



IN HER ARMS OR IN HER HEART

**Mary, our Good Mother;
Mary, our Source of Renewal**

**Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS
Superior General**

**Institute of the Marist Brothers
Volume XXXI, no. 5
31st May, 2009**

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¹ See 27 May 1838 letter to Monseigneur Pompallier in *Lettres de Marcellin J.B. Champagnat* (Roma, Italia: Scuola Tipografica S. Pio X, Via Etruschi, 7-9), pp. 391-394.

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ITALIA
Tel. (39) 06 545171
Fax. (39) 06 54517217
publica@fms.it
www.champagnat.org

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...a fragment

In unexpected places, in moments
of half-hope, half-desolation,
when I thought you had moved away,
I collide with you.

Sometimes you walk in
and confront me with mystery, passion, life.
My heart catches fire.

Adapted from Catherine de Vinck
A Time to Gather, 1974

INTRODUCTION

31st May, 2009

Dear Brothers,

For years a set of display cases crowded the foyer outside the office of the Superior General on the first floor of the General House here in Rome. Each contained statues or images of Mary, with the number far exceeding the space available for an attractive exhibit.

Walking among these representations of the mother of Jesus, I often wondered: were she to come for an afternoon and view this collection, would she be able to find herself in the midst of it or would she instead ask how things had gotten so out of hand?

Who is this woman whom the early Church knew as Miriam of Nazareth? What place did she have in the life

of Peter, and that of Mary and Martha, John the beloved disciple, and centuries later Marcellin Champagnat, who named her our *First Superior* and called her *Ordinary Resource* and *Our Good Mother*? More importantly, who is Mary for us today, members of an Institute that bears her name and citizens of the 21st century?

With each passing year, fewer of us, both brothers and lay Marists alike, and for that matter Catholics in general, remember a life prior to Vatican II. Those who do, however, must admit that since the Council, Mary's prominence among many people of faith has diminished. Though still visibly present in a number of ways, she is but a shadow of her former self.

Admittedly, the steady erosion of knowledge about the mother of Jesus and honor paid to her has not been universal. For example, devotion to the image of *Nuestra Señora del Pilar*, praised as Mother of the Hispanic Peoples by Pope John Paul II², continues unabated at the Cathedral of Zaragoza, Spain. Pilgrims also flock each year to Lourdes in France, Fatima in Portugal, Knock in Ireland, and, more recently, Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The image of *Our Lady of Lebanon* towers over the harbor in Beirut and both Christian and Muslim visitors climb steps that go up to the statue's base. So, too, in Asia, on the African continent, in Oceania, the Americas, Catholics continue to express devotion to the mother of Jesus in a variety of unique ways.

And, while *Our Lady of Guadalupe* has been declared patroness of the Americas,³ many Latin American Catholics continue to hold dear other images of Mary such as *Nuestra Señora de Luján* (Argentina), *del Carmel del Maipú* (Chile), *de Caacupé* (Paraguay), *la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (Cuba), and *Nossa Senhora Aparecida* (Brazil), to name but a few.

² www.freebase.com/view/en/basilica_of_our_lady_of_the_pillar

³ <http://cnsblog.wordpress.com/2008/12/11/our-lady-of-guadalupe-patroness-of-the-americas/>



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With each
passing year,
fewer of us,
both brothers
and lay
Marists alike,
and for that
matter
Catholics in
general,
remember
a life prior to
Vatican II.

Despite all this evidence of devotion, we must still admit that in more than a few parts of our world awareness of Mary's spiritual presence among us has diminished since the last session of Vatican II came to a close. For example, the practice of reciting the *Salve Regina* at the end of each Mass was discontinued in the mid-1960s, while the treasure of the rosary lies forgotten in many places, and ancient litanies composed in Mary's honor are prayed far less frequently today than in the past.

This situation is no less troubling within the Institute. As early as 1967, delegates to our 16th General Chapter observed that the profound changes taking place in Marian devotion in many parts of our Marist world were leading to considerable confusion.⁴

Our *Marist Constitutions and Statutes* remind us of our obligation to "contemplate the life of our Mother and model, in order to absorb her spirit."⁵ However, gone are our common celebrations of the great Marian feasts, recitation of the *Little Office of Our Lady*, and in many places, marking Saturday in a special way as Mary's day and May and October as her months.

A PERSONAL EXAMPLE

Mine was the good fortune to grow up in one of New York City's few parishes staffed by the Order of Preachers: Saint Vincent Ferrer. Mary was everywhere in that Church. An altar in her honor was located to the left of the Church's main sanctuary, with another commemorating her at Fatima a short distance away. To mark the month of May a temporary altar was set up and a student selected to crown her statue.

When I moved to a Marist secondary school, the mother of Jesus continued to hold a place of prominence. Each

⁴ See *Marian document: The Blessed Virgin in the life and apostolate of the Marist Brother*, Roma (Italia: Tipografia, Don Guanella, S. Giuseppe al Trionfale, 1969).

⁵ C. 4.

day, for example, a Brother led students in the recitation of five decades of the rosary. There was Mary's sodality, and images of her present throughout the building.

Are my reminiscences about the past little more than nostalgia, a sentimental look back on an age that served its purpose well but has little relevance for us today? Not really. The Mary of my childhood and adolescence was someone central and important in my life. What was meaningful to a boy of eight or nine or fifteen, however, fails to serve me well today. I would like instead to have this formidable woman of faith in my life in a way that makes sense to me as an adult.

WHY A CIRCULAR ON MARY

Circulars about the mother of Jesus are hardly a new phenomenon in the history of our Institute. More often than not, past Superiors General made her the focus of at least one of their major letters, and referred to her in countless other ways.

For example, during his tenure of leadership, Brother Basilio Rueda wrote a circular entitled *Mary in our Life* and delivered it just as capitulants to our 17th General Chapter were beginning their meeting. The text was divided into two parts: the first consisting of a theological reflection on Mary and the second made up of the personal testimony of a number of brothers from throughout the Institute.

Brothers Charles Howard and Benito Arbués made continual reference to Mary in the circulars and letters they wrote to brothers and lay Marists. Aware of the important place that the rosary has always had in the life of our Institute, Charles developed five additional mysteries and grouped them under the title of hope; he also wrote a prayer in Mary's honor that was first used during the Chapter of 2001.⁶

⁶ www.champagnat.org/shared/20Capitolo/Documentos/Howard/EN30102_Charles.doc



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Benito encouraged the image of Mary as “constant companion,” especially during times of trial and difficulty. Writing to his brothers under the title *Fidelity to the Mission in Situations of Social Unrest*, he brought his reflection to a close with these words: “When the Constitutions tell us that our ways of being and acting draw their inspiration and guidance from the attitudes that made Mary the perfect disciple of Christ (cf. C 4), they are asking us to live her spirit.

“I ask Mary to give to me and to each one of my Marist Brothers that attitude of attentive listening, prompt obedience, simple commitment to people, trust, strength, humility and serene joy. In times such as these, we are prompted to say with Father Champagnat: ‘She has done everything for us’.”⁷

Those participating in recent General Chapters have also honored Mary’s important place and role in the history and life of our Institute. Following almost immediately upon Vatican II, delegates to our 16th General Chapter (1967-1968) wrote a thoughtful and theologically informed document about her.⁸ In clear and compelling language they aptly summarized the teachings of Vatican II regarding the mother of Jesus and put before Institute members a challenge to re-imagine the place of Mary in our life and mission that has yet to be taken up fully.

So also, the members of subsequent Chapters have included the mother of Jesus in their deliberations with the 1985 Chapter providing a fine example of this practice. In writing our present *Constitutions and Statutes*, capitulants made sure that an article about Mary, as well as other references to her, appeared in each of the chapters that made up the final text.

With that said, however, these questions still remain: “Why another circular about Mary?” and “Why a circular about Mary at this time in our history?”

⁷ See Brother Benito Arbués. *Fidelity to the Mission in Situations of Social Unrest* (Rome, Italy, General House, 3(2), 8th May 1998).

⁸ See *Marian document: The Blessed Virgin in the life and apostolate of the Marist Brother*.

There are several reasons actually that justify writing this circular, and writing it now. To begin with, the time appears right to find a renewed understanding about the place of Mary within the life and mission of our Institute.

Though opinions differed among the Fathers of Vatican II about where exactly to place the teaching on Mary, the years before and immediately after that historic gathering brought her a new prominence and gave rise to fresh insights and innovative ways of understanding age-old Church teachings about the mother of Jesus.

Unfortunately, this trend reversed itself over time. The number of publications about Mary dwindled, and images of her were no longer common in many places where they had been found traditionally.⁹

These developments unavoidably had a direct effect on Marian devotion within the Church as well as the Institute, and a number of once familiar practices were put aside. Some among us, at home with descriptions of Mary that have their origin in Scripture rather than tradition,¹⁰ welcomed these changes, seeing them as being part of a long overdue and necessary renewal of Mary's place within the Church and Institute. Others, however, concluded that decisions taken at Vatican II unduly diminished the role of the mother of Jesus within God's plan of redemption.

Taking one or the other of these two positions does little to foster dialogue about the role and meaning of Mary in our life today. For while there is no denying that God called her to a special vocation in salvation history, we cannot forget that her closeness to God enhanced her humanity.¹¹ Like you and me, the mother of Jesus searched and was uncertain. She had her share of

⁹ See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), pp. 114-134.

¹⁰ For a wide ranging discussion of this area see Charlene Spretnak, *Missing Mary: the Queen of Heaven and her re-emergence in the modern Church*, (New York, NY: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004).

¹¹ For greater development of this idea see Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Ideal of Christianity* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1976).



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anxiety, frustration, and disappointment. Theologian Leonardo Boff, for example, reminds us that Mary's Immaculate Conception "does not mean that she was never troubled, or that she had no need for faith and hope."¹²

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux believed that it was for these reasons that love and honor have always been shown toward Mary. She remarked further that she loved the mother of Jesus not because she received exceptional privileges, but rather because she lived and suffered as we all do in the dark night of faith.¹³

With almost five decades having passed since the close of the Council, we have a timely opportunity once again to reflect on the place of Mary in our lives and our devotion to her. To do so will help us to understand more fully the changes that have taken place in this important area of our life and to chart a way forward.

At the same time, by welcoming the mother of Jesus in a new way into our hearts and lives, we will have a chance to make our own one of the key elements of the Founder's spirituality: placing humility within the context of a relationship with Mary. Though in time it came to be seen as an ascetic virtue, early in the development of Marist spirituality, humility more closely resembled a spiritual attitude or outlook. Consisting of the filial abandonment to Mary not only of oneself but also of the Institute that bore her name, this privileged relationship is captured in the familiar phrase, "All to Jesus through Mary."

Marcellin placed great weight on humility and struggled to give it a central place in his life. It was the first lesson that he taught to new postulants; *Livre d'or*, a treatise on humility, was the first book that he placed in their hands.

¹² See Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

¹³ Cited in Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A mosaic of Mary in Scripture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), p. 24.

The life of the mother of Jesus was a constant reminder to him that its perfection is not to be found in extravagant self-abasement. For in being nobody other than herself, Mary came to discover the glory of God. Over time the Founder realized that genuine humility is realized when we, like Mary, welcome God into our lives. In so doing, we come to see ourselves as we truly are: creatures in the presence of the Creator.

Marcellin himself, well aware of his personal limitations and realizing that his newly founded community was growing quickly, eventually entrusted to Mary all involved and the project itself. In time the virtue of humility was coupled with simplicity, and linked eventually also with modesty.

Today, faced with the task of renewal, you and I might feel equally inadequate. Certainly, we can take pride in the fact that with God's grace we have come a long way on that journey, but we must be aware that an equally difficult path lies ahead.

The work of preparing our Institute for a new world has been hampered also at times by half-commitments, self-preoccupation, and a reluctance to change. The model of Mary at the Annunciation presents a sharp contrast to these ways of thinking and acting. Her commitment was whole-hearted, her spirit open to God's will, her ability to change a model for us to imitate. We can assume also that once God's messenger moved on that doubts and questions did not disappear. What would make us believe that our situation should be any different?

By engaging Mary in the work of renewal as a fellow pilgrim and guide, we will not only be enlisting her aid, but also hopefully taking on her spirit of faith and openness to God's will.

Let us not take this step, however, unless we are willing to deal with its consequences. For if we express to the mother of Jesus our keen desire to work for the full renewal of our Institute, chances are that she will accept our offer.



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DEVOTION

Though our Marist documents often reflect contemporary understandings about the mother of Jesus, more than a few of us feel at a loss when asked to speak about Mary or our relationship with her. So also, we often cling to devotions that belong to another period in our history because we fear we have nothing with which to replace them. Today we need to discover anew the mother of Jesus in light of all that we have learned about her since the close of Vatican II and to develop our devotion to her accordingly.

Mary was no minor character in the mystery of salvation and yet in some ways we have come to treat her as though she were. Today we have the means at hand to find a renewed place for her in our lives, the Church, and our Institute. As mentioned earlier, contemporary biblical scholarship and theological reflection involving Mary bore great fruit prior to the Council and during the years immediately afterwards. Luke's account of the Annunciation, the message contained in the infancy narratives, John's focus on her role in the first sign at Cana, and her presence at Pentecost as described in the *Acts of the Apostles* are all more clearly understood.¹⁴

In recent years also many of us have acquired a deeper appreciation of the origins and purpose of our Institute and the nature of its spirituality. Ongoing work aimed at providing greater insight into the age in which the Founder lived as well as his experience of Jesus and Mary has opened new windows of understanding.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann (eds.), *Mary in the New Testament* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1978).

¹⁵ Brother Paul Sester's work assembling the letters and other writings of Father Champagnat and providing a commentary to accompany them; Patrimony courses held in 1993 and 2008; the ongoing work of Brother Aureliano Brambila at CEPAM in Mexico; the historical investigations of Brother André Lanfrey; the construction of a permanent archive in Rome, as well as the research of Brothers Gabriel Michel, Alain DeLorme, Alexandre Balko; and the efforts of many dedicated translators have provided us with an broad understanding that was not present even fifty years ago. The publication of *Water from the Rock* in 2007 also provided a large audience access to an introduction to Marist apostolic spirituality.

Making use of these and other resources, we should be able not only to appreciate more fully Marcellin's relationship with Mary, but also to re-imagine that relationship for our day and age. In that way we can ensure that she will be for us the inspiration and sister-in-faith that she was for him, the woman to whom he gave credit for the existence of his Institute and its mission.

At the same time, we should not hesitate to renew some of our long-standing ways of showing devotion to Mary. They have served the People of God, including ourselves, well for centuries and have the potential to do the same for some years to come.

We will be remiss, however, if we concentrate solely on reclaiming past practices while also failing to appreciate Mary, first and foremost, as the Lord's disciple. In so doing, however, we must be careful not to transform her simply into a symbol or icon.¹⁶

Those who made up the membership of Vatican II described Mary as the model of the Christian life and shed light on her role in the history of salvation. Paul VI later called her the Mother of the Church and encouraged us to imitate her.¹⁷ He pointed out that she had the good sense to question God's messenger. However, once that process reached its conclusion, her response to the invitation of God's emissary was unequivocal.¹⁸

The Pope's remarks were meant to be something more than a down-to-earth description of the mother of God at the time of the Annunciation. Rather, he presented us with a way of understanding Mary and her relationship with God that can be of help with the challenge of renewal facing our Institute today. For I can think of no better approach to that task than the one that she took when receiving God's messenger.

¹⁶ See Rea McDonnell, SSND, *Into the Heart of Mary* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press 2009).

¹⁷ http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

¹⁸ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_Marialis-cultus_en.html



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Here was a woman with strength enough to raise questions about what was being asked of her, and yet humble enough to eventually embrace God's Word. While others were looking for a Messiah who was a conquering king, she was able to recognize the Suffering Servant who came in his stead.

We find a valuable lesson here. For in setting out on the journey of renewal, more than a few of us resembled those among the Jewish people who anticipated a Messiah who would restore their fortune. Consequently, we, like them, were unprepared for what has come our way: smaller numbers, aging, even scandal, during the years since the Council came to a close.

In the process we have learned two important lessons: one, we are called to be faithful, not successful; two, a change of heart is required if any genuine renewal is to take place, a change of heart for our Institute and for each of us, its members.

MARY AND RENEWAL

As an Institute we stand today in a doorway. If we are uncertain about whether to go forward or backward, of this much we can be sure: we cannot stand still. The urge to move backward can be seductive. At times we might convince ourselves that a return to the ways of the past is a viable solution. After all, they are familiar and worked well enough at one time in our history as an Institute.

To choose this option would be to betray the dream of Marcellin Champagnat. He faced challenges at least as formidable as the ones confronting us today. His faith, reliance on Mary, simplicity, and lack of self-deception allowed him to overcome each of them in turn.

When the revolution of 1830 fueled tensions between Church and State, for example, the Founder appeared unshaken by all the upheaval. Asking Mary's special protection during a difficult time of political

and social unrest, he introduced the *Salve Regina* as the first community prayer of the brothers' day, a custom that continues to the present.

Likewise, in 1903 with God's grace our brothers responded to a perilous moment in our Institute's history with courage and ingenuity. Once again, their faith, willingness to rely on the mother of Jesus, and the virtues of humility and simplicity helped them win the day.

What will future generations say about you and me? That we did what was necessary to ready ourselves and our Institute for another century of evangelizing poor children and young people? That in a world experiencing tremendous upheaval and change, our spirit of faith, our willingness to transcend ourselves and our own needs, our zeal for the Good News of Jesus Christ gave hope to those who came after us? Or will they be forced to say that we failed on both counts?

The challenge, then, is clear: Do you and I have the courage, like Marcellin, to entrust the entire process of our renewal to the mother of Jesus and to accept the consequences of this decision?

Brothers, the time has come for us to commit ourselves again to the work of renewing our Institute with its life and mission. To do so will require a spirit of sacrifice and a willingness to change on the part of all of us. Add to that a generous heart and a belief in the future of our way of life. And what about those who may have little or no interest in being part of this effort? They should at least agree not to get in the way of those who realize that we must move ahead.

Today in the process of renewal two areas need attention urgently: one, understanding and appreciating more fully the apostolic nature of our Institute, and, two, ceasing to think about action and contemplation as foes vying for our time and interest, and to begin seeing them for what they are: allies, friends, essential aspects of the *Good News* of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately more than a few of us continue to think about religious life within a largely monastic frame of reference. Today, by contrast, we must ask: Are we



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When
the time
was right,
the Word
of God
was made
manifest
not at
the centers
of power
and wealth,
but rather
at the
margins
among
the poor.

willing to allow a truly apostolic form of consecrated life finally to grow and develop free of the constraints of the past? Can we agree that apostolic zeal should be among its chief characteristics? What steps must we take to achieve a positive outcome in these two areas?

As Marcellin's brothers, some of us have been fond of saying that we are better at working than praying. That belief is based, in part, on misconceptions that we have about the nature of contemplation, misconceptions that have their origin in the early part of the 17th century. Consequently, we have fears about making this form of prayer a central part of our lives.

Can we admit today that the prayer of the Church is contemplation? Can we also cease insisting that union with others is realized through the virtue of compassion while union with God is achieved through contemplation, and instead acknowledge that the end of both is union with God and others?

This brief reflection on the mother of Jesus in Marist life, then, is not meant to be an all inclusive discussion about Mary and our Institute but has instead two modest aims. First, to help you and me grow in appreciation of the Founder's relationship with the mother of Jesus so as to give the one we have with her a more central place in our lives. He called her Our Good Mother but related to her as though she were his confidant. How can you and I, his brothers, ensure that the mother of Jesus is for us the person that she was for him?

Second, to come to accept Mary as an important source of renewal in our Institute today and to take action to ensure that she remains so. She was there for Marcellin during the early days of our Marist life; she was there for our brothers during the crisis of 1903; and, if we but ask her, she will be there for us today, serving as a companion and a guide for the work that lies ahead.

Mary is and will always be worthy of honor, first and foremost, because she heard God's Word and kept it. By entrusting the work of renewal to her, we pledge ourselves to do the same.

For, like us, she was born at a certain moment in the course of human events, made her home in a particular place, and lived out her years under a unique set of political, religious, and economic conditions. What do we know about the world in which Mary lived and the realities of her day-to-day life? How did these elements help shape her self-understanding and worldview? More importantly, how did they work together to prepare her to accept the will of God in her life? We might ask the same of ourselves.

Unschoolled, poor and powerless, betrothed and living in an obscure village in an occupied country, Mary encountered God's messenger. That fact makes the revolutionary message of her *Magnificat* all the more understandable: for she announced to all who would listen that God her Savior was coming to overturn oppression in favor of the poor of this earth. During so many ages since, herein lay the great scandal of Christianity: when the time was right, the *Word of God* was made manifest not at the centers of power and wealth, but rather at the margins among the poor.

As you begin reading this circular, then, I invite you to join me on a pilgrimage in search of the Mary that Marcellin knew and loved. During our journey together we shall look at her and her life through the eyes of history and the eyes of faith and come to know her as the first among the poor of Yahweh, first model of the Church, first model of the Christian attitude.¹⁹

Eventually we shall also take those steps necessary to give her a more permanent place in our hearts and in our lives, and to invite her to take the lead in our present journey of renewal. Then she will be for you and me, as she was for the Founder, not only our *Good Mother* and *Ordinary Resource*, but also our confidant, our source of strength and consolation, our sister in faith.

¹⁹ See *Marian document: The Blessed Virgin in the life and apostolate of the Marist Brother*.



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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Printed below and elsewhere in this text you will find a few questions that might assist you with your reflection about points raised in this circular. Consider them as a resource for possible use if they are helpful. If you have available other more effective means for making this text your own, by all means use them.

1. Spend some time recalling your own history with Mary. When did your relationship with her first begin and how has it unfolded? Have there been times when her presence made an important difference in your life of faith, in your religious vocation, in your understanding of yourself as one of Marcellin's brothers?

2. Give yourself the freedom to dream about the renewal of our Institute. What's the most pressing challenge associated with this process in your Province and what can you do personally to address it?

SECTION I

Mary in Marcellin's religious formation and life of faith

As his life came to a close, the Founder blessed our early brothers using these words, “May a tender and filial love of that Good Mother animate you at all times and in every circumstance.”²⁰ Though he grew into his relationship with her over time, Mary always had a central place in Marcellin's life, mission, and spirituality. We can say with confidence that throughout his life, he related to her as a son would to his mother.

In a moment we will take a closer look at the development of that relationship and examine the source of his devotion to the mother of Jesus. Let's consider a few points, however, before doing so.

One, Marcellin found pretense and self-promotion insufferable; we can assume, therefore, that he brought

²⁰ See Joseph Benedict Marcellin Champagnat, “Spiritual Testament,” in *Marist Constitutions and Statutes* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Marist Press, 1990), p. 130.

to his dealings with the mother of Jesus the same simple and straightforward style that was so characteristic of him on other occasions.

Two, open to the religious thinking of his day, the Founder held the conviction that the mother of Jesus was an intercessor before God. The words of the *Memorare* and the *Sub tuum* were often in his mind and heart; references to clemency and mercy also appear throughout his discourses on Mary.

Three, Marcellin lived during what many thought to be a golden age for those devoted to Mary. Inspired by the Enlightenment's rational approach, it began with the birth of Mariology in the 17th century²¹ and came to a close shortly after Vatican II. Privileges of all sorts were bestowed on Mary in her role as mother of Jesus.²² New forms of piety blossomed, and additional feast days and titles were created in her honor.

However, the period was not without its problems. An anti-mystical frame of mind took hold in the Church just as the 17th century was coming to a close, and continued through the early years of the 19th century. One historian of spirituality referred to the entire period as the "twilight of mysticism."²³

Holiness was thought to be achieved only through prayer and ascetical practices, with contemplation being reserved for those few chosen by God. More heroic than holy, stoic than Christian,²⁴ this approach to the spiritual life did little but discourage people. Unfortunately, it also became the foundation upon which some religious formation programs were built, and continues even today to influence the lives of some of us.

This was the world into which the Founder was born. The word *spirituality*, for example, began to be

²¹ The term itself is credited to Nicholas Nigido, who used it in his 1602 treatise entitled *Summa sacrae Mariologiae*.

²² See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

²³ See André Lanfrey, FMS, "Essay on the origins of spirituality," in *Marist Notebooks*, 19(XIII), June 2003, p. 19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.



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used commonly in the French language only during the latter part of the 19th century, years after his death.²⁵ For the Founder and his biographer terms such as *holiness* and *perfection* would have been more familiar.

These and other elements influenced Marcellin Champagnat and played a role in shaping his faith and determining his religious practices as he travelled through life. He was fortunate enough, however, to have some exceptional guides along the way, not the least of whom was Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus.

THE EARLY YEARS

How, then, did the Founder's relationship with Mary begin and what influences helped it to unfold as it did? There can be no doubt that he loved the mother of Jesus, but what caused him to rely on her so, and why did he show such devotion to her and encourage others to do the same? For what reasons did he name her our First Superior and call her *Ordinary Resource* and *our Good Mother*?

The origin of the Founder's affection for Mary can be found in several places. During his earliest years the example and direction of his mother, Marie Thérèse, and aunt, Louise, a Sister of Saint Joseph, were foundational; these two women awakened his spiritual life.

No doubt Marcellin's mother instilled in him the rudiments of prayer, while Louise assisted with his early religious education. Also, she was probably the first to model for him how well prayer and apostolic effort fit together. No doubt, too, he absorbed from both women practices of piety and the spiritual heritage of the high plateau region in which they lived.²⁶

The Founder was also fortunate to grow up in the district of Marlhes. A region of deep faith, it claimed

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁶ For further information see Antoine Forissier, *For a Marian Church: Marist Founders and Foundresses* (Rome, Italy: The Marist Fathers, 1992), pp. 47 ff.

Saint Jean-François Regis as its patron and made his shrine a place of pilgrimage. This saint impressed young Marcellin, and influenced his spiritual formation. Brother François tells us that this devotion continued throughout the Founder's life and calls Jean-François Regis our second patron.²⁷

Living in the Marian district of bishops Pothin and Irenaeus further encouraged Marcellin's devotion to Mary as did the writings of Mariologists such as Olier and Grignon de Montfort. In all probability, as a seminarian, he took Father Olier, Founder of the Sulpician seminaries, as an important model. The latter considered "the Blessed Virgin as the inspiration, the only real superior and the support of the seminary of Saint-Sulpice,"²⁸ and went so far as to credit Mary with inspiring plans for the building's construction.²⁹

We cannot help but see a connection between Olier's use of the term "Mary's work" when referring to seminary projects and Marcellin's later application of that same phrase to the building of the Hermitage and, indeed, the entire Marist project. In time the Founder came to the conclusion that Mary was the master-mind behind the Society of Mary. In an 1838 letter to Brother Hilarion, he writes, "Let us tell Mary that this is far more her work than ours."³⁰ Marcellin saw himself as seconding Mary's plans, not as having an alternative set of his own.

The idea of being a tool used by Mary to carry on her work goes back to the very foundation of the Society of Mary and was deeply rooted in the Founder's heart. But he could hardly think otherwise. The events of his life had convinced him that he owed everything to the mother of Jesus.

²⁷ See Paul Sester, FMS, "Documents: Brother François evokes Father Champagnat," *Marist Notebooks*, 19(XIII), June 2003, p. 81.

²⁸ Cited in Paul Sester, FMS, "Mary in the Life of Marcellin Champagnat," *Marist Notebooks*, January 1996, no. 8, p.30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See Frère Paul Sester, FMS, *Lettres de Marcellin J.B. Champagnat* (Rome, Fratelli Maristi, 1985), pp.367-369.



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In her arms or in her heart

No doubt
Marcellin's
mother
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the rudiments
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while Louise
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For Marcellin believed firmly that it was Mary who had remedied the Institute's first vocation crisis by bringing him eight postulants who arrived after many prayers and novenas.

He was convinced that it was she who had ensured that the Hermitage project was completed without any personal injury to its builders or delays due to the lack of money.

He never for a moment doubted that the mother of Jesus had saved him and Brother Stanislaus the night they were caught in the snow and quickly losing strength.

Marcellin was certain, too, that Mary had been instrumental in causing the threatened suppression of his Institute by the Archdiocese to simply fade away.

In pointing to these examples, I do not want to give the impression that for Marcellin Mary was a type of *Deus ex machina*, someone to be summoned to action in a crisis. Rather, he saw all of the situations just mentioned as signs of her ongoing care and protection.

His attitude toward the Society of Mary was much the same. The inspiration for its foundation had come to Father Courville in the basilica of *Le Puy*. Marcellin looked at its success, and the parallel growth of his Little Brothers, with a certain sense of wonder.

At the outset, Marcellin had to pressure his fellow seminarians to gain their permission to add a branch of teaching brothers. They eventually told him to take that project upon himself and left the matter in his hands. As mentioned earlier, his confidence in Mary was total. So he placed his entire undertaking — all his activities as well as himself — in her arms, satisfied that he was serving as her instrument. But this action on the part of the Founder would have come as a surprise to no one. For in the spirituality of Marcellin Champagnat, the virtue of humility and a devotion to Mary always went hand in hand.

THE SEMINARY EXPERIENCE AND INITIAL YEARS OF PRIESTLY LIFE

Throughout the Founder's life, an ongoing process of conversion marked his ever deepening relationship with God. His spiritual life took shape only over time; the maturity that was his during the later years of his life was due to God's grace and his own hard work. We can console ourselves with the knowledge that in his spiritual quest as a young man, Marcellin first gave emphasis to self-discipline, achieving it only with the help of a well thought-out program of prayer and penance during seminary holidays and as a young priest in LaValla.

Next, he made use of a number of rules to guide his way of living. They helped him control his behavior and achieve a certain serenity of soul. Thankfully, though, the Founder's common sense and good judgment aided him in rising above some of the legalism and rigidity that characterized so much of the moral theology taught in early 19th century French seminaries.

We know already that during his formative years Marcellin absorbed the rich life of faith — including devotion to Mary — that was so characteristic of the dioceses of Lyons and Le Puy. On entering the seminary, he added the practices of his Sulpician professors to those he had already adopted.

Henceforth, the name of the mother of Jesus was invoked at the beginning of every exercise and almost all of them ended with the *Sub tuum*. The rosary was recited daily, Mary's feasts celebrated with great solemnity, the month of May consecrated to her especially.

Novenas had an important place in Marcellin's way of perfection and he encouraged others in their use. The frequency with which he made use of and recommended them attests to his fervor as well as his concern for the common people of his day. He realized that simple and easily remembered formulas would probably be most useful to them.

The Founder arrived eventually at a point where his



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life of faith was built upon the foundation of love of God and others. Gregarious, he loved people and enjoyed spending time with them. He also was willing to hear what they had to say. If such were the case in his human relationships, why not in those he had with Jesus and Mary? As he grew in holiness, the Founder came to realize that each person he met was an image of the risen Savior whom he had come to know and love so well.

Over time, Marcellin developed the habit of turning to Mary in every situation and he recommended that his brothers do the same. They would find peace of mind and heart knowing that they were serving as her instruments, doing her work, realizing her plans.

Brother François tells us that the Founder's love for the mother of Jesus was evident also in his devotion to the saints. He had, for example, great admiration for Saint Ignatius Loyola and often extended the saint's maxim with an additional word about Mary. "All for the greater glory of God," he would say and then add, "*and for the honor of Mary, Mother of the Lord.*"³¹

Marcellin encouraged our early brothers, as he would encourage us today, to follow his lead in their devotion to the mother of Jesus. Along with her son, she is mentioned 87 times in his letters, with 79 of those occurrences appearing in letters of circulars addressed to the brothers.³²

For example, on February 4th, 1831 the Founder wrote to Brothers Antoine and Gonzaga, "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."³³ He trusted completely in Mary's intercession: once her petitioners had done their best, she had to take responsibility for seeing them through.

³¹ See Brother Paul Sester, FMS, "Brother Francois evokes Father Champagnat" in *Marist Notebooks*, 18(XIII), June 2002, pp. 81-81.

³² See "Information," *Marist Notebooks*, no. 8, January 1996, p. 3.

³³ See *Lettres*, p. 62.

The Founder also asked our early brothers 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 practice of offering Mary the keys of the house and of placing the names of the brothers not resident in the Hermitage community in the heart hung around the neck of the statue referred to as “Our Lady of the Hermitage.” “She is in charge of us,” he said. “She is our patroness, our protectress.”³⁴

Marcellin also counseled the 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.”³⁵

“Good Mother,” is the expression that Marcellin used most frequently to describe Mary. It appears 14 times in his letters alone and in almost all cases it is preceded by the adjective “our,” but never by the word “the.” His relationship with the mother of the Lord was one of substance and intimacy, not formality and distance. The Founder described the mother of Jesus as the one who takes care of and protects us, the one to whom we should have recourse in our needs.³⁶ He also advised his brothers to take “a little rest under the care of Mary, our gentle Mother.”³⁷

Finally, Marcellin entrusted his benefactors to the care of Mary, our Good Mother, and relied on her to reward them for their generosity. For example, when a priest by the name of Father Mazellier made arrangements for some of our early brothers to train with recruits from his own congregation, the Founder thanked

³⁴ See Frère Paul Sester, FMS, *Lettres de Marcellin J.B. Champagnat*, pp.62-64.

³⁵ See *Rule of 1837*.

³⁶ See Brother Jean Roche, FMS, “Mary, Our Good Mother: According to the Letters of Marcellin Champagnat,” *Marist Notebooks*, no. 2, June 1991, pp. 53-60.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.



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In her arms or in her heart

Marcellin
knew that
he had been
called to serve
persons
who were poor
and he spent
his life
doing so.

him by saying, “Mary, our Good Mother, will not let the favor you are doing her children go unrewarded.”³⁸

MARY AND THE POOR

Marcellin knew that he had been called to serve persons who were poor and spent his lifetime doing so. He never lost touch with their reality and made it his own. Respecting people as individuals, he taught them to recognize their self-worth.

Here again, Mary, who was poor in spirit and in fact, was a model and source of inspiration. As a member of the *anawim*, a group many believed to be made up of what remained of Israel’s faithful remnant, she had total confidence in God, and relied on him completely.

Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, lists the *anawim*’s virtues: mercy, meekness, purity of heart, peacemaking, a thirst for justice. Likewise, the words of Mary’s *Magnificat* gives us some insight into the group’s spirituality. In Luke’s account the dreamy, shy maiden of so many artists’ imagination is nowhere to be found. In her stead we encounter a proud, enthusiastic, and bold young woman who brings news of collapsing kingdoms and humbled chieftains of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of each of us.³⁹

Today we must ask ourselves: How present in your life and mine are the virtues presented in the Beatitudes and the *Magnificat*’s spirit? At times, you and I can give lip service to the belief that the coming of Jesus changed the world forever. But often enough, we act in ways that would fail to convince anyone that the presence of the Lord in time and history made much of a difference at all.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A mosaic of Mary in Scripture* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Company, Inc., 2005), pp. 100-122.

Were we to take to heart the words of Mary's song, a song that many of us pray each day, we would be so much bolder in our embrace of the gospel message. For her words call you and me to fundamental change, a change of heart, not simply outward appearances.



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MARY AS MEDIATRIX

In keeping with the Mariology of his day, Marcellin also saw Mary as a mediatrix; she was to be the means by which sinful humanity would make its way back to God. This way of looking at the mother of Jesus dominated the Church's thinking during the second millennium.

We can trace its origins back to a time when medieval theologians began to portray the risen Jesus as remote from the faithful. About the same time, the Church took on an increasingly stern juridical tone, putting into place a system of penalties, some quite severe. Faced with a distant God and the Church's rigorous penalties, and well aware of our human tendency to sin, many of the faithful sought Mary's help.

Here was a heavenly power with a maternal heart, a person who would take the side of the sinner. The fact that she was also the mother of the one judging did not escape the attention of those who implored her aid. This way of thinking continued to develop to the point where Mary came to be seen as the mediator between Christ and his Church.

These understandings aside, Marcellin's relationship with Mary matured over time. His trust in her was total and he had confidence in her protection, saying often to his brothers, "With Mary, we have everything; without her, we are nothing; because Mary has her adorable son, either in her arms or in her heart."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See also, *Lettres*, 194, pp. 391-394.

In her arms or in her heart

Absent from Marcellin's dealings with the mother of Jesus is any trace of embarrassment. The closer he feels to her, the more she is present to him as a living person. Eventually a relationship between two people constituted his devotion to her; she became his confidant.

INCARNATIONAL AND MARIAL

The mystery of the incarnation, however, was at the heart of the Founder's spirituality. While he focused often on the intimate relationship between Jesus and Mary, it was Jesus and not Mary who was the final destination of his journey of faith.⁴¹ He believed that the Lord was close at hand and his confidence in him and abandonment to his will grew over time.

Brother François captures this attitude of the Founder in his instruction entitled *Filial spirit toward God*. "Filial spirit is also abandonment of self in the hands of God [...] who makes us go to God with the same freedom, the same self-indulgence as a cherished child." The Founder often quoted the words of Psalm 127, "If the Lord does not build a house, in vain do the builders toil."

Marcellin's incarnational spirituality was evident also in many of his letters. For example, in April 1839 he wrote to Brother Marie-Laurent, "Your letter, my 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."⁴²

The Founder often signed his letters with this characteristic phrase, "I leave you in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary," and was fond of saying, "These are

⁴¹ See Seán D Sammon, FMS, *A Heart that Knew No Bounds: the life and mission of Saint Marcellin Champagnat* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2000), pp. 87-94.

⁴² See Paul Sester, FMS (Présentés par) *Lettres de Marcellin J. B. Champagnat* 1 Textes (Rome, Casa Generalizia dei Fratelli Maristi, 1985), (La lettre 249), p. 479.

such good places; it is so good to be there.” His lectures are the source of our early brothers’ attachment to Christ through the Crib, Cross, and Altar: he encouraged them to use these havens for reflection and prayer.

Marcellin Champagnat embraced fully the *Good News* of Jesus Christ. The Lord and Mary, his first disciple, were the Founder’s constant companions. Discovering the joy of the gospel, he let its message transform him.

Father Champagnat wanted to share with all whom he met, but chiefly with poor children and young people, all that he had seen and heard. “To love God,” he often said, “to love him and to labor to make him known and loved—this is what a brother’s life should be,⁴³” and “To educate children well, one must love them....⁴⁴” Unwittingly, with these few words, he painted his own portrait, recounted his own story.



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⁴³ Brother John-Baptist Furet, *Life of Blessed Marcellin Joseph Benedict Champagnat* (Rome, General House, 1989), p. 490.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Once again, you will find below a few questions that might help you with your reflection on the text.

1. What aspects of Marcellin's relationship with Mary capture your heart and what features of that relationship feel foreign to you? Please say a word about what makes you react favorably to some manifestations of that relationship and less so to others.
2. Spend some time identifying those persons and events in your life that have influenced, for good or ill, the shape and nature of your relationship with the mother of Jesus. In what ways did each contribute to making that relationship what it is today?

SECTION II

Mary in our lives today

The golden age of Mary, which got underway during the 17th century, peaked just as the 20th century began to unfold. Moving toward a close, the period continued to maintain a remarkable vigor with thousands among the faithful joining groups such as the Legion of Mary, the Church declaring two Marian dogmas, Pope Leo XIII writing 11 of his 42 encyclicals about the mother of Jesus, and 65 religious congregations being founded in her honor between 1835 and 1935.⁴⁵

As the Church moved closer to the Second Vatican Council, however, different points of view began to emerge in the once unified field of Mariology. Eventually a split occurred between those who wished to build upon what had gone before and those who advocated a return to early Christian theology and its more gospel-

⁴⁵ See René Laurentin, *Queen of Heaven: A short treatise on Marian Theology* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1956).

oriented approach to Mary as the best means for renewing Marian theology and devotion. Of particular interest were Catholic scholars who argued that salvation comes abundantly from God through Jesus Christ, and reaches us even now through the power of the Spirit.

Theologian Karl Rahner, SJ, saw Mary as the realization of this mystery and proposed that grace rather than her maternity be the foundation upon which any Marian theology be built. God gives each of us a gift of grace that justifies and forgives. Mary, who is the model of the meaning of grace, is no exception to that rule. We are meant to become what she already is: a person who, on hearing the word of God, acts upon it in his or her heart.

As those participating in Vatican II began to assemble, two ways of thinking about Mary quickly became apparent: the *christotypical* and the *ecclesiotypical*. The first focused on the glories of the mother of Jesus and described her as having privileges parallel to those of Christ. The second imagined Mary as the recipient of grace and a special member of the community of the Church.

The differences between these two groups⁴⁶ led to one of the most emotionally charged and divisive conflicts of the Council. This issue separated them: should the teaching on Mary be included in the document on the Church or should she be accorded an independent text of her own?

The October 29th, 1963 vote taken on the matter turned out to be the closest of the Council; the motion passed by only 40 of the 2,188 votes cast. The tally was met with stunned silence and this question: how could the mother of Jesus have become the source of such division?⁴⁷

⁴⁶ While those whose outlook placed them under the *christotypical* umbrella looked forward to the Council declaring as dogma Mary as the mediatrix of all graces, those who made up the *ecclesiotypical* group looked forward to restoring a gospel orientation to the Church's approach to the mother of Jesus.

⁴⁷ See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly our Sister*, pp. 114-134.



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God chose Mary for a unique role in the history of salvation and gave her the grace she needed for her task.

Compromise was finally reached and Mary found a place in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* as Chapter VIII, entitled “The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.” Described as a most excellent member of the Church, the faith-filled mother of Jesus, once a pilgrim on earth herself and now in glory with God, Mary took her place as a woman of preeminence among the Communion of Saints.

Within a short period of time, however, two unexpected and unfortunate developments were underway. One, despite the Council’s call to the contrary, many of the ways of honoring Mary, common during the years prior to Vatican II, began to quietly disappear.

Two, even though those at Vatican II hoped that new understandings about the mother of Jesus would be welcomed by all, some Mariologists continued to teach and write in a manner that made little reference to Council decisions.

SIXTEENTH GENERAL CHAPTER

Delegates to our 16th General Chapter expressed satisfaction with the fresh perspective Vatican II had taken about the mother of Jesus. Without presenting a complete doctrinal study, the Council had shed light on the role of Mary in the mystery of salvation.⁴⁸ The Council Fathers, they pointed out, had situated her, in a special and unique way, among the Communion of Saints. They challenged us to make her our model for living the gospel.

Our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* reiterates these points by insisting that our devotion to the mother of Jesus is best shown by imitating her attitudes toward God and others, The words of article 4 put it this way:

⁴⁸ *Marian document*, p. 22.

Our Founder gave us the name of Mary because he wanted us to live according to her spirit. He was convinced that she had done everything for us, and so he called her our Ordinary Resource and our first Superior.

We contemplate the life of our Mother and model, in order to absorb her spirit. Since she was the perfect disciple of Christ, her attitudes become the inspiration and guide for our own way of living and acting.

God gave his Son to the world through Mary. So we strive to make her known and loved as a way which leads directly to Jesus. In this way we put into action our motto:

“All to Jesus through Mary, all to Mary for Jesus.”⁴⁹

Delegates involved in writing our *Constitutions and Statutes* went on to encourage us to celebrate her feasts, especially the Assumption, to study the Church’s Marian teachings, and to praise her daily by reciting the rosary or some other practice of Marian piety.⁵⁰

THE CONTRIBUTION OF POPE PAUL VI

Pope Paul VI, well aware of what had happened to Marian devotion during the post-Conciliar years, responded with an apostolic exhortation entitled *Mari-*alis Cultus**.⁵¹ Calling upon the entire Church to act creatively to renew these forms in keeping with contemporary sensibilities, he suggested four guidelines:

⁴⁹ C. 4.

⁵⁰ C. 74.

⁵¹ [http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_Mari-*alis-cultus*_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_Mari-<i>alis-cultus</i>_en.html).



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“She is worthy of imitation,” Paul VI tells us, “because she was the first and most perfect of Christ’s disciples.”

1. The veneration of Mary should be clearly linked to scripture, i.e., set within the message of salvation.
2. Practices of piety in honor of the mother of Jesus should be liturgical, flowing from and leading back to the Eucharist and in harmony with the liturgical seasons.
3. Services honoring Mary should be ecumenically sensitive, i.e., clear about the centrality of Christ.
4. Marian devotion should appreciate what we have learned from the human sciences, i.e. be anthropologically sensitive.

In this last regard, Paul VI went on to describe Mary as a strong and intelligent woman who experienced poverty and suffering, flight and exile, but consistently gave active and responsible consent to God’s call. The mother of Jesus made courageous choices, and worked to strengthen the faith of others.

The Pope also proposed Mary as a model and encouraged us to strive to be like her, she who, driven by a spirit of charity and having heard the Word of God, fully and responsibly accepted God’s will. ⁵²

IMITATING MARY

Brothers, if we claim Mary as a model, why not follow the Pope’s advice, as well as that of delegates to our 16th General Chapter, and imitate her, making her virtues our own?

We might begin by asking whether there is sufficient evidence on hand these days to prove that we remain a Marian Institute. And by adequate proof I do not mean scores of Marian prayers, but rather that our love for this woman of faith is without question and obvious to all, our devotion to her as apparent as the Founder’s.

⁵² Ibid.

However, there will be no doubt in the mind of anyone that we are members of a Marian Institute, one worthy to bear her name, when you and I fashion our lives of faith and discipleship after hers. And if this element or any of the others just mentioned is missing from your life or mine? Then we must ask ourselves: what are we willing to do to remedy the situation?

The Founder described the Hermitage as Mary's work, and saw the place as her house. Does it remain both today? Is it actually a Marian shrine, a place of pilgrimage to the mother of Jesus, or have we transformed it simply into the house that Marcellin built?

In our day to day lives are signs of Mary ever present: on our person, in our prayer, as we act and interact with others? Does the mother of Jesus influence our style of evangelizing? Do we have her openness, her generosity of heart, her willingness to let the Word of God disrupt her well-made plans and turn her world upside down?

THE FOUNDER AND RENEWAL

As Marcellin's brothers we remember Mary because she never forgets us. When we fail to recall that we are sons and daughters of God, she reminds us of our true identity.

Likewise, the mother of Jesus enabled the Founder to embrace fully the mission given to him. It was her work, not his own, that he carried out.

Today, we need to imitate his reliance on the mother of Jesus and once again entrust our Institute and its mission and members to her. Should we be willing to do so, she will show us the way forward. She did for Marcellin; what makes us think she would not do the same for us today?

I have no doubt that she would, first of all, help us to see a number of items in a new light, not the least of which is our apostolic identity. You and I are meant to



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be proclaimers of God's Word, men for whom the virtue of zeal is central.

Mary was the first missionary, the first messenger of the gospel, the first person to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to another. And she did it simply by carrying the Lord within her. Mary reminds us that mission has little to do with delivering a message in words, and everything to do with making a journey towards another person with Jesus in your heart.⁵³

This understanding of mission, so evident in the life of Brother Henri Vergès, inspired the design of our recently initiated mission *ad gentes* program to Asia. Henri, whose life was taken by extremists while he was living in Algeria among the people he loved, reminded us time and again that no matter the differences that exist between ourselves and those we hope to evangelize, an approach to mission that relies on presence and witness fosters mutual respect and admiration and often gives rise to friendship. "Eventually," he tells us, "the Spirit of God sees to it that our hearts beat in unison."⁵⁴

APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS

Marcellin meant us to be apostolic religious in the way of Mary. What does that mean exactly? In the biblical texts, the mother of Jesus questions, pursues her son, gives orders, and travels. Actually, she travels a lot. Mary sets out "at once and in haste" to visit her cousin Elizabeth, makes the definitive pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and at Pentecost is part of the believing community into whom the Spirit of God breathes life and sends forth on mission. Yes, Mary's story is char-

⁵³ See George Pitcher, "The Archbishop's sermon at Lourdes," reprinted from the Telegram Media in the *Marist Newsletter: Marist Brothers of the Province of Melbourne*, 40(4), May 2009, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁴ Cited in Alain Delorme, *Fifteen days of prayer with Henri Vergès: Marist religious martyred in Algeria* (Roma, Italia: Fratelli Maristi, 2008), pp. 49-50.

acterized by movement, by passages from one moment of meaning to another.⁵⁵

Such an outlook is essential for anyone who claims membership in an apostolic Institute that bears her name. Unfortunately, some of us have come to resemble more the members of monastic congregations, with their commitment to a specific monastery and place. In contrast, we are meant to be itinerant, to move to those places where the need for evangelization is most urgent.

As a rural woman, she traveled beyond village boundaries to give birth to God among us and to serve as a witness to his salvific death. We, too, are called to go to those places where the Church is not, bearing God's *Good News* to poor children and young people. Where we have lost this ability, we must restore it to its proper place in our lives.

The mother of Jesus reminds us that preserving the itinerant nature of our way of life is important for others reasons also. For example, she is noteworthy for her capacity to enter deeply into Christianity's many cultures and not to be contained fully by any one of them. Also veneration of the mother of God takes on many forms and is not limited to certain specific geographical locations.

The migration taking place in many parts of our world today is reshaping the character of regions and nations, introducing multiculturalism and greater internationality. Are you and I willing to learn about other cultures and welcome them into our world, incorporating their customs and practices into our way of life? Do we demonstrate tolerance when we encounter the differences that exist among the many people who currently inhabit this planet of ours?

Sad to say, we often expect others to abandon long held beliefs and practices and to take on instead what



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⁵⁵ See Deirdre Cornell, "Our Mother, Our Advocate: The Many Journeys of Mary of Nazareth," in *America*, 200(16), May 13, 2009, pp. 15-17.

we value, judge important, hold dear. I remember with regret a young man, a member of a minority culture in his Province, who left our Institute after a few years because he felt so out of place. On leaving, he told me, "What saddened me most was not how little my brothers knew about my culture, but rather what little interest they had in learning anything about it."

We need to begin giving recognition from the time of formation onward to the international nature of our Institute and world as well as the many cultures and customs found in both. The present use of international regional novitiates in several locations throughout the Institute is one step in that direction.

Were we to also establish international scholasticates with a solid program of phase one post-novitiate formation in four or five regions of the Institute and mix together young brothers from various parts of the world in each of them, we would begin to create an international network among our younger members and a generation of evangelizers with a worldwide perspective. Challenges such as language would have to be addressed but most young people take such matters in stride.

CHALLENGE OF RENEWAL

The mother of Jesus, in no small measure, can also be a model for us as we continue our efforts to renew our way of life. After all, when it comes to change and transformation, she had some significant first-hand experience of her own: moving from an understanding of Jesus as son to that of Jesus as Lord and Savior, from the role of being his mother to that of being his disciple, from the familiar world of Judaism to the more complicated world of Jewish Christianity.

Unfortunately, however, for all our talk about dependence on God and reliance on Mary and her protection, a number of us may balk when it comes to put-

ting all of this into practice. We are much more at home when we are in charge, feeling capable, achieving success in our own right. Yes, more than a few of us have convinced ourselves that with ingenuity and enough hard work, nothing is beyond our abilities.

But it seems to me that since renewal first got underway, God's intended outcome has been quite different from what we might have had in mind. For when we expected to grow in numbers, we often met with diminishment, where we hoped to meet with success, we often encountered failure, where we thought that we would find respect, we frequently had to deal with scandal.

Religious life and our Institute stand at a crossroads today. During the past five decades, we have worked hard at renewal, both as individuals and as a group. For a number of reasons we have failed to accomplish that task fully. In but one example: the time has been too short. Past periods of significant change in religious life should have taught us that any process in which the old must die to make way for the new takes at least a half century to run its course. Any group needs that time to "fall apart" sufficiently for its members to begin asking some of the right questions.

FALLING APART AND BEGINNING AGAIN

During the last fifty or so years, we have witnessed significant changes in our Marist way of life and mission. A number of them were but a preparation for what lies ahead. In many ways, the experimentation necessary to help us build a future has hardly gotten underway never mind come to an end.

In the face of that reality, some of us might be tempted to hang out a "Do not disturb" sign and exempt ourselves from the work that lies ahead. We protest that we are too old to begin again, or that the number of young brothers in our Province or District ensures its future,



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or simply that we are tired and have had our fill of “new ideas” about renewal.

But age, number of young brothers in any one Province or District, or fatigue at having tried before and been disappointed are no excuse for exempting oneself from the work that we must all face together. It will require of each of us at least as much sacrifice, effort, and prayer as it has in the past. However, we do have this advantage: perhaps we have fallen apart enough to give a hearing also to what God might have in mind for our way of life.

Brothers often ask me about our future: Do I think we have one as a group and, if so, what might it look like? I believe without question that the mission for which God brought our Marist way of life into existence is as urgent today as it was during the time of the Founder: so many poor children and young people remain desperate to hear the *Good News* of Jesus Christ.

I also believe without question that religious life is meant to be the Church’s conscience, its living memory of what it can and must be. That role is as important today as it has always been, perhaps more so.

Finally, I believe without question that the vocation of the brother is needed in our Church at the moment more urgently than in the past. Power, position, and prestige were never meant to be our concerns; only proclaiming God’s kingdom and its imminence.

With all that said, I also believe that we run the risk of missing the moment, that we could preoccupy ourselves with maintaining the status quo, continue to staff some institutions without ever questioning their purpose or our presence there, become so professional that we lose sight of the importance of apostolic zeal. I worry that we might busy ourselves with endless activity and thus avoid facing the great questions of our time in history and in our Church.

Our way of life was never meant to be predictable, balanced, conventional. Rather, it was meant to shake us up and stretch us to our limits, be judged a bit fool-

ish by some, and ultimately to be a blessing beyond measure to our Church and world. Consecrated life, pure and simple, only makes sense if you and I are in love with God. And more so that like the Founder we cannot contain our desire to tell all whom we meet, but especially poor children and young people, about this treasure which is ours.

What options are available to us, then, in our present situation? One, we can do nothing. While this approach might appear attractive to some because it is the least disruptive, embracing it sets the stage for later and more complex difficulties.

Two, we can adopt half-hearted solutions. They might work for a while, but will prove to be equally empty over the long-term.

Three, we can strive to be as daring as Marcellin was in his life. And that means giving the Institute as well as its life, mission, and work of renewal to the mother of Jesus and then agreeing to participate fully in the adventure that unfolds.

We are today exactly where we should be in that journey. This process was never meant to be swift or to reach completion without our having to pay a price. It begins with a change of heart on the part of each of us, and eventually the group as a whole. Today the latter includes not only brothers but also Marist laymen and women. We need to work together promoting and supporting the vocations of each other while sharing fully our Marist charism, mission, and spirituality. In many instances, models for doing so do not yet exist. We must work together to create and implement them.

THE APOSTOLIC NATURE OF OUR INSTITUTE

Early on Marcellin held close to his heart a certain vision for his Little Brothers. They were to be apostolic in nature, and embrace a program of holiness founded on humility, obedience, charity, and zeal, with each of



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these virtues having a distinct Marist character. For example, Marist humility was described as the filial abandonment to Mary not only of each of us but also of the Institute that bears her name.

Unfortunately, over time and for a number of reasons, this original vision was obscured. In Jean-Baptiste's biography of the Founder, for example, humility is on its way to becoming an autonomous virtue detached from the mother of Jesus, while the presence of God, once seen as a general spiritual attitude, has become a devotional exercise. The virtue of zeal, seen as so essential by Marcellin to our identity as brothers, was also moved to a place of secondary importance.

While these changes may appear at first insignificant, they moved us away from a truly apostolic and towards a more monastic understanding of our way of life, contributing to some of the current confusion that we have about our identity. Today, we have an opportunity to rediscover what was in Marcellin's mind and heart originally.

And what should we expect from leadership during such a time? A capacity to live with ambiguity and conflict, a thick skin, as well as plenty of persistence and perseverance.

A FINAL CHALLENGE

Marcellin's biographer placed him among the founders of the great monastic orders. My hunch is that he would have preferred to be seen as a man among the people. For that is what he was: a good and simple man in love with God; a man who set into motion a movement that has the potential to change our world, if not for everyone, then surely for the poor children and young people who were his concern.

Were it not for Mary of Nazareth, however, Marcellin Champagnat would not have been able to accomplish what he did. Together they formed an alliance that

allowed him to touch the hearts and transform the lives of many poor children and young people in his day and during the years since. God was never far from the center of his life. Contemplation, in the truest sense of that word, was his prayer.

Many of us are suspicious when we encounter this experience of prayer because it appears to require so little of us. For a spirit of contemplation to take root and grow we have but to stop trying to do all the work in prayer and allow God to do his part also. Contemplation challenges us to slow down, to stop talking and start listening, but most of all, to allow God to look on us with love. This type of prayer was tailor made for apostolic life, the type of life that Marcellin had in mind for us.

What about Marian devotion? Where does it fit into the pattern of our lives today? First of all, I prefer the term Marian moments to Marian devotion and see the former as being those brief times during each day when we call to mind and heart, individually or as a group, the presence of Mary in our lives.

Immersed in a challenging task, we might, for example, pray a decade of the rosary, stopping before each Hail Mary to recall the name and intentions of one of our colleagues.

Then again, we could reclaim and make our own the Founder's instruction to our early brothers that they pray five decades of the rosary daily. However, he also qualified this directive in the following way: "If through some unforeseen event or some exceptional duties," he said, "you cannot say the whole rosary, say two or three decades, and if it is absolutely beyond you, say the first three Hail Marys, or, at the very least, take your beads and kiss them before going to bed." By following his advice, he assured his brothers that they would never be without the benefits of this daily prayer in their lives.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ See Frère Jean-Baptiste, *Vie de Joseph Benoît-Marcellin Champagnat* (Roma, IT: Maison Généralice des Frères Maristes, 1989), p. 350.



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Finally, we could also take one of the Church's ancient litanies or another that is more contemporary and pray aloud only those lines that speak to our lives at one time or another. Marian moments can be as short as three or four minutes or run up to a half hour. Used often enough, these pauses in the day become second nature, brief reminders of the presence and power that the mother of Jesus has in your life and mine.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The questions below are meant to help you with your reflection on the circular's message:

1. If Mary does not have a prominent place in your life or the life of your community at present, what concrete steps can you take to remedy either or both situations? Where can you find support for whatever you decide?
2. Mary was Jesus' first disciple. What does being a disciple of the Lord mean for you personally? In what ways does Mary inspire you to be the Lord's disciple?

CONCLUSION

When a draft of the five calls developed during our 20th General Chapter was first presented to its capitulants, two omissions were immediately apparent. Neither Mary nor the poor were mentioned in the text. Both were quickly inserted and, in my opinion, an opportunity for reflection put aside.

I must confess that I was not surprised that these two important elements in our Marist way of life had once again been overlooked. After all, we have struggled with both since the days of the Council. The time is fast approaching, however, when we must restore both to their proper place in our Institute. Should we fail to do so, genuine renewal will not be possible.

We are a Marian congregation; the mother of Jesus has a central place at the heart of our Institute. So also, she must have a place in the heart of each of us. Hers must be a vibrant and life-giving presence; it cannot consist of a few prayers recited daily or a series of pious practices.

Marcellin Champagnat was in love with the mother of Jesus; his confidence in her and reliance on her pro-

tection were without question. Today we must marshal our efforts and reclaim for the mother of Jesus her proper place in Marist life and in our Church. We can do that most effectively by being, like her, a true disciple of the Lord Jesus, a bearer of the Word of God to poor children and young people.

Let us pray today that Mary becomes for us once again the source of faith and hope that she was for our Founder and brother.

*Mary, our Good Mother,
Ordinary Resource,
and sister-in-faith,
you who touched the heart
and transformed the life
of Marcellin Champagnat,
do the same for us.*

Amen.

Blessings and affection,



Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS
Superior General



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MARIST LITANY TO MARY

Mary, wellspring of peace,
be our source of consolation.
Model of courage,
be our example.
Model of risk-taking,
be our inspiration.
Model of perseverance,
be our strength.

Mary, our Good Mother,
lead us to Christ.
Woman of mercy,
teach us to be merciful.
Woman of faith,
help us in our unbelief.
Woman of vision,
open our eyes.

Comforter of the afflicted,
give us a heart of compassion.
Cause of our joy,
lead us to life.
Sign of contradiction,
help us in uncertainty.
Woman of wisdom and understanding,
gift us with knowledge.

Ordinary Resource,
protect and guide us.
Woman pregnant with hope,
be our source of new life.
First disciple,
show us the way.
Fellow pilgrim,
accompany us on life's journey.
Seeker of God's will,
help us to do the same.

Amen.

