constitutions and Statutes* remind us that when it comes to the apostolic work to which the Lord has called us, prayer must be the source of our inspiration and of our strength. At the same time, that apostolic work — and all the people and concerns that it includes — is what draws us back to prayer.

The text challenges us to give preference to the poor, and to live simply, to seek out the root causes of poverty, and to rid ourselves of all prejudice or indifference toward those less fortunate. Taking into account also the link between evangelization and human development, it calls us to help those in need and to work with those who strive for peace and for justice in our world.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, our *Constitutions and Statutes* remind us that our Institute, open as it is to all apostolates that are in keeping with its founding charism, considers the direct proclamation of the Word of God as an essential element of its mission.<sup>98</sup> While respecting conscience and the talents of the children and young people whom we

are called to serve we engage them in a dialogue about life, and put them in touch with the Word of God and the Spirit at work in their hearts.

Yes, whenever we look at our lives and mission through the eyes of our founder and read the documents of our Institute, we will find that the answers to our questions about mission and our apostolic life are not beyond our reach but in fact very close at hand. They are already in our mouths and in our hearts. We have but to claim them, make them our own, and put them into practice.

Blessings and affection,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Seán'.

*Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS  
Superior General*

## APPENDIX A

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### **Brother Sean Sammon's mission ad gentes letter of invitation to each brother in the Institute**

2<sup>nd</sup> January 2006  
Feast of the Foundation of the Institute

Dear Brother,

The Christmas/New Year season 2005 is quickly coming to a close. The feasts of Saint Stephen, the Holy Innocents, and Saint John the Evangelist have come and gone; today we mark the 189<sup>th</sup> year since Marcellin founded our Institute, and in but a few days the feast of the Epiphany will be celebrated. Each of these annual commemorations reminds us that we are at that annual crossroad where an old and a new year stand shoulder to shoulder. The year just past is taking its place in history; at the same time a new one is just coming alive. What hope that new beginning brings to so many of us each year.

I write today with news of another new beginning, but this time for our Institute. I write also to offer a personal invitation to each of you. Please read this letter carefully and with this question in mind: Is the Lord asking you to accept the invitation found in these pages, an invitation to put forward your name for our new mission ad *gentes* program?

During our recent General Conference, Luis Sobrado and I presented the outline of this project. More specifically, we provided those present with an overall description of a new mission ad *gentes* initiative as well as some details about its origin and structure and a timeline for its implementation. Later discussion during the Conference gave rise to a number of helpful suggestions for sharpening and improving the proposal. Many brothers also told us of their strong support for what we had in mind.

During the weeks since our presentation, some reports about this proposal have appeared in the Update and Bulletin as well as on the Institute's web page at [www.champagnat.org](http://www.champagnat.org). Unfortunately, limitations of space and the nature of each of these media allowed us to offer but a few highlights about the project. Consequently, I am writing today to each member of the Institute with further details about the project and to ask you and each of them to give serious and prayerful consideration to becoming a part of it.

To begin with, the details of several initiatives aimed at building the future of our Marist life and mission worldwide were presented to the members of our Seventh General Conference. For example, comprehensive plans to renovate and better equip the Hermitage in France as a universal center of Marist spirituality, heritage and mission were outlined. So also preliminary planning for a follow-up to the recent



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Marist year of vocation promotion was discussed, plans for an international conference in 2007 on Marist mission were presented, and a call was issued for those Provinces and Districts that have not as yet entered into a process of restructuring to do so.

Second, the mission ad *gentes* project that we presented is in keeping with a long history of Institute undertakings in this area. And similar to those of the past, we need but look to our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* to understand the origin of this most recent proposal. Article 90 of that text reminds us that, Like the Church, our Institute is missionary, and therefore we should have a missionary attitude like Father Champagnat who affirmed, “We are ready to work in every diocese in the world.”

As an Institute we are missionary by nature. Recall that Marcellin himself longed to serve in Oceania and that only obedience to the directives of Father Colin and ill-health caused him to remain at home in France rather than travel to and work in the Pacific. From the founder’s time onward, the ongoing practice of sending brothers on mission has existed within our Institute.

So also, in 1903, approximately 900 of our brothers left France in response to the newly enacted laws of secularization. They set out with a spirit of courage, faith, and daring for there was little else available to help them prepare for the challenges they were about to face. The audacity of these men during a time of crisis that called for innovation permits our Institute to claim today an evangelizing presence in 76 countries around the world.

Finally, over the course of many years the General Administration has taken steps to actively promote overseas mission. Witness the international formation

houses of Saint Francis Xavier and Bairo that for years took on the task of preparing brothers for mission *ad gentes*.

So also, for more than 20 years now brothers willing to volunteer for mission on the level of the General Administration have been invited to contact the Superior General to let him know about their willingness to serve. A list of names has been created and those on it have been called upon most often during times of turmoil, such as after the genocide in Rwanda in the early 1990s.

More recently, we find in the Choose Life document from our 20th General Chapter this suggestion: that the time has come for a new chapter in our missionary history to be written. We believe that the project we have proposed is one response to that challenge and a serious attempt to help build the future of Marist life and mission for this new century.

Our Institute, then, has a long history of undertakings on behalf of mission *ad gentes*. What, you may still ask, is the origin of this recent proposal and how does it fit in with the calls of the Church today, the signs of our times, and the directives of our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* and recent General Chapters? More importantly, what about its impact on the Provinces and Districts from which these new missionaries will come? How many are we looking for, how quickly do we plan to identify them, and what preparation for this undertaking do we have in mind? I will attempt to answer these and other questions briefly in this letter.



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## THE PROJECT'S ORIGIN

At the heart of the new mission *ad gentes* project is this dream: to mission over the next four years 150 or more brothers to new apostolic works throughout the countries of Asia and also to send a smaller number to those restructured Provinces that have not yet achieved the necessary levels of vitality and viability that are needed if a future is to be theirs.

This proposal is also in keeping with the current calls of the Church and the signs of our times. For example, the late Pope John Paul II, writing in his post-Synod document *Vita Consecrata*, was optimistic about religious life and its future. He offered this challenging insight: “You do not have only a glorious story to remember and recount, but a great story to build! Look to the future...” By undertaking this new initiative, we are doing just that.

## CONFUSION ABOUT MISSION

During the years following Vatican II, considerable confusion developed about the nature of what until that time had been called foreign mission work. Prior to the Council a model of the Church existed that might best be described as militant and triumphant. As Catholics you and I were taught that there was no salvation outside of the Church; the work of the missionary was clear: to evangelize and convert.

Vatican II took a broader view toward those who hold other beliefs. The Church, now describing itself as the People of God, moved beyond the approach of “no salvation outside the Church.” This new understanding about the nature of the Church was bound to give rise to questions about the purpose of mission — even among missionaries themselves.

The crisis, however, was not just theological; decolonization and the rise of new nation states in missionary lands led to calls for a moratorium on mission. In 1981, however, during the SEDOS meeting a shift in focus occurred: from questioning the purpose of mission at all to the challenge of how mission was to be carried out in our contemporary Church and world.

Unfortunately, this new development failed to clear up the confusion. The fact that John Paul II felt compelled to write the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* ten years after that landmark SEDOS gathering suggests that concerns about mission continue to lurk below the surface of many discussions.

The Pope's letter, the first encyclical on mission since the close of Vatican II, is an eloquent presentation of the theological foundations of the topic, as well as an appeal for renewed missionary fervor within the Church. John Paul expounds the horizons of mission today and talks about the means to achieve them. The encyclical, which closes with a reflection on missionary spirituality, carries with it a tone of urgency about refocusing Church's efforts in this area. We find within the text this preoccupation on the part of the Pope: Missionary motivation has been flagging; missionary activity diminishing.

Surely the latter has been true for our Institute as well during the years following the Council. The information in the chart below demonstrates that while the overall number of brothers officially assigned to overseas mission has increased over the last 15 years, their median age has also risen steadily, increasing overall by 12 years.



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Number of brothers assigned to overseas mission (1989-2004):

| <u>Date</u> | <u>Number</u> | <u>Age</u> |
|-------------|---------------|------------|
| 1989        | 553           | 51.37      |
| 1994        | 571           | 55.34      |
| 1999        | 576           | 60.04      |
| 2004        | 596           | 63.76      |

## OUR PROPOSAL

The General Council believes, as do so many of our brothers and Marist lay partners, that our way of life has an important, indeed essential, place in our Church today. There have been losses in recent years in parts of the Institute: the loss of good men, of identity and purpose, and in some instances of prestige and reputation. We have, so to speak, passed through a time of transition and purification. Most of what has transpired over the last 40 or so years has been helpful, assisting us to look at the past, take stock of the present, and eventually move on toward the future. Now is the time to do just that: create the future of Marist life and mission for today and tomorrow.

Several reasons motivate us to make Asia the target of this new missionary initiative. First of all, our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* tell us that our Institute has a particular concern for countries which have not been evangelized and for the young Churches. (Const. 90). Second, the late Pope also issued this challenge during the years before his death: “Just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent of Asia” (Ecclesia in

Asia, no. 1). Arise, let us be on our way; Asia, that's our challenge for the third millennium!

Third, Asia is home to approximately two-thirds of the world's population and yet we have fewer than 200 of our 4200 brothers serving there. The United Nations also identifies south Asia as the world's poorest region when it comes to young people. And there are plenty of them there: almost half the population of south Asia today is below age 24 years. Of that number, almost half again live on less than two US dollars a day.

Finally, Marist Asia is in the process of restructuring, and our brothers in that region are currently considering at least two models of reorganization that will lead to increased viability and vitality. While the scope of this proposal extends far beyond the borders of present day Marist life in Asia, we want to work in cooperation with the exiting administrative units of the area as we plan and implement the program. A number of brothers there have been of significant help already.

We plan, therefore, to set up in 2006 a six-month program of discernment and preparation for the first group of approximately 30 brothers who will be going to Asia. This course will be located in Davao in the Philippines, will be staffed by a team of three brothers, and will be repeated twice annually.

We have over the last few years received invitations from bishops in Asia asking us to send brothers for a variety of works. To ensure good communication with the hierarchy of the region, I have asked Brothers Michael Flanigan and Rene Reyes to serve as delegates of the Superior General as we work with the local Churches to secure ministries that are in keeping with our founding purpose and charism as well as be-



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ing responsive to the signs of the times. In addition, I have asked Brother Luis Sobrado, our Vicar General, to take overall responsibility for coordinating and implementing this new mission *ad gentes* initiative. I am grateful to all of these brothers for their generous response to my requests.

## WHAT DO I ASK OF YOU?

In undertaking this new initiative we all realize that the nature of mission *ad gentes* has changed in recent years. A shift has occurred: from the proclamation of the Word of God only to a spirit of dialogue and proclamation. In light of that fact, you might ask yourself what I am asking of you.

First of all, your prayers for this project and for those who will be involved in it. Please pray for God's blessings on it and on each of them. Unless a passion for Jesus and his Good News is at the heart of this undertaking, it will do little to further the Kingdom.

Second, I ask you to reflect prayerfully about what the Lord is asking of you at this time in your religious life. Is the Lord calling you to give six to nine years in overseas mission in Asia? This period of service would be in addition to the six-month discernment in the Philippines and any necessary language study and other preparation prior to beginning work. This question looms large here: Can we today precipitate our own 1903 with results that will be as striking a century from now as have been the efforts of our brothers who went before us a century ago?

Yes, the absence of brothers from their Province of origin for six to nine years will be a sacrifice for all involved but it will also be a blessing. On returning,

these missionaries will bring with them another experience of Marist life and mission. They will enrich the communities and works of which they will be members, just as they too are enriched by those who have labored at home during their absence.

Regarding language, we would expect all involved to learn English as well as the language of the country to which they will be assigned. English is the medium that the vast majority of our brothers in Asia use to communicate with the Institute and among administrative units. Sufficient time will be provided so that all those involved can learn well the languages they will be expected to master.

A word of consolation to those who might hold the belief that all Asian languages are formidable. Several of our brothers in Asia have reassured me that some Asian languages, such as those used in Borneo or Malaysia can be learned well enough for day to day communication in a period of approximately six months in a total immersion program. Understandably, as with any language additional time and study will be necessary to perfect the language in question.

If you believe that you are called to be part of this project, I would ask you to contact Brother Luis Sobrado directly by letter, fax [international code] 1 425 952-1382, or e-mail ([vicgen@fms.it](mailto:vicgen@fms.it)).

In conclusion, let me say that I believe this call for a new mission *ad gentes* project in Asia is of the Spirit. I pray that a century from now when historians look back and write the history of this period in our Institute, they will be able to say that we undertook the challenge with courage, daring, and hope, and that in the Asia that has come to be for that moment in time will give ample evidence of our presence and efforts.



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May God continue to bless and keep each of you and to make you his own, and may Mary and Marcellin be our constant companions today and during the days ahead.

Blessings and affection,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fem".

Brother Sean D. Sammon, FMS  
Superior General



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*I am grateful to one and all.*

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