

Address of the Superior General at the opening of the General Conference

LOOKING BEYOND ...

Leaders at the service of our Global Marist Family

Dear Brother Provincials and District Leaders.

It is a pleasure and a grace to be able to meet in person. We did so with many of you two and three years ago, around the same time of year. Thank you for your efforts in organising your travel, obtaining visas, arranging your schedule and carrying out the necessary protocols to be able to come to Italy.



A good number of you have only recently started your service in leadership, many of you have already been on the journey for much longer, and others will soon begin... We are here to exchange, to learn from each other... This Conference provides an opportunity to create greater synergy between the General Administration and the Administrative Units. To feel that we are all in the same boat, in servant and prophetic leadership.

If we take a first look at these past two years, with the Covid-19 pandemic, I am sure that all of us have experienced highs and lows, intense moments of pain (especially at the loss of our brothers - more than 40 - lay and family members) and we have also experienced times of uncertainty... Each one of us has been on a journey in which we have learned a lot, and we have been sustained by hope, seeking to experience God's presence in the midst of all that we are living through.

We have tried to be proactive and responsive both in our communities and ministries. There have been many concrete expressions of solidarity in response to the humanitarian emergency (including the Institute's fund for this). There have been creative responses in the field of education. You have provided accompaniment for the Brothers, in person and online, according to the possibilities. I am very grateful for all these efforts by brothers and lay people in these difficult times.

We gather here, a little more than halfway between the two General Chapters - four and a half years - at the General Conference. In 2019, we met the then Provincials and District Superiors under the slogan "*Called to live a prophetic and servant leadership*", in co-responsibility and interdependence, and in 2020, we were able to meet under the slogan "*Leadership that cares for life*". Two more meetings are planned before the 22nd General Chapter.

We thought that, on this occasion, the slogan "*Looking beyond ... leaders at the service of our global Marist family*", could be a motive for encouragement and launching anew, starting from the context that we have been living through during these past two years and that is ongoing...

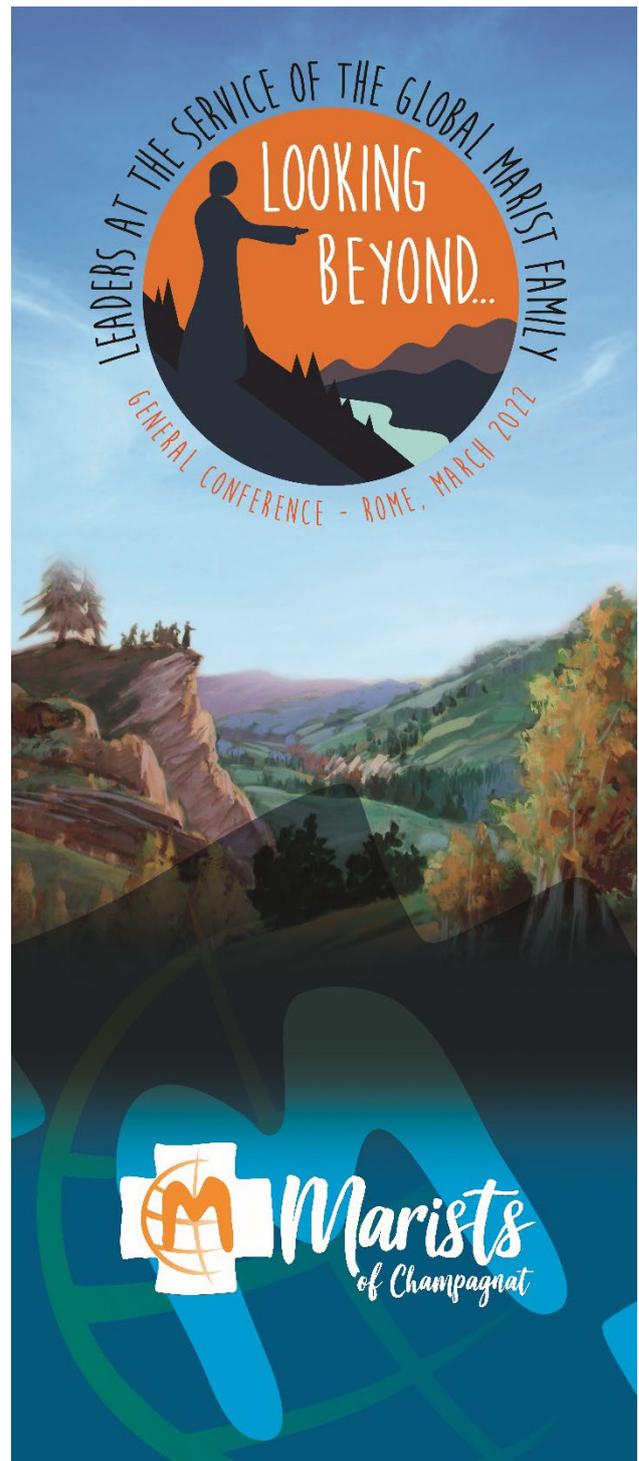
On June 6th last year, in my message "*With Marcellin, take a long view...*" I recalled how our Founder, a practical man of action, in times that were not easy, was able to have a far-reaching vision, a vision that came from a heart that sought to be continually filled with the presence of God, of his Spirit, with eyes that observed a set of circumstances and challenges resulting from a revolution, being able to respond in a bold and practical way. His energy, his passion, and his love for Mary attracted a good number of our first Marists to join his project. And this ability to "*look beyond/ take the long view*" led him to take bold and even surprising steps such as leaving his parish house to go and live with the Brothers, encouraging their vocation within a very clerical context, starting to build without first having all the financial means, and initiating new teaching methods, etc.

Here we are in the year 2022, two hundred years after Marcellin and the first brothers experienced a time of vocational crisis and resurgence. Mary's constant and close presence gave Marcellin the energy and drive to not look back, but always forward, with a confident and hopeful perspective....

This was the context when Champagnat envisaged the construction of a sizeable structure that could accommodate a large number of brothers. What was it in Marcellin's heart that led him to think big? I think that fundamentally it was the deep conviction that it was not his personal project, but that of God and Mary.

Today we find ourselves as leaders facing new challenges: a world that seems to be increasingly connected and, yet, a world that also seems to be looking for ways to disconnect, to create walls and separation... Just look at how in recent days this new war has broken out in Ukraine; there are new poverties, new situations of marginalisation... how many children have come into the world and who have only seen adults wearing masks... how many others have lost their parents, their grandparents, without even being able to say goodbye; how many families and even communities have been torn apart, with raw wounds and persistent fears; a greater individualism is on the rise, in the search for self-protection and self-defence...; how many people have been left without work, due to businesses or companies that have closed down or have made staffing cutbacks. I am grateful for the ways you have coped and are coping with such situations, in times that are far from easy.

As for the Institute, there is progress and growth in some parts of the world while elsewhere we continue to diminish and fragility is more evident. In some Regions, important steps are being taken, but in others we are perhaps slower to make a move.



Various authors have spoken of the fact that we are living in a change of epoch. Perhaps we find this difficult to understand because we find ourselves caught up in this movement? This is the context in which we want to be filled with the spirit of Marcellin and try to "*look beyond*" as leaders seeking to strengthen the global Marist family, in line with the invitation of the XXII General Chapter.

On last 2nd February, the Day of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis said in an extraordinary homily:

What do our eyes see? Simeon, moved by the Spirit, sees and recognizes Christ. And he prays, saying: "My eyes have seen your salvation" (v. 30). This is the great miracle of faith: it opens eyes, transforms gazes, changes perspectives. As we know from Jesus' many encounters in the Gospel, faith is born of the compassionate gaze with which God looks upon us, softening the hardness of our hearts, healing our wounds and giving us new eyes to look at ourselves and at our world. New ways to see ourselves, others and all the situations that we experience, even those that are most painful. This gaze is not naïve but sapiential. A naïve gaze flees reality and refuses to see problems. A sapiential gaze, however, can "look within" and "see beyond". It is a gaze that does not stop at appearances, but can enter into the very cracks of our weaknesses and failures, in order to discern God's presence even there (*Homily of his Holiness Pope Francis – 2 February 2022*)

Based on the legacy left to us by our Founder and encouraged by the repeated messages of hope offered to us by Pope Francis, I invite you to try to engage in our "*looking beyond*" at this Conference:

- **A sensitive gaze.** A gaze that discovers the needs of our brothers, our communities and the Province itself. A gaze capable of perceiving the needs of suffering, marginalisation and poverty around us, because we do not remain closed in on ourselves or our own egos... a sensitive and compassionate gaze, which seeks to understand without judging and to welcome with mercy, and is capable of leading to action.
- **A prophetic gaze.** Invited, as leaders, to "*look beyond*", from the vantagepoint of the Spirit, who seeks to read the signs of the times and to propose audacious and even radical responses. To live the gift of brotherhood with prophecy. To be prophetic signs walking side by side, brothers and lay people, valuing both vocations. We know that being a prophetic voice does not always lead to popularity or applause, but what moves us is our desire to be the voice of God for our times. How many times have ideas or projects been initiated which at first seemed to have very little appeal or support, but which afterwards bore fruit and gained appreciation, even if not always by all? A gaze that also allows us to be self-critical of what we have not done well and where we have not been brave enough in our response.
- **A gaze that is global, that takes in the whole.** We are certainly here to support each other and to give each other space for reflection and formation, to better exercise our service of leadership in each of our Administrative Units. But above all we are here to "*look*" together at our Global Marist Family. The Chapter has been insistent that we "*journey together as a global family*", and I believe that we are taking steps in that direction. At the same time, we want to give ourselves some space for reflection and dialogue to look together at the present and the future of our beloved global Marist family, the Institute as a whole. May we be able to transcend our borders, seeking to offer support to one another, knowing that in such a movement there is always something to be gained and something to be sacrificed. We know that there are weak and fragile areas in the Institute, marginalised and poor areas... So, a gaze that feels for them as part of us, not just as faraway places, the domain of other Provincials; a gaze that invites us to greater sharing across the board.
- **A hopeful gaze.** In these days we would like to reread the calls, principles and suggestions offered to us by the XXII General Chapter and seek ways to update them and also to discover what other new things God is asking of us in our days. My invitation is that our vision for the future be based on hope. As leaders, we are invited to be prophets of hope. Hope that is born of faith, commitment and coherence, based on a deep spirituality. I think that we will succeed if we have that inner engine that encourages us and pushes us to move forward. Hence in the process of these days there will be moments of silence and spaces for reflection and dialogue, where we can try to listen to the voice of the Spirit and discern, doing this personally and in groups.

- Our gathering is occurring in the context of a synodal process... It is helpful to feel part of this movement and to be an assembly that places a high value on participation, one that seeks, above all, to listen to the Spirit, as Pope Francis indicated at the synod's launch on 9th October

As an Institute of Brothers, we have had many experiences of “synodality” in Chapters and Assemblies, so we can make an important contribution to the Church. At the same time, it is important to realise that we still have some way to go. And this is a moment in time when the Church is inviting us to engage with one another in this way. Let us remember the experience of the XXII General Chapter, especially the contemplative dialogue and process of discernment that we undertook.

As a final thought for now, it might help us to call to mind Mary's way of looking at things... She was able to meditate and ponder in her heart and respond with a steady and comprehensive yes, without seeking to understand everything or all the time...

Br. Ernesto Sánchez Barba, Superior General
8 March 2022

