

A Revolution of the Heart

**Marcellin's spirituality and a contemporary identity
for his Little Brothers of Mary**

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Institute of the Marist Brothers
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CHILDREN OF A NEW SEASON¹

III

After the ease of summer,
low skies and stormy weather
restrict and define our journey.
We walk deeper than silence
and a step higher than emptiness.
The leaves are swept,
a pale sun fingers the reeds:
it is half past Autumn, end of time!

Where is the fiery wheel,
the space chariot promised long ago,
hoped for in patient waiting?
If there is a message
it lies in this old land,
at these cross-roads
where the gate opens and shuts:
The choice between instant autonomy –
wrenching roots from common ground –
and the dark, unknown emptiness
where man hears the mystery of life
moving, echoing through ordinary tracks
and ordinary clay.

Which way to go?
Further, where the trail fades,
where thoughts of journey or search
no longer correspond to map or meaning?
Further within the cloud?
Quicken the pace now,
the air is rare and cold
and the power that draws us
will not let go.

Catherine de Vinck

INTRODUCTION

6th June 2003

Feast of Saint Marcellin Champagnat

Dear Brothers,

Any religious order has an obligation to offer its members a particular way of following the Lord, a unique approach to self-transcendence.

This circular letter is one of several that I plan to send out over the next few years. Entitled *A Revolution of the Heart*, it discusses the central place that Marcellin's spirituality must hold in any contemporary identity for his Little Brothers of Mary.

Why choose this topic as the focus of the circular? For two reasons. In the first place, the urgent task of forming a fresh and compelling identity for our Institute has been with us since the close of Vatican II and needs resolution.

In the second place, as this new millennium gets underway, we appear not only willing to face the challenge of re-imagining our Institute's identity, but are in possession also of the tools necessary to complete our work. And complete it we must, since any religious order worth the name has an obligation to offer its members a particular way of following the Lord, a unique approach to self-transcendence.

And that is why stories about Marcellin and our early brothers are so important. They encourage you and me each day to live as poorly, obediently, and chastely as we can, and they help us to understand and give thanks for the fact that our way of life as Little Brothers of Mary leads not to diminishment but to greater freedom. What better reason for holding fast to our

traditions and for promoting Marcellin and the other saints among us?

MISSION: CENTRAL TO OUR CHURCH'S IDENTITY

However, there is still another reason for choosing identity as the topic of this circular, and it has to do with our Church and its mission, and our role in both as men religious exercising ministry through non-sacramental service. We take on a prophetic role when, through our profession of the evangelical counsels, we promise to live out our baptismal commitment in a radical way. Permit me to explain.

Mission is not merely one of our Church's many activities; it constitutes its very being. Part of our job is to keep that identity "front and center" in the mind of the Church. We do so by recalling for all involved God's saving interventions in the past, the need we all have for a fundamental change of heart today, and the responsibility everyone carries to build up the human community now and in the days ahead, in keeping with what God has promised.

The image captured in Eugène Burnand's² painting of Peter and John rushing toward the tomb of Jesus on Easter day has been used, at times, to illustrate the relationship between those of us in consecrated life, and the Church as a whole. We know the story well: John ran ahead of Peter and arrived at the entrance of the grave before his fellow disciple.

Whether John's sudden sprint was due to impatience with Peter's pace or an eagerness to confirm the report of the women that Jesus had indeed risen, on arriving at the door of the tomb and before going in, he respectfully waited for the older man. Religious life has a similar role to play in our Church. It is meant to run ahead of the Church but to wait, when necessary, for this larger body to catch up.



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In making our vows, then, we oblige ourselves to bear witness to the mission of Jesus in a way that is revolutionary. In word and by deed, like a well-formed conscience, we are to remind our Church constantly about the nature of its identity. Ideally, we take on responsibility for helping the Church to keep in mind what it can be, what it longs to be, and what it must be.

Brothers, though, let's be honest: we cannot give what we do not have. We have no business making recommendations to others without taking the same good advice to heart ourselves. Our Church has struggled over the last half century to peel away the historical trappings that have encumbered its ability to proclaim God's Word in a manner that speaks to the men and women of this age. We can be no less courageous when it comes to facing the critical issues that beset Marcellin's Little Brothers of Mary at this time in our history.

But, what if we fail in our attempt to find candid and coherent answers to these two questions: "Who are we?" and "What do we cherish or hold dear?" and, thus, miss our opportunity to form a fresh and compelling identity for our Institute? We run the risk of moving ahead aimlessly rather than with purpose and passion. On the other hand, a well-understood, expressed, and accepted identity would focus us as a group, galvanize our energies, and invite our renewed commitment.

IS THE CHALLENGE THE SAME FOR EVERYONE?

Is the challenge of addressing the issues of identity and Marcellin's spirituality equally pressing in every part of our Institute? Not really. We have today provinces and districts with members who have made the work of renewal their own. The process of restructuring also has helped. An important but often overlooked dimension

of this Institute-wide effort to achieve greater vitality and viability has been its spirituality. At the heart of the often demanding work of restructuring is the central belief of our faith, the Paschal Mystery. A painful and lengthy process of dying to the old must often take place before any of us can see, through the eyes of faith, the first bright rays of an Easter morning.

But brothers in other provinces and districts have been less enthusiastic in their response to calls for renewal. A good number among them fear change, often equating it with loss and turmoil. And, indeed, that is its typical outcome. But change is a necessary first step in any process of transformation.

Finally, I would not be honest if I did not share this concern: in a few of our administrative units the need to attend to questions of identity and Marcellin's spirituality is urgent. Denial sets in so easily in a group that is afraid to change. The long term effects of a culture of denial, however, can be fatal.

I have great optimism about religious life and its future and, in particular, about our Institute and its life and mission. At the same time, I believe that the windows of opportunity that God has provided in recent years to our Institute and its many provinces and districts will not stay open indefinitely. Indeed, without decisive and bold action on the part of all involved, some are about to close.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS CIRCULAR

Directly and indirectly at our 20th General Chapter, our identity as a group and the central place that Marcellin's spirituality must hold within that identity was an important theme. The topic has arisen also in the work of the General Council, as well as during many of the recent retreats, and other phases of the visits of the



Change
and the process
of transformation
differ
in many ways.

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General Administration to provinces and districts. That should come as no surprise. After all, the issue of our identity and the place of Marcellin's spirituality within it is a key element in our life as Little Brothers of Mary.

The challenge described in this circular far exceeds what we have faced when using programs of pastoral planning or other useful tools employed in recent years to further the work of renewal. In setting out on our current journey, we move away from organizational concerns, as important as they are, and take up matters that are foundational.

If we can answer the spiritual question that rests at the heart of identity, "On whom or on what do you and I set our hearts?," so many other considerations connected with the process of renewal will fall naturally into place: a 21st century image of Mary, a willingness to embrace the preferential option for the poor to which we are called, clarity about the nature and shape of our ministry and life together in community, easy identification of the Jean Baptiste Montagnes of today, and so much else.

THREE POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND

Brothers, as we set out on the adventure of re-imagining the identity of our Institute, keep in mind these three points. One, to reach our goal, our hearts must be open to change while, at the same time, willing to cherish the best of the past. Genuine renewal does not do away with what has gone before but, rather, frees it from the trappings of history.

Two, don't forget that change and the process of transformation differ in many ways. Change takes place at a moment in time, transformation over time, giving us the opportunity to adjust psychologically and spiritually to our new circumstances. In introducing a pro-

gram of exercise into my daily routine, for example, I effect a change in my life. The transforming results of that program, however, are often not visible until much later when my loss of weight and overall improvement in health become obvious to me and everyone else.

Three, remember that the pilgrimage of renewal on which our Institute has set out is being made by at least three different generations of brothers. Each of them has a unique experience of our Church and world. A failure to acknowledge this fact will lead to unfortunate misunderstandings, and an inaccurate reading of the signs of our times.

Later in this circular, we will discuss more fully the generational differences that exist in our Institute today. For the moment, though, remember that some of our brothers have had a first hand experience of Marist religious life prior to Vatican II, while others among us only came of age as that historic gathering was getting underway, and still others, years after it had concluded.

A HISTORY LESSON

History can be a wise teacher, but only if we are attentive students. At the end of the periods of change and transformation in the history of consecrated life, these three elements appear to remain: prayer, community, and ministry. They may be present in a new form, but somehow we have come to expect that any way of living that calls itself religious life will include these three aspects.

Within the legacy of our traditions, we will be better equipped for the challenging work of re-imagining our life in community, manner of praising God, and ministry if we have developed the habit of prayer, a capacity to listen, and, finally, a willingness to act with courage and determination.



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The simple,
yet often
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Most especially, however, the simple, yet often difficult act of listening must mark any process aimed at renewing our way of life. It needs to be one of the hallmarks of our work together. To develop this capacity we do well to take care not to surround ourselves solely with those who hold to our point of view, or to read only those authors who share our opinions and world view.

Yes, it would be easier not to have to sort through various positions. However, if we are to arrive at a new understanding about our Institute and its mission, we cannot simply do what is easy. We must do what is right.

A POINT OF CLARIFICATION

For the sake of simplicity of style and focus, I have addressed this letter to my brothers in the Institute. I realize, however, that many of our lay partners will also have an interest in its message, and I do not intend to exclude them. Brothers, please feel free to share this letter with lay partners in your District, Province, or region and to include them in discussions about its contents. When you get to the reflection questions at the end of each section, you'll note that they are suitable for use with many different audiences and in a variety of settings.

A FINAL WORD ABOUT THE CIRCULAR

The text is divided into three parts with a series of reflection questions following each of them. The circular is meant to help all of us share our experience and insights and reflect together on the topic being discussed: you, me, our brothers in community and ministry, and our lay partners – all of us. With that said, let us begin our work by using a story to help set the context in which to talk about Marcellin's spirituality and our identity as Little Brothers of Mary.

PART I

The importance of contexts

As a reward for their good behavior, a kindergarten teacher gave her pupils an hour in which to draw something of their own choosing. The children were delighted, and quickly took crayon and paper in hand and got to work.

As time passed, the teacher grew curious about the outcome of her students' efforts, and she began to walk around the room, glancing at various masterpieces in progress.

Looking over the shoulder of a young girl named Louise, however, the teacher grew perplexed. Though the child had been working diligently for the entire period, the instructor could not figure out what she was drawing. So she asked Louise what her picture represented.

The child replied, "I am drawing God." The surprised teacher said, "My, that is an ambitious project. You realize that no one knows what God looks like." Without looking up from her work, or missing a crayon stroke, Louise replied, "They will in a minute!"

Now, that is the voice of confidence and certainty. Would that today we had the same self-assurance when talking about our identity as Little Brothers of Mary and our spirituality as heirs of the legacy of Marcellin Champagnat.

In retrospect, you and I are better able to appreciate the fact that since Vatican II, the real crisis facing our Institute, as well as a number of others, is not an apparent lack of vocations in some parts of our world. No, the foundational crises for so many groups during the last four decades have been those of identity and spirituality.

This outcome stands to reason. While the Fathers of Vatican II tackled the necessary and urgent challenge of defining the rightful place of lay men and women within our Church, they were less successful in their attempt to redefine the nature and purpose of religious life.

With the passage of time, fewer among us have a living memory of that historic gathering or of the spirit of hope that it enkindled in our Church. Those of us who do, though, will recall that our identity as Little Brothers of Mary seemed to be clearer when the Council started than it does today.

For example, 40 years ago, in a number of countries where we serve, there were more young people who could recognize us as brothers. While not fully aware of the day to day details of our religious life, they did see us as men set apart, and, more often than not, they judged our life as being simple, poor, and one of evident sacrifice. Having pledged ourselves to live the evangelical counsels in a particular, some would say more intense, way, in the eyes of many we had also given up several things that most people could expect to have: a spouse, money and some control over it, and a degree of freedom in making certain decisions.



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But times have changed. External signs, such as a common way of dressing, the daily recitation of the rosary with our students in class, or even a common Province or District ministry, that once made the identity of our way of life clearly consistent and understood, no longer exist in many places. Unfortunately, we continue to await the appearance of new signs that might serve to replace those that have faded away. With what result? In some parts of our Institute, the meaning of our life today as brothers is unclear to many, and downright confusing to some.

Adding to uncertainty about our identity is the fact that, for at least the past four decades, we have worked hard to assure fellow Church members that life as a brother is no better than any other approach to living out the gospel. At the same time, we have failed to emphasize what it is about our life that makes it different and unique.

Finally, in some parts of our world today, an increase in consumerism at the expense of the simple, and almost austere lifestyle that existed in the past, increasing individualism, and reports of child sexual abuse occurring at the hands of some of our brothers have understandably raised questions in the minds of many people about the present health and future direction of consecrated life in general and our life as brothers in particular.

Since Vatican II, then, those of us in religious life have struggled to find our footing once again. For almost 40 years now we have been searching for a fresh and compelling identity to replace the one we lost during the Council.

Unfortunately, we have fallen short of achieving our goal. Concern today about the state of religious life in parts of our world is such that Timothy Radcliffe, OP, for-

mer Master General of the Order of Preachers, has likened some among us to blacksmiths in a world of cars, wandering about seeking something meaningful to do.

DISCOURAGING NEWS?

Now, should this news discourage us? Not really. Church historian, John Padberg, SJ,³ points out that during the past 450 years, religious life in the western Church has passed through three major periods of upheaval. The first began with the Protestant Reformation. The second came to life around the time of the French Revolution; and our most recent period of turmoil got underway during the years following Vatican II.

We also can take some consolation in the fact that, despite the charts developed in recent years to illustrate the orderly evolution of religious life from the time of Mary of Egypt and Anthony of the Desert until the present, the history of consecrated life has been anything but systematic and tidy. Though we would like to believe otherwise, count on the process of transformation to be fitful, messy, and disruptive.

DO WE HAVE A FUTURE?

Before we go further, though, let's stop for a moment and raise some troubling questions. First of all: Do you and I believe that a revitalization of our way of life is possible? In light of or in spite of the changes of the last 40 years, and the losses that often came with them, do you and I honestly believe that the Little Brothers of Mary have a vital and viable future? What makes our answer to this question so important? The energy we are willing to spend, and the risks you and I are prepared to take during the years just ahead will all be determined, to a large extent, by the answer we give to that question.



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A second and equally troubling question: Are you and I committed to the dream and charism of Marcellin Champagnat, and do we plan on channeling a significant portion of our time and energy toward realizing both in a way that is in keeping with contemporary needs? If, either in word or by deed, our answer, and that of a majority of our brothers, is “no,” there will be little worry about a future for our Institute. In all probability, it will not last beyond the present generation.

In his book *Alice in Wonderland*, author Lewis Carroll relates the tale of Alice's encounter with a Cheshire cat. Coming to a fork in the road and spying the cat in a tree, she asks: “Which road do I take?” The cat responds with a question of his own, “Where do you want to go?” “I don't know,” Alice answers: “Then,” says the cat, “it doesn't really matter what road you take.”

Nor will the road taken matter for us, if we fail to make the necessary choices involved in formulating a fresh and unique identity for our Institute and give ourselves fully to the task of revitalizing our way of life during the years just ahead.

As we do so, we can be encouraged by the fact that among congregations that have experienced one or more rebirths during the course of their history, the presence of an inspiring vision guiding the group, prophetic voices among its members, and a spirit of hope evident in the leadership gave those involved the courage they needed to respond generously to these three challenges:

- Initiating a profound change of heart, by renewing their life of faith, leading to a greater centeredness in Jesus Christ.
- Re-discovering their Institute's founding charism, unencumbered by historic trappings.

- Arriving at a transforming response to the signs of their times.

I firmly believe that as we address these three tasks, we will discover that the spirituality of Marcellin Champagnat lies at the heart of any fresh and compelling identity for his Little Brothers. Understandably, Marcellin's way of going to God will need to take on a 21st, rather than a 19th, century face today. However, at its core will be the same attitudes and orientations that guided him in his own spiritual journey.

A word of caution before we move on. Retreating to models that promoted vibrancy at another time in history can be seductive during a period of uncertainty. But choosing that response to change will only lead to a loss of vitality and ultimately betray any possible future.

We are living through a time in the history of our way of life where a paradigmatic shift in its image is taking place. When this process has run its course, what we knew before will no longer exist. However, what we long for in terms of revitalization for our Institute and its mission has not yet come fully into view.

Important choices about our identity and purpose as a group lie ahead. Once made, they will show clearly the cost of membership in a renewed Institute with a vital mission, and allow us to direct our energies toward living both fully.

COMPLICATING OUR TASK

With that said, we must admit our work of renewal is complicated by certain characteristics of the present age and the several generations found within our Institute today. This time in history, referred to by many as post-modernity, is marked by a growing awareness



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of the need for a fresh and credible image of God. Addressing the opening session of our 20th General Chapter, Benito described this confusing situation as a crisis of faith⁴.

Many of us realize that the worlds in which we live can no longer be expected to carry the faith for us. The time is long past when we could count on living in a Christian culture, or even on being surrounded by believers. Even in some of our Marist communities, those among us who wish to have a vibrant life of faith cannot count on some in the group for support.

So, here at the dawn of a new millennium, more than a few of us long for a God who will dwell at the center of our lives. One to whom we can relate easily, and who will provide depth of meaning and an answer to our ultimate concerns. This is the God around whom we long to renew our spirituality and build a life of personal and communal prayer.

Less obvious, but of concern also, is the fact that in recent years an extraordinary rate of change has been imposed upon people in a number of developing nations. Having little or no control over their situation, they have had to face shifts, in one or two generations, that some of us in developed countries were given five or six generations to master. From a human and a spiritual perspective, the outcome has often been tragic: the disintegration or outright destruction of a number of indigenous cultures.

Finally, at least three different generations are present within our Institute today, and some knowledge about characteristic traits of each is important to better understand the theme of this circular.

Those brothers who make up the oldest of the three remember what our way of life looked like prior to the

seismic changes that shook it during Vatican II and the years just afterwards. They recall, for example, that it was Pius XII who first called for the renewal of consecrated life in our age, beginning with his directive late in 1950 that dated and non-essential customs be modified. This group of brothers also remembers the Latin Mass, can identify a biretta when they see one, and lived for a number of years within a highly structured form of our way of life.

A second group of our brothers came to maturity as Pope John XXIII threw open the windows of ag-giornamento and called not only for some fresh air to blow in, but also convoked the first Ecumenical Council in almost 100 years. Many among this generation of brothers became immersed quickly in what today is referred to as modernity: they moved to put aside certain privileges and cast off those symbols and ways of living that separated us from the People of God. Thus, religious habits became less common and long established ways of living together in community started to change. So much with which we had been familiar for so long began to disappear.

Challenging us to live the same questions about life and meaning that everyone else must face, this group led our Institute through a time of loss, an important time of questioning the meaning and purpose of our way of life. Privileged to be present at the death of one era of Church history, they were blessed with the role of being midwives to another.

The renewal questions of 2003, however, are not those of 1967 and 1968. Today, a new generation is looking at religious life and at our Institute, and, quite frankly, a number come from worlds that are foreign to many of us over age 50. While not universally true, increasingly these young people come to us devoid of a strong Catholic identity. For example, the symbols



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on which many of us were nurtured and reared in the faith – fish on Fridays, fasting from midnight before taking Communion, the nine first Fridays, to name a few – have not been part of their experience.

Among those who come as candidates to our way of life today, are the offspring of that period referred to as modernity. They have borne its questions since childhood, and, understandably, they now want some answers. They are looking for clear signs that demonstrate they will be members of a religious congregation. They want to belong to the group, but at the same time they wonder what will sustain them over time in living out this challenging way of being a person in our day and age.

So, when you speak with our young brothers, you will quickly discover that Vatican II is someone else's history. The 1980s and 90s, and not the 1960s, are their reference point. When members of this generation set out to retrieve aspects of what is referred to as the pre-modern, with its emphases on tradition, they are not involved in a restoration of the past. Why? Because they do not have a living memory of our world and Church prior to Vatican II.

With such diversity of experience, those in leadership in the Institute today cannot forget the need we have for a comprehensive vision that includes all our members. How else will we be able to navigate the present postmodern waters with all their complexity?

GOD DWELLING AT THE CENTER

The second focus of this circular, and one that I refer to as Marcellin's spirituality, is as important as the first. As stated earlier, I believe that the founder's way to God must be at the heart of any renewed identity for our Institute and its mission.

The topic also takes on greater consequence in light of the Chapter's request to the General Administration for a document, similar to *In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat*,⁵ about our spirituality. With this resource in hand, all of us who share the founder's charism and dream, brother and lay woman or man alike, should be able to reflect more fully on his spirituality as the foundation for our own.

Since 1976, the term Marist Apostolic Spirituality⁶ has been used most often to guide discussion about this topic. For a number of reasons, I prefer the phrase Marcellin's spirituality. First of all, any discussion about our spirituality as Little Brothers of Mary must begin with the founder. The treasure he passed on to our early brothers and to each of us through our Church is unique and differs from the legacy of, for example, Jean-Claude Colin. The latter's influence is evident in the spirituality found among the members of the other branches of the Society of Mary, but not so much in ours.

Second, the founder's last Testament identifies the three elements that make up the core of his spirituality and that of his Little Brothers: confidence in God's presence, devotion to Mary and reliance on her protection, and the practice of these two uncomplicated virtues: simplicity and humility.

Writing in language appropriate for his day, Marcellin described the spirituality he recommended for his Little Brothers; it was a mirror of his own. "Practice the presence of God; it is the soul of prayer, meditation, and all the virtues. Let humility and simplicity be the characteristics that distinguish you from others. Have a filial and tender devotion to Mary; make her loved in every place. Love and be faithful to your vocation, and persevere in it courageously."⁷



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

Later in this circular we will examine several factors that contributed to Marcellin's spiritual maturity, not the least of which was his practice of the presence of God. And the God whose company Marcellin enjoyed and promoted was no abstract deity. It was the Lord Jesus himself. The mystery of the incarnation was at the heart of his spirituality. Clearly, intimacy with Jesus was the destination of Marcellin Champagnat's journey of faith.

Christ was central to the spirituality of the founder. So also was Mary, albeit in a different way. Marcellin had complete trust in her and confidence in her protection, saying often to his brothers, "With Mary, we have everything; without her, we have nothing." The name of Mary was important to our founder. In Marcellin's understanding of our faith, both Jesus and Mary were at the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation. So, we can say that while the founder's spirituality was truly incarnational, it was decidedly Marial, too.

Marcellin's spirituality was also eminently transparent. Simplicity was the quality that characterized the man. The founder was direct, enthusiastic, confident. His humility was also evident: no one would ever describe him as a person of pretense. These are the elements that he advised for his brothers and that so many in our Church today find attractive. Marcellin's spirituality is an expression of a practical Christianity, one capable of transforming the person as well as the world in which he or she lives.

Finally, from time to time, each of us is reminded just how much one or another aspect of Marcellin's spirituality is a part of our everyday life. Between my first and second terms as Provincial, for example, I decided to make a 30 day retreat at a spirituality center on the coast of Massachusetts.

My director for this experience was an old and seasoned Jesuit by the name of Tom. We quickly got

down to work, meeting regularly during the first week as I moved into the rhythm of the retreat.

At the beginning of the second week, however, Tom made this surprising assessment during our daily 30 minute direction period: “It’s impossible,” he said, “for you to make the traditional Ignatian Exercises; Mary is too present in your spirituality.” Wondering aloud whether or not this comment was a veiled criticism, I asked him what he meant. He replied, “Oh, it’s clear: you are a Marist, not a Jesuit.” From that point on, we fashioned a retreat in which I spent the remaining time looking at the world and the Word of God through the eyes of Mary. At the end of the month, I realized that that retreat had turned out to be one of the most memorable and helpful in my life. So, as I’ve already said, for a number of reasons I prefer to use the phrase Marcellin’s spirituality as the term of reference for this circular.

OUR 20TH GENERAL CHAPTER

To give the theme of our 20th General Chapter an anchor in Scripture, the members of its Preparatory Commission chose a passage from Chapter 30 of the Book of Deuteronomy. Yahweh puts before the Israelites this choice: life and a future, or death and destruction. In parts of our Institute, we face the same challenge today: to boldly embrace the future, or to cling timidly to the past.

And, what will be the price of life and a future for our Institute and its mission today? Nothing short of a revolution! So I invite you to join me in one, a revolution of the heart. I can promise little in return except hard work, a steady diet of self-sacrifice, and the possibility of being part of nothing less than the rebirth of our Institute. Yes, the possibility of being part of nothing less than the rebirth of this Institute and mission that we love so well.



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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In your quiet moments, what are your thoughts about the future of our Institute and its mission? Are you confident that it has a future, or do you worry about where we are headed? What causes your reaction?
2. Name some of the major obstacles working against a re-birth of our Marist life and mission in your region, Province, District, or community. What steps can you take to reduce the influence or strength of these obstacles?
3. Similarly, what elements within you are obstacles to the revitalization of Marist life and apostolate, and what can you do to address them?
4. On the other hand, what qualities in you or actions on your part are working to build up our Marist life and mission in your region, Province, District or community? What can you do to enhance these positive forces?
5. Say a word about your spirituality. How would you describe your relationship with Jesus Christ and with Mary to a friend who asked you about the place of both in your life?

Note: Find a quiet place where you can consider these questions. Do so at a time when you do not have to rush. Take a pad and pen with you and jot down whatever thoughts, feelings, and inspirations you judge worth saving. Later, consider having a conversation with others who have made a similar reflection. Your notes will come in handy during such a discussion or later when you simply want to take a fresh look at the fruit of your reflection.

PART II

A word about identity

Every evening at sunset, a Rabbi walked through the town in which he lived as far as its outskirts. This daily routine gave him time to reflect and also to keep up on the comings and goings of his neighbors.

Wealthy landowners living on the town's outer edge had the custom of hiring watchmen to guard the perimeters of their property at night. One evening, the Rabbi came across one of these guards and asked him for the name of his employer. A familiar one was given in return.

To the surprise of the Rabbi, the watchman next asked him about his employer. The question stunned him. Wasn't it obvious to the guard, indeed to the entire world, that he worked for the Master of the Universe? Growing unsure of himself, the Rabbi delayed giving an answer to the watchman. Eventually, he said, "I am sorry to say, that I am not sure that I really work for anyone. You see, I am the Rabbi in this town."

After a long silent walk together, the Rabbi asked the guard, "Will you come and work for me?"

"Yes," replied the watchman, "I would be willing to, but what would my duties entail?"

To which the Rabbi replied, “Oh, there would be just one thing that you would always do. Remind me for whom I work, in whose employ I am, and why I am here. Just remind me—that is all.”

And the point of our story? As Little Brothers of Mary, with almost 40 years of renewal efforts behind us, you and I could very well conclude that we are the Rabbi in this tale, ever in need of being reminded for whom we work. But our proper place is among those who watch. As mentioned earlier, we are called to live on the perimeter, and to be our Church’s living memory, reminding it constantly about the nature of its identity. That is our prophetic role.

JUST WHAT DO WE MEAN BY IDENTITY?

What do we mean by identity? On a personal level, it is that feeling of knowing who you are and where you are going in life. The identity of a group or organization is much the same. When asked what it stands for, an institution with a strong identity has a ready and compelling answer to give. Just as personal identity helps make each of us unique, a religious Institute’s identity helps its members answer these two questions, “Who are we?” and “What do we cherish or hold dear?”

To form an identity, an Institute must, first of all, take an honest look at its available options. As a group, we have been struggling to do just that since Vatican II. In light of our charism, and in response to the calls of the Church and world, changing realities, and new needs, we have asked: Which ways of being in the world will foster a radical dependence on God and further the mission of Jesus?

Similar to the challenges that must be faced when creating a personal identity, the second step in the process of identity formation for any Institute entails dealing with



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those inevitable crises that follow upon any process of exploration. Over the past four decades we have learned two hard lessons as an Institute: exploration leads to crises, and the more possibilities for living that we uncover, the greater our number of crises.

Once again, as with the formation of an individual’s identity, for any group the third and final step in the process involves commitment. To bring any period of exploration, change, and transition to fruition, we must make some choices. After assessing many competing, and possibly equally compelling possibilities, we must decide where we stand, what points of view we hold dear, and how we plan to live our lives. If you and I want to forge a new identity for our Institute and its mission, we cannot escape the process of assessment and choice.

WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF OUR PROBLEMS WITH IDENTITY?

Are you curious about the source of our confusion over the identity of contemporary consecrated life? Look no further than Vatican II. In the minds of many, decisions taken at that historic gathering, though necessary and long overdue, brought to an end the ideological framework upon which our way of life had been built for centuries.

From the early Middle Ages until Vatican II, most Catholics accepted unchallenged a three-tiered hierarchical ranking of the clerical, religious, and lay states within the Church. Many of us over age 50, for example, can remember being taught that priesthood was the “highest calling” in terms of a vocation.

Consecrated life came second. Conventional wisdom held that only vowed members of religious orders could achieve spiritual perfection. The lay state, unfortunately, ranked a distant third. Many lay men and women,

not called to priesthood or religious life, felt like second class citizens in their own Church.

Vatican II turned this three-tiered model right on its head. “Consecrated life,” the Council Fathers declared, “from the point of view of the divine and hierarchical nature of the Church, [was no longer] to be seen as a middle way between clerical and lay states of life. Rather it [was to] be seen as a way of life to which some Christians are called by God, both from the clergy and the laity.”⁸

In retrospect, we realize that those who participated in Vatican II faced forthrightly the necessary and urgent task of redefining the rightful place of lay men and women within our Church community. They were, however, less successful in their attempts to redefine clearly the nature and purpose of our way of life. *Perfectae Caritatis*, having come to life in a difficult and complex way, fell far short of advancing for men and women religious the type of theological thinking that *Lumen Gentium* had done for laity.

More recently, in *Vita Consecrata* John Paul II observed that each of the fundamental states of life within our Church expresses one or another aspect of the mystery of Christ. Lay men and women, for example, take on responsibility for the mission of insuring that the gospel message is proclaimed in the temporal sphere.

Religious life, on the other hand, which is meant to mirror Christ’s own way of life, has, in the Pope’s words, responsibility for showing forth the holiness of the People of God. It is meant to proclaim and, in a way, anticipate a future age when the reign of God will be achieved. It is a more complete expression of the Church’s purpose: the sanctification of humanity.

As mentioned just above, the Council Fathers identified but two states of life within the structure of the



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Church: clerical and lay. *Vita Consecrata*, even with its flaws, reminded us all that within the Church’s experience, there are three: the lay, clerical, and religious. With those words, consecrated life began to find a place in our Church and the means to begin re-imagining itself for the new millennium. But that is not the end of our story. In the next few pages, we will review briefly our almost 40 year journey to discover anew the identity of our way of life.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR RELIGIOUS BROTHERS⁹

As brothers, we have faced some additional and unique challenges in our attempts to form a new post-Conciliar identity. To begin with, during the turbulent years following Vatican II, we suffered a greater loss of meaning than a number of our ordained confreres. To maintain stability and a sense of identity, more than a few of them clung fast to their sacramental ministry.

Second, our vocation has always bewildered many of our fellow Catholics. Some remain convinced that we are “training to be priests,” while others believe that that is the very task at which we have failed!

Today, however, our vocation as brothers has begun to bewilder a number of us as well. In recent years, for example, we have put aside a number of external signs that, in the past, helped people distinguish one religious Institute from another. Also, in some Provinces and Districts, our move away from what many would consider our traditional ministry toward those judged to be more in keeping with the needs of the times gave rise to the same outcome.

Consequently, we are less visible in some of the societies and cultures in which we find ourselves, and more homogeneous with the members of other religious congregations. Is it any wonder, then, that we have floun-

dered when faced with the task of theoretically and theologically re-imagining a distinct role for ourselves as brothers within the ecclesial community?

Third, as brothers we are in a position to make a contribution to discussions about contemporary Church ministry. Our voices, however, often enough have been strangely muted. What gives rise to this situation? For one thing, we have yet to find readily available and effective channels through which to share our experience.

As an Institute, we evangelize primarily through education. For the most part, the institutions in which we serve operate fairly independent of the local Church. While the local Ordinary must give his permission, he, more often than not, after giving that authorization is content to let us organize and direct these facilities according to our Marist traditions and customs.

Caught up in the day to day preoccupations that beset any school or other institution, we can grow quite removed from the concerns of the local Church. Over time, we come to discover that the number of channels in place to help us share our experience and insights about ministry decrease steadily.

Finally, similar to the members of other Institutes of brothers, we are a pragmatic lot. Prior to Vatican II, this characteristic served us well. As long as we knew what was expected of us in terms of the vows, community life, and our apostolate, we were able to get on with the task at hand: our ministry to young people.

This long-standing system of meaning collapsed suddenly during the 1960s. In the years that followed, some of us have gone about our work but without the clear understanding that we had prior to Vatican II. Even today, some of us remain uncertain about what



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is required of us in terms of the vows, our life in common, or the form and nature of our spirituality.

Our failure to acknowledge that our system of meaning fell apart has given rise to a great deal of unspoken grief. We do well to realize that the release of the grief that many of us have carried for almost four decades now will be as painful as it is healing.

AN EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL CHAPTER

In 1967 and 1968, in accord with the directives of Vatican II, an extraordinary General Chapter took place at our General House in Rome. A review of the documents produced by our brothers who participated is evidence enough that they left no stone unturned in their efforts to respond to the Council's challenge to renew our Institute. Furthermore, we can readily understand that in the midst of the many pages they produced, members of that 16th General Chapter were already beginning to struggle with the question of identity.

Brothers who came together for our 17th General Chapter in 1976 also discussed the issue of identity. They did so, however, under very different circumstances than the group that had met nine years earlier. In more than a few Provinces and Districts, brothers had been stunned by the numbers who sought dispensation in the wake of the Council and our extraordinary Chapter of Renewal.

Be that as it may, at the conclusion of the 17th General Chapter, its members sent out this message about identity as part of their overall report on their meeting: "Marist identity is a problem that touches the identity of religious life itself. And the identity of religious life is deeply influenced by the state of the contemporary world, especially the questioning of values [that] until

recently [have been well] accepted. There is, then, a lack of real unity among the different elements that go to make up our religious life, but this lack is not primarily a moral question. It is a phenomenon very much like that of a biological system which has been seriously upset and is searching for a new equilibrium.”¹⁰

PUTTING EARLY RENEWAL ATTEMPTS WITHIN THEIR PROPER CONTEXT

As mentioned in passing before, early attempts to renew our Marist way of life and mission did not occur within a cultural or historical vacuum. Instead, beginning as they did in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they started to unfold during a turbulent period of social and political unrest in many parts of our world. Independence movements, for example, on the African continent, gave rise to nationalism and a new political order.

Movements demanding greater civil, political, and sexual liberty also marked the 1960s and 1970s in many developed countries. With what results? Greater emphasis placed on the rights of the individual, and a growing mistrust of almost all forms of authority.

In the years following Vatican II, many of us also gave high priority to the challenge of personal growth. In so doing, we became better acquainted with principles of human development and psychology. For most of us, this knowledge was helpful personally and in terms of renewing our programs of initial and ongoing formation. For a few, however, it led to excessive self-preoccupation, and a diminution of the impulse to generosity that has typically marked our way of life.

Eventually, in some parts of our world, the process of deconstruction—the dismantling of familiar struc-



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tures and institutions—and the turmoil of the Church’s post Vatican II world converged. One result, among others: an unraveling of existing forms and accepted practices of religious life as we had known them.

In recent years, a number of us have also come to realize that as we dismantled the “cloister,” competing ideologies—individualism, materialism, consumerism, new understandings about sexuality and relationships, to name but a few—flooded in and did battle with other values that, up until that time, had guided religious life. It was within all these rapidly changing circumstances that we and the members of many other Institutes began the work of adapting our groups to the realities and needs of the Church and world of the latter part of the 20th century.

A NEW IDENTITY FOR THE LITTLE BROTHERS OF MARY

General Chapters since the time of Vatican II, then, have been clear about this point: in forming any new identity for our Institute, we must address these three areas: prayer, apostolate or ministry, and community life. Our most recent Chapter also encouraged us to take up this work in union with lay Marists, eager to clarify their identity and having a keen interest in Marist mission and Marcellin’s spirituality.

In a number of ways, our 20th General Chapter reminded us that spirituality is the place to start if we seek genuine renewal. We can change works, locations, communities, but all can be little more than “geographical cures” if we fail to change our hearts as well.

In two future circulars I intend to discuss the topics of community life, and our mission and ministry and their relationship to identity. During the remainder of

this circular, however, I will concentrate on what many, myself included, consider the most essential building block of any new identity for our Institute: Marcellin's spirituality. If you and I wish to undertake a revolution of the heart, this is the place to start.



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Note: Find a quiet place where you can consider these questions. Do so at a time when you do not have to rush. Take a pad and pen with you and jot down whatever thoughts, feelings, and inspirations you judge worth saving. Later, consider having a conversation with others who have made a similar reflection. Your notes will come in handy during such a discussion or later when you simply want to take a fresh look at the fruit of your reflection.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Imagine a student or colleague asking you these two questions: Who are the Little Brothers of Mary? What do they cherish or hold dear? How would you answer?
2. Is our Marist way of life largely invisible in your country, Province, or District? If so, what is your reaction to this state of affairs? If the situation troubles you, what steps can you take to remedy it?
3. Do you agree that these three elements are essential to our identity as Little Brothers of Mary: prayer, apostolate or ministry, and community? If so, why? Or do you disagree with the statement? And if so, what elements would you identify as essential to a corporate identity for our Institute?

PART III

Marcellin's spirituality and a contemporary identity for his Little Brothers of Mary

During at least one era of Church history, conventional wisdom held that most of us were destined for damnation. For this notion to take root and flourish, those promulgating it had to overlook no less significant a matter than what Saint Paul liked to call the scandal of the Paschal Mystery. Nevertheless, the conviction that many of us would spend eternity in hell influenced the belief and practice of more than one generation of Catholics.

The times in which we live help to form us. Christians who lived during the period just described above could not help but be affected by the thinking and customs of their age. This fact was no less true for Marcellin Champagnat. The period of history into which he was born and the circumstances in which he lived had a profound influence on his personal and spiritual development.

The Church of early 19th century France, not unlike our own, faced a crisis of innovation. The world in which it found itself had changed quickly and decisively, and the Church's response to this upheaval had to be

inventive and resourceful. It was people like the founder who eventually would take charge of shaping it in a new way.

INFLUENTIAL FACTORS AND PEOPLE

Marcellin grew up in the district of Marlhès, a region of deep faith. Its people claimed Saint John Francis Regis as their patron and made his shrine a place of pilgrimage. This particular saint impressed the founder, and influenced his spiritual formation.

His mother, Marie Thérèse, and his Aunt Louise, a Sister of Saint Joseph, were the first to awaken a spiritual life in the young boy. Their example and direction were foundational. From both women, he absorbed the practices of piety and spiritual heritage of the high plateau region in which he was born.

Marcellin's father was also an important formative influence in his life. Jean-Baptiste Champagnat was a thinker, revolutionary, government official, tradesman, and farmer who passed on to his son the following gifts: diplomacy, discernment, compassion for others, a head for business, and the skills of a laborer.

The founder's devotion to Mary, too, was shaped initially by the religious practice and theology of late 18th and early 19th century France. He lived in the Marial district of Bishops Pothin and Irenaeus, and in a country influenced by the writings of Mariologists such as Olier and Grignon de Montfort.

A DEVELOPMENTAL SPIRITUALITY

Writing in Chapter 23 of *Opinions, Conferences, Sayings and Instructions*,¹¹ the author outlines five seasons in the course of religious life, each having its own unique chal-



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lenges. He calls them, respectively, the ages of: Docility, Settling in, Becoming set in one's ways, Lack of results and dissatisfaction, and Decadence or holiness.

Marcellin Champagnat's own spiritual development also unfolded in stages with an ongoing process of conversion marking his ever deepening relationship with God. While not born a saint, our founder spent his lifetime becoming one.

Initially Marcellin emphasized self-discipline, achieving it as a seminarian with the help of a well thought-out program of prayer and penance. He also followed this regimen during his seminary holidays and as a young priest in La Valla.

The founder's rigorous schedule of ascetical practices included rising at 4:00 AM and beginning his day with a half-hour meditation. Daily mass was preceded by 15 minutes of recollected prayer. Though fully engaged in parish work, he still found at least an hour each day to study theology. Fridays he fasted, and he faithfully visited the parish sick. These practices—self-discipline, prayer, and penance—used by our founder to build his relationship with God, can be helpful aids to many of us as we grow in the spiritual life.

As Marcellin's relationship with God deepened, he came to rely on the rule of law. It gave the founder a guide for living, and helped him control his behavior and achieve a certain serenity of soul. His common sense and good judgment, coupled with the fact that Rigorism influenced his thinking more than Jansenism, helped him rise above the legalism and rigidity that characterized so much of the moral theology taught in early 19th century French seminaries.

In time, the practice of the presence of God became the heart of Marcellin's spiritual life. His path to a

deeper relationship with Jesus and Mary, however, was not an easy one; the young priest encountered many rough stretches along the way.

LOVE OF GOD AS THE FOUNDATION

Eventually, the founder arrived at a point where he built his spirituality upon this solid base: love of God and of other people. He loved God in His very human nature. Outgoing by temperament, Marcellin also loved people and enjoyed spending time with them. Aware that God chooses to be revealed in the persons and events of life, the founder came to understand that one way to a loving relationship with God was through loving relationships with others.

STEPPING STONES

Several moments of crises early in Marcellin's life also appear to have been "stepping stones" in his process of personal conversion: his dismissal from the seminary at the end of his first year, the sudden death on September 2nd, 1807 of his friend, Denis Duplay, and a conversation about his need to improve his conduct held with the supervisor of the seminary, Father Linossier.

There can be little doubt that the death of Marcellin's mother, Marie Thérèse, in 1810, contributed to changes in his spirituality. She had been instrumental in his vocational decision and supportive throughout his seminary formation. In 1809 he had written, "O my Lord and my God, I promise you to no more offend you, to make acts of faith and of hope, never to return to the tavern without necessity, to avoid bad company, and to lead others to practice virtue." A year later, we find him acting on his resolve.



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Wouldn't our time in history, as well as the traditions and customs of our countries and cultures, also influence our living out of Marcellin's spirituality today?

During the process of his formation as a priest, then, Marcellin became more open to the power of God's transforming grace in his life. The Lord used some very human means to focus the founder's mind, heart, spirit, and energies on this one aim: loving Jesus and, in turn, helping others to do the same.

Brothers, call it a practical Christianity, call it what you will, but Marcellin Champagnat came to embody an incarnational spirituality. He knew from experience that an authentic spiritual life has its origin in the place and amid the circumstances in which we find ourselves. As he matured, each person the founder met became for him an image of the risen Savior whom he had come to know and love so well.

SPIRITUALITY DEFINED

All well and good, you might say, but how do you and I live out the founder's spirituality today? Here was a man of his times, whose search for God was influenced by the circumstances of his life and the events of his age. Wouldn't our time in history, as well as the traditions and customs of our countries and cultures, and a host of other elements, also influence our living out of Marcellin's spirituality?

In a moment, we will return to look more closely at the three major characteristics of the founder's spirituality as found in his Last Testament: his practice of the presence of God, reliance on Mary and her protection, and the two uncomplicated virtues of simplicity and humility. First of all, though, I want to define several terms so as to establish a contemporary context in which to discuss Marcellin's spirituality further.

What do I mean when I use the word spirituality? Let me answer that question by telling you a story about

a young man who aspired to great holiness. He worked hard to achieve it, and eventually went to report to his Rabbi.

“Rabbi,” he announced, “I think I have achieved sanctity.”

“What makes you think that?” asked the Rabbi.

The young man replied, “I have been practicing virtue and discipline for some time now, and have grown quite proficient at both. From sunrise to sunset, I take neither food nor water. During the day, I do all kinds of hard work for others and never expect to be thanked. If I have temptations of the flesh, I roll in the snow or the thorn bushes until they go away, and at night, before bed, I practice the ancient monastic discipline and administer lashes to my bare back. I have disciplined myself to be holy.”

The Rabbi was silent for some time. Then, he took the young man by the arm and led him to a window in his study. The Rabbi pointed to an old horse in the field; it was being led away by its owner. “I have been observing that horse for some time,” began the Rabbi, “and have noticed that it does not get fed or watered from morning to night. All day long it has to work for people, and it never gets thanked. I often see it rolling around in the snow or bushes, as horses are prone to do, and frequently I observe that its owner whips it. But, I ask you: is that a saint or a horse?”

The point of the story? Spirituality has more to do with being grateful for the gift of God’s unconditional love than with any pious practice, and that stands to reason. After, all, gratitude is the root of all virtue; it is the foundation of love and charity. Marcellin understood that fact; he invites us today to do the same.



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

One of the gifts of our age, though difficult for many of us to accept, is the growing understanding that spirituality has more to do with the unquenchable fire that burns within us than with climbing any ladder of virtues. Pious practices devoid of passion will not sustain you or me over time.¹²

Many of us claim to have passion enough for more than one lifetime. We admit, too, that this driving force, lying at the heart of our human experience, fuels the love, creativity, and hope that we bring to life. Yet, we are often reluctant to admit that passion is also an intimate part of our spirituality.

Is our hesitancy due to the fact that passion, having more than one face, frightens us? After all, we do experience it at times, more as restlessness or burning desire that we describe as a hunger. This face of passion leaves us on edge, dissatisfied and frustrated. And in the midst of all this unrest, just what is spirituality? Ultimately, it is what we do with our passion.

GOD’S LOVE, FREELY GIVEN

This approach to spirituality is not what most of us were taught during our early years of formation, nor during most programs of ongoing renewal in which we have participated. Instead, we were often led to believe that to be fit for God we must painstakingly climb a ladder of virtues. But doesn’t any relationship with Jesus come at his initiative and not ours? Teresa of Avila, for example, often told those who sought her counsel about the spiritual life that when they lacked words for prayer they should enter the chapel and sit before the Blessed Sacrament, so that the Lord could look on them with love.

Our hunger and thirst for Jesus is nothing more than a mirror of his for us. But unlike Teresa and Marcellin,

few of us are willing to believe that God loves us in such an unconditional way. Yes, we will say, “God loves us unconditionally,” but the word “but” always seems to follow and fill the place where a punctuation mark called a period belongs. So we must ask ourselves why try to tame God’s love by pretending that something given so freely must be earned? In this life, we alone stand in the way of our accepting God’s unconditional love.

ELEMENTS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Over time, the saints and mystics who have gone before us came to understand and accept the great love that Jesus had for each of them. All people of faith must make this journey of understanding.

And what does this task require? To begin with, that we accept the fact that Jesus is the answer to the question that is every human life. Marcellin came, over time, to understand that piece of Good News. This was also the first point that members of our 20th General Chapter made when writing the five calls that make up the heart of our Chapter Message. My relationship with Jesus rests at the center of my life. Concretely that means putting aside time, as I would for any other important relationship in my life, to nurture this one and allow Jesus to be himself.

As mentioned earlier, our spiritual lives develop in stages, and we must learn to be patient with ourselves. Some spiritual directors, for example, compare the consoling grace found in our relationship with Jesus to water bubbling to the surface of a well, almost to the point of overflowing. Early in that relationship, we are young and strong and can easily by our own power draw water from the well. We have available to us as much of God’s consoling grace as we desire. But let’s be honest: we are in charge, not Jesus.



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Our hunger
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With the passage of time the water level in the well begins to drop. But we still have our strength, and so, with human effort, we continue to lower a bucket into the well and draw forth as much consoling grace as we like. But we remain in control. Jesus continues to be kept at a distance.

Eventually, however, that well, once brimming with water, dries up. No longer young and strong, we lack the self-sufficiency of our earlier years. So, we ask ourselves: what can we do now to gain the consoling grace of God? An honest response: nothing, except to sit and wait for the rain.

When you and I arrive at this point in our spiritual life, as Marcellin himself must have, we are better able to allow Jesus to be at least an equal partner in our relationship. We give him the freedom to love us as he sees fit. How do we know that we are moving in this direction? When, like Teresa, we long only for a simple presence before God. Nothing more, and nothing less.

The second characteristic of a religious person builds upon the first: I accept the fact that Jesus loves me in a singular and special way. From the beginning of time, God has reached out to us in relationship, with Jesus the most stunning example of that initiative. Our relationship with Jesus and its pattern of development are unique; they cannot be duplicated.

INCARNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

As we have seen, Jesus was fundamental to our founder’s practice of the faith. The Eucharist was also central in his life, and he looked forward to celebrating it regularly with our early brothers.

We know, too, that three elements lay at the heart of the spirituality Marcellin passed on to us, in practice

and in his Last Testament: confidence in God always being there, devotion to Mary and reliance on her protection, and the presence of the uncomplicated virtues of simplicity and humility. The founder's spirituality was incarnational, Marial, and transparent.

Let's look briefly at each aspect in turn. The incarnational nature of Marcellin's spirituality was the source of his practice of the presence of God; he had a passion for both the Lord and his mission.

For Marcellin, Jesus was always close at hand. Consequently, his conversations with the Lord continued uninterrupted, and his confidence in him and abandonment to God's will deepened over time. He often quoted the words of Psalm 127, "If the Lord does not build a house, in vain do its builders toil."

Marcellin's incarnational spirituality can be found in the wording of many of his letters. In an April 8th, 1839 note to Brother Marie-Laurent, for example, the founder wrote, "Your letter, my very dear friend, greatly aroused my compassion. Since then I never approach the holy altar without recommending you to Him in whom we never hope in vain, who can help us overcome the greatest obstacles."

ELEMENTS SHAPING AN INCARNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY TODAY

Passion marked Marcellin Champagnat's relationship with the Lord Jesus. In our own day and age, we long for a similar experience of God, though we understand that it may differ in some ways from the founder's own.

I mentioned earlier that passion is ambitious. While it plays an important role in our spiritual life, passion appears to be at work in other areas of our lives as well.



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For example, wherever strong emotions such as anger and rage hold sway, passion is close at hand. So, too, in situations of profound sadness and ecstatic joy. Passion also holds a place of prominence in our sexual lives.

Now, linking sexuality to passion in anyone's prayer life would not have been conventional in Marcellin's day. Sexual feelings were often judged to be dangerous and in need of strict control. Though many mystics wrote using sexual images, their work was treated with caution, if at all.

Today, however, we realize that sexuality is much broader than genital sexual behavior, and includes also our way of being in the world as a man or woman, and the attitudes and characteristics, culturally defined as masculine or feminine, that we appropriate over time.

More importantly, though, sexuality captures our basic human need to reach out, both physically and spiritually, to embrace others. It expresses God's intention that we find in relationship what it means to be human and spiritual. Yes, sexuality is intrinsic to our relationship with other people and God. It has much more to do with self-transcendence than with self-fulfillment.

However, we also realize that, similar to spirituality, sexuality wears more than one face. While it gives us a zest for living, contributes to romance in a relationship, and is the source of unusual courage and heroic generosity, this same energy can also lead us into self-destructive and dehumanizing behavior. On those occasions when we lose our sense of balance, sexuality contributes to our running about and out of control.

So, we must ask: are means available to help us channel our sexual longing and desire in creative ways that lead us away from self-defeating behavior and toward union with God and others? There are actually several:

a sense of discipline, a capacity for honest self-appraisal, an ability to tolerate solitude, and a sense of humor. For any life to be fruitful, all are essential.

For centuries now, spiritual directors have recommended these same tools to those with a serious interest in their religious growth. And their recommendation stands to reason. To a large extent, the degree to which our body, mind, and spirit feel like part of a whole depends upon the disciplines and habits by which we choose to live. At the same time, the quality of our relationship with God, as well as with ourselves and other people, is also influenced by these same choices.

When it comes to sexuality and spirituality, then, we face this challenge: to become friends with the passion within us and, at the same time, to accept the fact that we are unfinished. While many of our cultures teach us otherwise, we cannot “have it all.” We must, instead, learn to live with tension in both our spiritual and sexual lives. Augustine was right – in this life we cannot answer fully faith’s fundamental question: On whom or on what do we set our hearts? Our hearts remain restless until they rest fully in God.

SPIRITUALITY AND CELIBATE CHASTITY

A moment ago, I pointed out that spirituality and sexuality are closely related. We could almost say sexuality lies at the heart of any life worth calling spiritual. Now, if sexuality lies at the center of our spiritual life, that spiritual life must likewise be at the heart of genuine celibate chaste living.

Once again, this conclusion is reasonable. After all, to be at home with our choice for celibate chastity we have to face – first and foremost – what it means to be a religious person, our spiritual identity. You and I can



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learn all there is to know about human sexuality, become quite expert, as a matter of fact, but until we face what it means to be a spiritual person, we will always be uneasy with our celibate chastity.

Many people in the societies and cultures in which we find ourselves today believe that embracing a life of celibate chastity is both naïve and foolish. And it is! Naïve because the choice defies social convention; foolish because to embrace and live well a life of celibate chastity leads inevitably to a revolution of the heart. What philosopher Bernard Lonergan, SJ, reminds us is akin to “an other worldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations”.¹³

And who among us wants to undergo such a conversion, to embrace this revolution of the heart? Herein lies the challenge of celibate chastity: in choosing to live out our sexuality in a celibate chaste manner, we commit ourselves to live with passion, to be deeply spiritual and sexual at the same time.

Eventually, we come to rediscover the fire—that longing for Jesus – that has always burned brightly within us. In making this rediscovery we grow to be more at home with ourselves and with the Lord, but now on his terms and with infinitely more knowledge about his ways. When do we know that we have come to this point in life? When the phrase that best describes us is this one: “deeply spiritual and profoundly human.” Surely these words would have been apt when applied to Marcellin Champagnat.

THE PLACE OF MARY

A second feature of Marcellin’s spirituality was its Marial dimension. The founder was strongly attached to the

Mother of Jesus. He named us after Mary, saw her as the Institute's first Superior, and called her our Good Mother. Yes, he made her a central part of our spiritual heritage.

Marcellin's relationship with Mary matured over time. His complete trust in her and confidence in her protection grew into a union of some intimacy. Eventually she became his confidant..

The founder's devotion to Mary was expressed in sermons, novenas, and letters. His February 4th, 1831 message to Brothers Antoine and Gonzaga is but one example of this aspect of his spiritual life. The founder wrote, "Get Mary on your side; tell her that after you have done all you can, it's just too bad for her if her affairs don't go well." Marcellin trusted completely in Mary's intercession: once her petitioners had done their best, she had to take responsibility for seeing these plans through.

The founder encouraged our early brothers to follow his lead in their devotion to Mary. For example, he asked them to display a picture or statue of her in the house, and wanted them to carry on their person something to remind them of her. Later, he advised the touching practice of offering to Mary the keys of the house. "She is in charge of us," he said. "She is our patroness, our protectress."

Marcellin also counseled these early brothers to take Mary as their Mother. She was to be a model for imitation, and a person to be approached with childlike confidence. At the Annunciation, Mary's response to God was trusting and direct. The founder wanted us to be no less wholehearted in our "Yes." In the Rule of 1837, he included a special prayer, "Abandonment to the Most Holy Mother of God."

What does the founder's devotion to Mary tell us about his personality? A great deal. Marcellin was a man who, over time, became increasingly more aware of his limita-



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tions. He realized that the gifts required for the adventure in which he found himself exceeded his natural capacities. How explain its success? Sincere of conscience, our founder gave credit for all that had been accomplished to Mary, whose help he had always requested and whose inspiration he followed as faithfully as possible.

MARY OF THE ANAWIM, OF NAZARETH, OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, OF TODAY

But what about us today? What is Mary's place in our Institute's spirituality and in your life and mine here at the dawn of a new millennium? First of all, we do well to acknowledge the rich diversity that exists in the Institute when it comes to Mary. Various countries and cultures have their special images of her, as well as places of pilgrimage and days of celebration.

With that said, however, we must also admit that our understanding and appreciation of this extraordinary woman of faith today is not much different from what was commonly held by 19th century believers. That fact may help explain why devotion to Mary has waned since Vatican II in both our Church and Institute. The mother of Jesus had been frozen in time, trapped in images created by Renaissance artists, placed on a pedestal, and elevated beyond our reach.

Here at the dawn of the 21st century, we as an Institute need a new appreciation of Mary: one in keeping with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and, at the same time, respectful of the varied and rich traditions that are so evident among us. It goes without saying that this woman of courage and strength who was so important to Marcellin, should have a central place in our spirituality, just as she did in his.

OUR CHALLENGE

The world of the 19th century was very different from ours. For example, we are far more aware of our multiculturalism, and of the differences that exist among us. Paradoxically, at the same time, we sense that we are closer than ever before, and have a greater opportunity for mutual understanding than perhaps at any other time in history. This is the world and Church for which we must develop a new language to describe Mary. Simply put: what is needed today is a theology of Mary that is suitable for the 21st century. To make a difference, it must be sound, empower us spiritually, and challenge us ethically.

Vatican Council II taught us that holiness and the absence of sin are not antithetical to ordinary day-to-day elements and events that make up our life on this earth. Instead, God's grace plunges all of us into the heart of the world.

Mary's life was a genuine human journey. To deny that fact and take her out of the ranks of humanity is unfair to her and to all of us. This woman of faith was never, and will never be, divine. To persist today in applying titles to Mary that appear to give her the qualities of God brings confusion rather than clarity.

Mary was a Jewish woman of her day who observed the Sabbath and all the practices associated with the special fervor of the anawim, or poor of Yahweh, among whom she was numbered. Hers was a commonplace and obscure life. Here was a woman who searched, felt anxious, laughed and cried, did not understand everything, and had to find her way from one stage to another as she traveled life's journey. And life did not treat her gently. She lived through the human lot that falls to us all: tears, distress and bitterness, courage and greatness, agony and death.



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Marcellin Champagnat was direct, enthusiastic, confident; he encouraged his brothers to develop the same traits.

Though artists have for centuries pictured her as reading the last book of the Old Testament as she waited expectantly for Gabriel's visit and the news that would assure her inclusion in the first book of the New Testament, Mary was, in all probability, illiterate, unable to read like the vast majority of men and women of her day. Therese of Lisieux reminds us that we love Mary not because the Mother of God received exceptional privileges but rather because she lived and suffered simply, like us, in the dark night of faith. Mary was a daughter of this earth; she had human passions, joys. She shared all the human concerns that we experience today.¹⁴

But, Mary also waited expectantly for the coming of the Messiah. And because she always looked at the world through the eyes of faith, she was able, over time, to recognize him in the Suffering Servant who was her son. As an individual, she made difficult choices in life with courage, and grew, in time, to be an elder in the budding community of the Church. So, while we hold fast to Marcellin's image of our Good Mother, today we are ever more aware of the fact that Mary is also our sister in faith, and a prophet among the Communion of Saints.

Personally, I often hope that in relieving Mary of the burden of being the ideal woman or someone larger than life, and in taking her down from the pedestal on which we have placed her, she will be able at last to be herself in our Church and Institute.

THE UNCOMPLICATED VIRTUES OF SIMPLICITY AND HUMILITY

The practice of the virtues of simplicity and humility was the third essential element of the founder's spirituality. Simplicity characterized Marcellin Champagnat.

He was direct, enthusiastic, confident. He encouraged his brothers to develop the same traits.

As a man, Marcellin was also humble: as he grew to maturity, he came to know and accept himself. The founder was not a man of pretense. Similarly, he challenged us, his brothers, to be sincere and unpretentious.

The founder's relationship with children quickly illustrates both qualities. His love of children and young people was expressed in refreshingly straightforward ways. He was considered an excellent catechist, speaking directly to the hearts and concerns of the young. He was concerned about both their education and evangelization, and was often heard to say, "I cannot see a child without wanting to let him know how much Jesus Christ loves him and how much he should, in return, love the divine Savior."

The episode that came to be known as the Memorare in the Snow is still another example of the virtues of simplicity and humility in the founder's life. This incident also opens an additional window on the structure of his personality and his spirituality.

What caused Marcellin to set out on his journey in the first place? Concern for a sick brother. The founder's great love for the early brothers was one of his most memorable qualities. Marcellin's world might have been small when compared to that of many people today, but there was nothing small about his heart. Love always translated into action. A brother was sick; the founder set out to visit him.

With that said, though, we might wonder what possessed him to begin his return trip in the face of a threatening snow storm. Some would judge the founder's journey from Bourg-Argental to be an act of imprudence.



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To deepen the bond that you and I have with the Lord, our times of personal prayer must also grow in a natural way to become regular and prolonged.

Whatever other reasons motivated the timing of his return journey, we can speculate that his sense of God's presence and confidence in Mary and her protection caused him to undertake the trip where others might have hesitated. His recourse to the Memorare in the face of danger was not the final effort of a dying man. Marcellin was, by this time in his life, aware of God's continual and powerful presence; Mary had also supported him often enough that he counted on her protection with the simplicity of an almost childlike faith. His faith in God's saving presence was with him always and he trusted Mary without question. The Memorare in the Snow was simply an external manifestation of the man's deep spiritual reality.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Now, how do we apply what we have been discussing about Marcellin's spirituality to our own lives today? First of all, we pay a price when getting involved with Jesus on his terms. After all, he asks us to imitate him, not admire him, and that means embracing the Paschal Mystery. If we seek transformation, we must first learn to be at home with suffering and death.

Second, how does any relationship with Jesus develop, and what is needed to sustain it? To begin with, throughout the ages, spiritual writers have insisted that times of personal prayer are an essential part of any relationship with the Lord. Marcellin's spiritual journey, as we have seen, was influenced at the outset by his relationship with his mother and Aunt Louise. During his years in the seminary, however, his spiritual life developed due to the discipline of regular times of prayer, penance, and other practices that he introduced into his life.

To deepen the bond that you and I have with the Lord, our times of personal prayer must also grow in a natural

way to become regular and prolonged. What does the phrase “regular and prolonged” mean concretely? Ideally, an hour each day. But this goal is something into which we grow, over time, and at God’s invitation.

You and I have the pleasure of Jesus’ company twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. If we are serious about our relationship with him, we will want to return the favor by providing Jesus with the pleasure of our company for at least one hour each day. This time-honored practice and integrity in our moral life are two characteristics of people who take their spiritual life seriously.

We may balk at the idea of trying to find an uninterrupted hour for personal prayer in the midst of an already busy day. We can also cite the article in our Marist Constitutions that prescribes 30 minutes of personal prayer a day. But let’s be honest: could either of us convince anyone that we have but a half hour a day for what we declare to be the most important relationship in our life?

Brothers, the busyness that marks the lives of a number of us in the Institute today borders on the pathological. For some among us, it is the single greatest threat to our interior life, and I count myself among those who must struggle here.¹⁵

For what reason is busyness or endless activity such a threat?¹⁶ Because of three elements that lie at its core and eventually numb the spirit and heart of a person: the belief that everything depends upon me, assigning to the quality of efficiency an importance it does not merit, and avoiding the challenge of solitude by filling every free moment with work, amusement, or another activity. For those of us literally possessed by busyness, solitude is a terrible trial: it forces us to face ourselves. Sad so say, more than a few of us today appear willing to take any means to insure that that confrontation simply does not take place.



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FINDING A REMEDY

Those who made up the Synod on Consecrated Life reminded us that as brothers, we are important in our Church because of who we are, and not because of what we do. However, Basilio has been quoted as say that as an Institute we appear to excel more at working than at praying, and this description may very well still be accurate.

A Provincial told me recently that he thought that, if asked, most of the brothers in his Province would get up an hour earlier than normal to finish some necessary work, but he could not imagine an equal number rising 60 minutes ahead of schedule for an additional hour of prayer, or even some social activity with the community. However, with the passage of time most of us learn this hard lesson: an ever deepening life of prayer helps sustain us in this way of life, more and more work does not.

What keeps us from prayer? I believe that, in part, we avoid it because we feel so inadequate when it comes to praying well. If your prayer is anything like mine, often enough it is filled with distractions: concerns about the day, phone calls to be made, work that needs to be done and done quickly. Yes, everything but God seems to intrude on my prayers some days.

But perhaps all these distractions should be seen as a reminder that you and I do not have to do anything to be worthy of God’s love. It is given to us freely and unconditionally. Like Mary, we can say “yes” to it or reject it, but the idea of having to earn God’s love is just not a possibility. This last quality of a religious person is the most difficult for most of us to accept. Why is this so? In part, because we are embarrassed by God’s unrestrained passion for us. And what eventually gives us the courage to respond to God? The fact that our hunger and thirst for him far exceed our selfishness and sin.

With that said, I must emphasize that this matter is a serious one. For years, we have been discussing our need for personal prayer, and talking about our failures in this area for at least that length of time. Meanwhile, an informal review of reasons given over the last ten years by brothers seeking dispensation from vows demonstrates that lack of a spiritual life ranks among the two most frequently mentioned. If only for that reason, we cannot continue to avoid facing this issue and finding a solution.

MARCELLIN'S WORLD AND OUR OWN

Marcellin Champagnat is a saint, not by his own merit, but rather because he allowed God's grace into his heart, where it took root and flourished. He suggested as much when he wrote in his Spiritual Testament: "There are difficulties in living the life of a good religious, but grace makes all things easy."

As it was for Marcellin, so also for you and me: Jesus must be first and foremost in our lives. The distinct character of our way of life has always been our public profession to live fully and radically the Good News of Jesus Christ as the object of our life.

Since our foundation in 1817, our Marist world has become increasingly more complex. Today, for example, the Institute is found in 77 countries, and includes brothers from many more cultures. Language, custom, and tradition vary from one nation to another, and, often enough, within the same country. All these developments must be taken into account in any contemporary discussion about our identity and Marcellin's spirituality.

For example, interest in ecological spirituality has grown in recent years in some parts of our world. At some point in the future, we may consider the contribution this approach to spirituality can make to our ap-



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preciation today of Marcellin's way to God. When we do so, however, we must keep in mind also that understandings about ecology are influenced by culture. Therefore, any fruitful discussion will entail, at the very least, prior knowledge of ecology in traditional cultures, Asian religious traditions, and a variety of contemporary culture.

With that said, we must admit that, despite the fact that we are today a worldwide Institute, our words and actions fail to reflect this reality. More often than not, our discussions about so many topics related to our way of life, including spirituality, continue to reflect what can best be described as a western way of thinking. At times also, our behavior and our language reveal an unspoken but, in my opinion, erroneous belief that some cultures are inherently better than others.

We are not alone, though, in our desire to transform ourselves into an Institute that is universal in word and in fact. The late German theologian Karl Rahner suggested as far back as 30 years ago that our Church in the latter part of the 20th century faced the same challenge: moving away from being a Church of western Christianity and toward being a world Church. As we continue to discuss the topics of Marcellin's spirituality and a contemporary identity for his Little Brothers, this call to universality should never be far from mind.

GROWING IN THE SPIRIT OF GOD

We have seen that Marcellin's relationship with the Lord developed over time. Early in his life he used the discipline of daily schedules and some fixed activities to develop some "habits" of prayer. With the passage of years, however, he grew to the point where his relationship with Jesus was second nature.

But in addition to embracing the Paschal Mystery and the twin habits of personal prayer and integrity in our moral life, what other practices did Jesus recommend and our founder use to foster a healthy spiritual life? Three in particular come to mind: one, a passion for justice; two, a grateful heart; three, involvement with an historic community of faith. A brief word about each.

It comes as no surprise that creating justice for the poor ranks high on the list of essential attitudes and actions that foster the spiritual life. For Jesus, there were two basic commandments: love God and love your neighbor. He bluntly tells us in Matthew 25 that we will be judged on how we treat people who are poor. The way in which we treat them will be equated to the way in which we treat God.

We are deceiving ourselves if we think we can relate to God without also continually caring for the weakest members in our society and ruthlessly examining how our own way of living is contributing to their plight. Genuine spirituality cannot be cut off from the concerns of persons who are poor, and the need for a just society.

A grateful heart is another important element in the spiritual life. After all, to be a saint is to be fueled by gratitude. It stands to reason, then, that only grateful hearts will be able to transform our world spiritually. The tale of the Prodigal Son illustrates this last point. Both sons are “away from their father’s house”; one through infidelity and weakness, the other due to bitterness and anger.

According to the custom of the day, either son was entitled to his inheritance, even while his father was alive. But the latter, for as long as he lived, was guaranteed the interest gained on any assets transferred to either son. In taking his inheritance and moving to a for-



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ign land, the younger son denied his father his due interest. The son sinned, not so much because of his loose living in a far-off country, but because he figuratively wished his father dead.¹⁷

But his older brother was no better. He did all the right things for all the wrong reasons. There was no celebration in his heart. Jesus asks us to avoid imitating either son, and instead encourages us to look to the grateful heart of the father and to take on his compassion.

Finally, spirituality has both a personal and a communal dimension. God calls us not only as individuals but also as a group. Some of us find that fact hard to accept. We want God, but we don’t want institutions such as the Church. Its humanity and sinfulness embarrasses us. Our search for God, however, must have a communal dimension; it can never be solely an individual quest. We also do well to remember that we are a part of that all too human and sinful Church, the one that is so often the object of our criticism.

SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

All well and good, you might say again, but how does all this talk about spirituality, passion, Marcellin, and the work of renewal come together? Permit me to offer practical applications. First of all, earlier I mentioned that among congregations who experienced one or more rebirths during the course of their history, one common factor was evident: their members initiated a profound change of heart, by renewing their life of faith, leading to a greater centeredness in Jesus Christ. This point is critical: the most important aspect of our identity as brothers is our spiritual identity.

Ellen Gaynor, OP, who served as oncologist to the late Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago, Illinois during the

period just prior to his death from cancer, has written movingly about the man and the impact he had on her. She discusses his faith and the tremendous courage he demonstrated in the weeks before cancer took his life.

The Cardinal's life and death remind us that personal witness can still be a powerful tool for promoting the message of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ What quickly becomes evident is that everyone knew that Joseph Bernardin was, first and foremost, a priest. Our primary identity as religious persons and brothers must be at least as clear, to ourselves and to all with whom we come into contact.

For those who want to grow in their personal life of prayer and, thus, in intimacy with God, the Word of God is the best place to start. Any time we spend in prayer with the Old and New Testaments will bear fruit.

Another aid is fixing a set time each day for personal prayer and then treating that time period as though it were an appointment that cannot be cancelled. I find, for example, that if I do not take the time in the morning, chances are that my time for personal prayer on any particular day will be quite short. By nightfall, I am too tired, and my day is often too distracted to reasonably accommodate a longer period of personal prayer. So, I must plan accordingly.

Communal prayer is another important moment in our daily life where intimacy with Jesus Christ can be nurtured. Here the challenge is often greater than in the area of personal prayer. Why? Because of the differences in personality, age, and formation experiences that exist among us. Our various understandings about the origin and nature of the prayers that have been designated for our common use is another important factor to consider.



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Both in its form and frequency, common prayer within consecrated life has been shaped by the concrete reality of the lives of religious at any given time. This situation has been true for religious life in general, and true also for our Institute. Often enough, the catalyst for the evolution of common prayer has been a General Chapter directive, a development in the Church at large, or time constraints arising from ministry.

Sad to say, less influential have been more important concerns such as a community honestly answering these questions: Just how do we as a group want to praise God? As a community, how best celebrate our hunger and thirst for Jesus?

Now, perhaps you find yourself uneasy reading that last paragraph. Taken to its logical conclusion, a process that uses those two questions as the means to organize community prayer could lead to a multiplicity of forms and styles. Images of the confusion that reigned at the Tower of Babel can come to mind!

We have, however, our Marist Constitutions, as well as the rich traditions of our Institute, to guide us, though many of us may need to refresh our memories in these areas before presenting our ideas to the community. To aid us in our reflection on common prayer, we also have our day-to-day experience in ministry, community, and other areas of our life, as well as some knowledge of just how common prayer among men and women religious has evolved over time.

Right now, then, let us take a few minutes to look at the historic evolution of our common prayer and place that story within the context of a brief history of community prayer among religious congregations from the time of the Desert Fathers until the present. With those tasks completed, we might find it easier to take a closer look at how we celebrate God's loving presence among us each day.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMON PRAYER

Painting in broad strokes, we can start our discussion about the evolution of common prayer in religious congregations with the Benedictine communities of the Middle Ages. Their members were partial to the Divine Office which, at the time, consisted of the chanting of psalms, interspersed with readings from the Fathers of the Church.

By the 10th and 11th centuries, however, the Eucharist – now elevated to a position of supreme importance among all the prayers of the Church – had usurped the Divine Office’s privileged position and taken its place at the center of the monastic day.

Appearing on the scene during the Middle Ages, the Cistercians and the Beguines were quite revolutionary in their approach to personal and common prayer and to spirituality. They emphasized the intention behind formal prayer. Their “affective mysticism,” as it was called, eventually included a number of mystical validations of prayer, such as levitations, trances, and the stigmata.

By the 16th century Ignatius of Loyola had developed a new technique for structured meditation that focused on the life of Christ and the great truths of the faith. His contribution led to changes in the type of prayer practiced by the members of many religious congregations. Rather than emphasize the recitation of the Divine Office or mystical contemplation, Ignatius directed his Jesuit confreres to perform the “Spiritual Exercises” during their annual retreat, these exercises being founded upon discursive meditation. The three powers of memory, intellect, and will were all used.

These new practices became quite popular among the members of a number of new congregations. Many founded in the 19th century adopted Ignatius’s practice of an annual retreat and made meditation the basis of



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“To love God,”
he said,
“to love God
and to labor
to make God
known
and loved –
this is what
a brother’s life
should be.”

their community prayer. Structured reflections on pre-selected points or topics replaced the affective mysticism that was so popular at an earlier time. For those of us formed before Vatican Council II, Ignatius’s structured approach to meditation will sound very familiar and, indeed, was the method we were taught above all others.

The Divine Office was set aside by many of the new apostolic congregations. In its place appeared a number of devotional prayers such as novenas, the rosary, morning and evening prayers, and litanies. These practices mirrored what was occurring, at the same time, in the larger Catholic community.

But why choose devotional prayers over the Divine Office? While a number of reasons undoubtedly go into any full explanation, the Office was not commonly used, in part, because recitation of all its hours interfered too much with the group’s ability to carry out its ministry. In the minds of many, one could not teach or nurse well while stopping every few hours for community prayer.

Unfortunately, in time, mystical or contemplative prayer fell into disuse, and those who aspired to it were judged to be arrogant. Contemplation came to be seen as reserved to a small group of the spiritually elite. This mistaken notion has impoverished us as a Church. If we, as apostolic religious, are to be contemplatives in action, we need to be as dedicated to the contemplative side of this self-definition as we are to the important element of action.

The style and form of community prayer that exists within our Institute and others, then, has evolved over time. At each step along the way it has drawn freely from the Church practice of the day. Now, as we reflect on Marcellin’s spirituality and struggle to arrive at what is appropriate and life-giving communal prayer for an Institute of our size and scope, we need to recall this history of common prayer in religious life.

More importantly, we need to have some understanding about the origins of our own common prayer. It is only then that we can take measure of the many new and innovative ways of praising God that have sprung up in our Catholic community in recent years, and see how they might help us in our task of renewing community prayer in a multicultural Institute.

A FEW REFLECTIONS ON OUR MARIST COMMON PRAYER

Like every Institute's common prayer, ours has a particular history. Some of us will remember, for example, the days when the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, recited in Latin, was used as a text for prayer. Today, finding even one copy of this publication can be a challenge. We know that singing or reciting the Salve Regina at the beginning and end of each day was not an Institute custom during the early days. It was only in 1830 that Marcellin added this practice. The "second" French Revolution was underway and the founder, in his great devotion to Mary, added the Salve to ask Mary to protect his young community and its members during a time of civil strife.

Brother Louis Marie, our third Superior General, apparently originated the invocations that we recite every morning. He was concerned about a safe journey for our brothers who set out to establish the Institute in South Africa. Since that Province, prior to restructuring, celebrated its 100th anniversary, we can assume that the brothers arrived without a mishap! The invocations recited so fervently by their contemporaries to insure their safe passage, however, continue to be part of the morning prayer of so many of our communities today.



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A FINAL WORD ABOUT PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL PRAYER

Marcellin knew that spirituality as manifest in personal and common prayer is at the heart of our lives as his Little Brothers. Without both, we soon drift away from the ideals of our way of life. Personal prayer every day must be the well from which we refresh ourselves regularly.

Common prayer was, in Marcellin's mind, equally important. To re-imagine and renew it, however, we must take some risks. First, there is the risk of sharing with others in community something about my relationship with Jesus. If you and I are to find new and satisfying ways of praising God, we must be willing to share something about our personal spirituality, as difficult as that sharing might be for some of us.

Next, we must make ourselves aware of what our Church is doing as a whole in the area of common prayer. There are many new initiatives underway among the People of God when it comes to praising God today.

Finally, we must respect differences in culture. Even within the confines of our present Constitution, our common prayer may not have exactly the same form in all parts of our world, but if it is true to Marcellin and his dream, it will be the same in spirit.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

And so, we have reached the end of this circular letter. As we do, let us not forget that while our Institute is emerging from a period that has been both blessed and burdensome, it continues to face some formidable tasks and complex challenges. The work that lies ahead will demand of us no less than what has been required to come

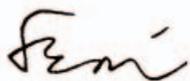
this far: open minds, a willingness to surrender divisive ideological points of view, and much sacrifice.

As I mentioned earlier, this circular letter discusses but one aspect of our identity as Little Brothers of Mary, albeit the most important. The members of our 20th General Chapter challenged us “to center our lives and communities in Jesus Christ, like Mary, with passion and enthusiasm, and to implement processes of human growth and conversion which promote this.”

Their Message is a challenging one, but not without its own measure of joy. Certainly, today joy must be very evident in our life and mission as Marcellin’s brothers. As one of our brothers said to me recently: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful for you and for me to come to the end of our Marist life and wonder if there was any merit in it at all, because we had enjoyed it so much?”

So, my Brothers, let us be up and doing. The challenge we face is clear, and we have the resources to contend with it. But hasn’t the challenge ever been the same, beginning with our foundation on 2nd January 1817? Marcellin put it very simply: “To love God,” he said, “to love God and to labor to make God known and loved – this is what a brother’s life should be.” In giving us this description of our vocation, he was reminding us that at the heart of our identity as Little Brothers of Mary, now as then, must be found, first and foremost, Jesus Christ and his Good News.

Blessings and affection,



Seán Sammon, FMS
Superior General



A Revolution of the Heart

Br. Seán D. Sammon, SG

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of Marcellin’s spirituality appeal to you and touch your heart? Are they present in your own spirituality today? If so, in what ways?
2. Now, what aspects of Marcellin’s spirituality trouble you or fail to touch your heart? Be specific if you can, and also try to write something about the reasons why these aspects are so unappealing.
3. What are the greatest rewards you experience and the greatest struggles you face in your life of personal prayer, and in your communal life of prayer? Does what you have read about Marcellin and his spirituality help you at all in addressing the struggles you face in a more satisfying way? If so, just how?
4. Discussions about common prayer can often lead to misunderstandings and strained relationships—the opposite outcome from what a life of prayer together should provide a community. Try to dream for the next few minutes: ideally, what would a life of common prayer look like for your community today, taking into consideration differences in age, temperament, culture, and understanding of religious life? How can this matter be discussed with greater freedom in your community? What outcome would you expect from that discussion?
5. Who is Mary for you today? How has your image of Mary changed, if at all, over the years since formation?

Note: Find a quiet place where you can consider these questions. Do so at a time when you do not have to rush. Take a pad and pen with you and jot down whatever thoughts, feelings, and inspirations you judge worth saving. Later, consider having a conversation with others who have made a similar reflection. Your notes will come in handy during such a discussion or later when you simply want to take a fresh look at the fruit of your reflection.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 John Padberg, SJ, in Laurie Felknor (Ed.). *The Crisis in Religious Vocations: An Inside View*. Mahwah, NJ, Paulist, 1989.
- 4 See *Acts of the 20th General Chapter*. Institute of the Marist Brothers of the Schools, Rome, May 2002.
- 5 *Document of the 20th General Chapter of the Institute of the Marist Brothers of the Schools. Choose Life*. Rome, October 13th, 2001.
- 6 Prayer, Apostolate, and Community, article 1.3 [“PAC document”] found in *Proceedings of the XVIIth General Chapter*, Marist Brothers of the Schools. Institute of the Marist Brothers of the Schools, 1976.
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- 9 Bruce Lescher, in Michael Meister, FSC (Ed.), *Blessed Ambiguity: Brothers in the Church*. Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1993.
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- 13 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. London: Herder and Herder, 1972.
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- 16 Ibid.
- 17 For further detail see Henri Nouwen. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. New York, Image Books, 1994.
- 18 Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. *The Gift of Peace*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998.

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