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XXI General Chapter

September 10th: listening to the word of God incarnate in the Marist regions of the world

The letters written by each Marist region took centre stage today in the chapter hall. Those organizing the work of the Chapter set aside the whole of the day for the reading and study of the message they contain. The day's dynamic was conceived like a celebration of the eucharist. It began in the chapter hall in the early morning and finished in the evening at the altar in the main chapel. The first part of the Eucharist is centred on the Word of God. The assembly, likewise, began the morning reflection by listening to the word of God incarnated in the realities of the Marist regions, as expressed in the letters of each region. A text had been chosen from each letter which contained the essence of its contributions and proposals. The four screens in the room displayed the maps of the regions, showing the places of the Marist mission and the presence of brothers and lay Marists.

The Gospel of the Annunciation supplied light and motivation for the capitulants by suggesting Mary's attitude was what God was proposing to the Institute.

The second phase was one of internal work and prayer in response to the question: "What is the letter from my region saying to me, in the context of the other letters, and the General Council report, about the Institute as a whole?" This time of personal work concluded with the capitulants coming together in new groups, constituted by the seven regions together with the General Council and the lay people, to share the results of their personal re-



reflections.

During the first afternoon session, the capitulants shared around their tables what each had discovered in the letters from the other regions. The arrangement of the tables, occupied by the same persons since the beginning, allowed each one to share his/her feelings after reading the letters from each region in the context of the other regions. In this way, the reflection the whole Chapter was making on the contributions sent from each region was beginning to take on a social character. This dynamic concluded with an open forum, in which those members of the assembly who wished could express, before all, their feelings about what they had reflected on up to the present.

The personal reactions expressed by the capitulants pointed to what is essential, viz. newness of heart. What is needed is to leave behind the old hearts for an old world and make way for new hearts for a

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new world. This is what the Superior General meant in his circulars when he spoke of a revolution of the heart. It remains open to the invitation to take the risky way of faith in order to respond to the deep calls of the heart.

In the second session, the capitulants had time to make more explicit their personal dispositions faced with the call God is making to the Institute at this time. The dynamic proposed to bring to the surface what was in the heart consisted in writing a personal letter, placing before the Lord the feelings and attitudes moving within. The offertory of the Mass will be the

solemn moment for presenting these letters as the offering of the whole chapter community.

The mass continued in the main chapel with the solemn offering prepared during the day. In the centre of the chapel, a lotus blossom slowly opened its petals, sign of opening to the life and light of the new sun, in oriental thinking. On the inside of the petals was visible the Marist logo used for the beatification of the brother martyrs of Spain, and in the centre of the flower the logo of the Chapter. The extended petals formed a large tray on which the capitulants placed the

letters written during the day. Marist sanctity, represented by the blood of the martyrs, has watered the seeds of new life in the Institute sown in the hearts of brothers and laity. Thus concluded the Mass of the Marist world.

Today it was announced that the Marist Fathers, also holding a general chapter in Rome, have elected a new Superior General. He is Fr. John Hannan, former Provincial of the Province of Europe. For more information, contact www.smchap2009.org.



Message of Brother Superior General to the Chapter

September 9th

This day began with great expectations of the speech that the Superior General, Br. Sean Sammon, was going to give to the Chapter. Brother Graham Neist, who was coordinating the session as a member of the Provisional Committee, told a story presenting those who tell stories as men who build an undying culture which nourishes hope. Applying this metaphor, he introduced Br. Sean as a "good storyteller".

The words of Br. Sean

Br. Sean's address covered five major areas. In the first, he described the general context in which the eight years since the previous Chapter had been lived. The second part, without doubt the longest and most substantial, was dedicated to the consecrated

life and formation. The third referred to the international character of the Institute. The fourth was a reflection on government and animation during the past eight years. And finally, there was a special focus on lay Marists. Before finishing, Br. Sean gave thanks to those who had worked with him. "If there have been successes in our government and animation, it is to them that we owe it. If there have been failures, I take the responsibility". His words were received with great applause. The full text will be available on this page when it has been translated into the four official texts.

Afterwards, one heard comments such as these: "He reminded us that we ought to stamp our proper place in the Church as consecrated persons". Sean has emphasized very clearly that "now



is the time for us, laity and brothers, to take our place at the centre of Marist life and mission". "We have an urgent mission, and now is the moment". "He fills me with hope in calling us to dream and build the future we wish to live as Marists". "It was a courageous and realistic speech. He indicated the

positive aspects but placed particular emphasis on the challenges the Institute faces for the future". "He made it clear that the presence of lay Marists does not depend on the brothers; they are themselves the ones who must take the responsibility". "We must have a better formation programme". "Sean moved me and impressed me deeply by the clarity with which he presented the road covered, the current reality, and his profound discernment of both the limitations and the creative potential of the Institute".

General Plan of the Chapter

The second part of the morning and all the afternoon was dedicated to setting on track the General Plan of the Chapter, which will be made concrete in its aims and dynamic. Four general criteria guided the initial reflection of the Chapter: the search for consensus rather than a majority decision; to favor shared work in the assembly rather than in specialist commissions,

sponsoring dialogue in the hall; to create a climate of prayer and discernment which calls for daily listening to the Word or a whole day of retreat; and to promote common life more than work in the chapter through times and spaces of celebration, outings, and living together.

With these criteria the Chapter has to provide itself with the method to follow for discovering the central call of God to the brothers and lay Marists of today and the consequences flowing from that.

Once this is achieved, it will proceed to appointing the persons who will direct the work of the Chapter. These persons will make up the Central Commission.

The second phase of the Chapter will be marked by studying God's call to the Institute to determine the consequences and priorities for drawing out ways of government, and the election of the Superior General and the Vicar

General who are to direct the carrying out of this call in the life of the Institute.

To discover what God wishes for the Marists of today, two resources, involving the whole Institute, have been used: the regional letters and the report of the General Council. Now we have to add the Superior General's address to the Chapter.

Another task which has to be defined within the Plan of the Chapter is the transmission of its decisions to the Institute. For this, it needs to define what type of transmission it wishes to carry out, and to work out what resources it needs to do this.

The Chapter has begun work in a climate of serenity, joy, and fraternal unity. The first steps are of a technical and organizational nature, but they are the foundations for the dynamic of the Chapter working efficiently.



Inauguration of the Chapter

September 8th

The inauguration of the 21st General Chapter began with a ceremony symbolizing the end of the course traversed by the whole Institute in its time of preparation. The capitulants, following different routes and carrying in their hands the letters written in each region of the Marist world, arrived together at the door to the chapter hall. The long road of preparation for this encounter has passed through the paths and hearts of the Marist world for nearly two years. Having gathered the concerns at the heart of the Marist works and communities, they made their entrance into the chapter hall like the waters of different streams joining into a river or like the

grains of wheat scattered through the fields being gathered into one.

At the door of the hall, the chaplain blessed the water and Brother Sean Sammon, Superior General, sprinkled it over the heads of all present as a sign of purification, acceptance and welcome. Then the delegates from each region entered the hall carrying the letters. Brothers and lay people placed the contributions from all the administrative units in a designated place in the hall and then turned to one another in a welcoming and brotherly embrace.

A brief intention made by a represen-



tative of each continent introduced a period of prayer. At the same time, each one lit a candle and then altogether they lit the paschal candle symbolizing the presence of the Lord in the midst of the assembly. The word of God, taken from the Acts of the Apostles 1: 12-14, 2: 1-4, centred the thoughts and hearts of those present, and accompanied the singing of the *Veni creator Spiritus*.

Brother Tony Leon, taking the part of a messenger, appeared in the hall laden with parcels, representing the contributions from the regions during the time of preparation. As a sample, he opened one of the boxes to display other smaller packets. Each of these carried a label referring to the content of the major themes the members of the Chapter have to deal with. By means of beautiful images, projected onto the four walls of the hall, an overview was provided of the road traversed by the Institute in preparation for this assembly, which begins today in Rome. This reminder of the road travelled served to keep the assembly in tune with the work already achieved.

The members of the assembly spent some time sharing with one another what had been most significant for them in the preparation period.

Dynamics of integration

The second morning session, after a brief interval, was dedicated to promoting relationships among the participants and letting them come to know

one another better. A good length of time was given to the sharing of personal characteristics and interests, the experiences and expectations each brought to the chapter.

The second phase was the composition of a jigsaw by those sitting at each of the ten tables in the room, which placed before the eyes of all present the key words summarizing the themes of most concern to the Institute. On the pieces of the puzzle, each brother or lay person stuck the name of one of the participants. The pieces were then placed on a logo of the Chapter set up in a designated place in the hall. The dynamic concluded with the announcement: As Champagnat placed the names of the brothers in the heart of Mary, we place our names in the heart of the Chapter.

Challenges and questions

The afternoon began with Marial prayer. Today, the feast of the Nativity of Mary, is also the anniversary of the reception of the habit or the first religious profession of many brothers. The assembly placed in the hands of our Good Mother all the work the Chapter will do in the coming days.

Time was then given to defining personally the questions raised by this Chapter and sharing them with the people grouped around the same table. By way of summary, a member from each table provided for the whole assembly a summing up of the thoughts shared. Some of the sentiments expressed

were: we are hoping something new will be born; God is with us and He is the one generating life; we feel the responsibility of not letting this opportunity slip by; we are hoping to construct a new world; desires that the heart may prevail over the word; we want no hidden agendas to emerge; a great desire to enter into a spirit of discernment; responsibility for responding to the desires of so many persons who look to the Chapter with expectation; there are themes which already announce a birth, etc. Someone finished with the question: How will hearts become new for the future?

Questions of regulation

In the second part of the afternoon, the Chapter received the report of the Committee charged with verifying credentials, which concluded "recommending to the capitulants to accept all the elected delegates as validly elected". The assembly voted approval of this recommendation. At the conclusion of voting Brother Sean declared the 21st General Chapter open. His words were received with warm applause. The time was 17.30 (5.30 pm).

The capitulants also voted on the presence of the experts at the Chapter. The proposal included the chaplain, Fr. Jesús Pedro Alarcón SM, the facilitator, Mr. Bruce Irvine, the four brother secretaries, one for each language, and Br. Teodoro Grageda, who co-ordinated the works.

Eucharist

The day's work concluded with the eucharistic celebration. The chaplain thanked the assembly for their acceptance of his person and his services. "I am not so nervous now that I can count on having been officially accepted by you all". At the offertory, the presence of the Good Mother was emphasized by the placing of her statue in the middle of the assembly by one of the lay women invited. At the same time, four brothers, representing the four official language groups, brought up copies of Brother Sean's circular on Mary.

