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XXI General Chapter

Interview with Father J. Pedro Alarcón, chaplain to the Chapter

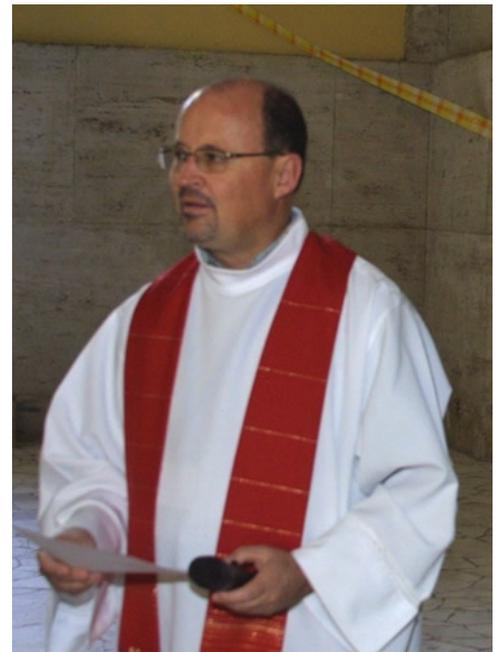
Father J. Pedro Alarcón Méndez SM has been chaplain to the chapter in its first weeks of work. The assembly approved his participation as expert, working with the secretaries of the Chapter. In his daily homilies he has brought the rhythm of the chapter hall into harmony with the spiritual life. We are grateful that he is willing to offer some observations on the Chapter to our readers.

How do you see the human group which makes up this Chapter?

I am very appreciative of the privilege to be among you celebrating brotherhood and the eucharist. The international character of the XXI General Chapter is one of the great riches of the Marist Brothers. The Chapter's internationality reflects in an important way the great steps taken in favour of the mission ad gentes, in places where Brothers leave their provinces to provide new directions for evangelization. Like a true mosaic, or like a stained glass window with an infinity of angles and light reflected in an infinity of colours, the more than 80 capitulants, representing 79 countries, organized into different regions, coming from different cultures and geographic situations, with diverse languages and customs, are really united around a common search: to live the Marist life with hearts renewed in a world renewed. The laity, essential members of the Institute, are also taking part in this XXI General Chapter. They and the Brothers are looking for complementary ways to mutually enrich themselves in the task of living out their respective Marist identities.

From the beginning, the chapter has adopted a new methodology. Has it been the right option?

It seems to me providential that the XXI



Chapter has decided to abandon the parliamentary method in favor of the method used up to the present, of discernment leading to consensus. This methodology reveals itself in a constant way in this Chapter, capable of creating communion, thanks to the spirit of listening which prevails in all the dynamics. It offers many lessons which could be adopted in many contexts, such as recognizing minorities, being attentive to diverging points of view, recognizing that consensus can really arrive at discovering ways of coming to an empathy which is more than mere sympathy. Another equally

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important lesson is that of seeking the will of God collectively, that it is not the sum of the collective wisdom of those present, but that it depends in direct ratio on the prayer life of those taking part. I am very happy, because the atmosphere of cordiality and prayer are important signs that characterize the way in which the different parts of the process are being lived. I believe that with this methodology a Marist atmosphere is truly emerging. It is as if through this methodology, the style of being Marist will possess many more possibilities of manifesting itself as a way of being, which emerges from the weighty considerations that come from life and meditation on the Word of God.

At this point in the work of the

Chapter, there are already outlines of some lines of reflection which indicate the direction of the Chapter proposal to the Marist Institute. Where is the Chapter heading?

There are many elements which are emerging now as the Chapter proceeds. The profound discernment undertaken to discover the so-called "Fundamental Call of the Chapter, as the expression of God's will for the Institute today", has led to the recognition of major themes, which arose in the course of the process. Once the "Fundamental Call" is formulated, it will be possible to examine the different themes. To my way of understanding, it has been fundamental that the regions reflected in their own places on very concrete

topics; these topics appear in the letters of the regions, the object of fuller and detailed reflection in the first days. There are themes which emerge from these letters, such as the identity of the Brother in relation to the lay identity, the challenge to be with the poorest of children and youth, the mission ad gentes with all its demands and possibilities, spirituality as thirst for God, and Marist community life. I see with joy the enthusiasm for carrying out projects like the International Meeting of Marist Youth, in association with WYD 2011, and the studies at university level, University graduate in "Vision and principles of Marist education". I think that the XXI General Chapter will be decisive for the future of the Institute.



Preparing a great symphony for the Marist world

Tuesday, September 22nd

The Marist world seeks to promote the Reign of God, in harmony with the Church and the world, in living the charism it has received through Champagnat. It has passed eight years already since it last adjusted voices and instruments in the 20th General Chapter. They composed a score entitled "Choose life". And the whole Institute, for eight years, set itself to interpreting and living this melody throughout the world. At the end of that time, Brother Sean sent out a beautiful circular: "Come, let us have a new Chapter!" From the five parts of the world the Brother delegates arrived, with the voices of their communities and the vibrations produced by the instruments of their works. Voices and instruments came to Rome with the different intonations shaped by sensibility, culture and language. United in Rome, they decided to name



an orchestral director who would combine voices and instruments, so that a beautiful Marist symphony might once more rise and resonate throughout the world. At the time, it was decided that the melody sound and be distinguished as the "vision" which the Chapter has

of what the presence of the Institute in the Church and in the world must be. To give consistency to this melody, six tasks were defined, which are like the outlines of six staves on which to place the keys and chords supporting the principal melody.

The Central Commission has helped by showing each one the place from which he can sound his voice and connect his instrument, but so far the orchestra has not begun to present the concert. They perceive the first outlines of the melody and are listening to the first chords, but they must have time to complete the composition.

Where the instruments are now

Today, 22 September, has been directed towards organizing the work of the assembly. On arriving in the hall, the Central Commission distributed the capitulants around eight tables, composed of different persons from the previous days. At each table a secretary was elected for each one of the unpostponable "tasks" confronting the Chapter, which were mentioned in yesterday's chronicle. The grouping of secretaries to deal with each task constituted the working group. This resulted in seven groups, one for each task. One of these 7 groups is dedicated to the theme of "vision" of the Chapter about the Institute for the next 8 years and consists of about 24 members since it has 3 or 4 members representation from each table. A first meeting was

then held to consider each "task". With this working structure, this complex orchestra called the Chapter began to move.

The pulse of the assembly

The Chapter assembly picked up the change of rhythm from the previous stage. "The Chapter has begun a new stage. The group work is seen as giving new vigour to the search for the fundamental call amid the mist". This was the talk in the corridors. "The novelty is great. The temptation of turning back to known methods is there. The natural confusion of the first attempts does not help. For all that, there is overall confidence in the method of work and the possibilities of participation it offers". "The consensus method and simultaneous group work let us listen at the same time as we feel others listening to us. There is no doubt that this method finds favour with the 83 capitulants forming part of this Chapter".

The members of the assembly were very satisfied with the material provided for them to compose the Marist symphony. "The preparatory work which has been done over the last year

in the provinces has been important from the point of view of the motivation of a good part of the Brothers. It is this work, crystallized in the regional letters, which has supplied first hand material for the capitulants to use in searching for the key directions for the Institute over the next eight years".

The harmony of the assembly with the method being employed has shown openly the consensus of the assembly. "The general atmosphere of the Chapter was very friendly. All the capitulants are willing to do a service that will bring new life to the Institute. There was some worry about the time remaining, given the task ahead. Some are afraid of being obliged to work too hard towards the end." And there was not lacking admiration for what was being contemplated. "Looking around the Chapter hall and seeing the Brothers united around the table, I was reminded of two scenes marked by the feeling of communion: Champagnat in La Valla, at the table with his Brothers, sharing his dreams, his feelings, his experience of God, and the first Christian communities sharing everything in common".



The Chapter crosses the equator

Wednesday, September 23rd

The crossing of the imaginary line, which divides the calendar of the Chapter into two parts, took place under settled conditions. A day of quiet but efficient work. For the chronicle, nothing to report in the morning, except the buzz coming from the various rooms of the house where the groups are pursuing their work. They have invaded the little meeting rooms dispersed around the house. The Basilio, Silvestre, Francisco, Lorenzo islands... welcome the little communities of the new times. The groups speak different languages but they have managed to

solve the translation problem so all can understand. And they have succeeded with different formulas. The identity card each capitulant wears around his neck indicates the languages he can communicate in. The official translators of the Chapter have also been present to help when necessary.

In the afternoon it had been anticipated, that the group considering how to plan the "election of the Brother Superior General and his Vicar" would present a progress report to the assembly. And in fact, it had drawn up

a written proposal, which all received on their computers. Paper is notable by its absence. It is not surprising that the cleaning lady finds nothing to do. "I come in to clean, because that is something that has to be done, but the little brothers keep the hall very clean!" The task entrusted to the members of this group was to "define the process of electing the Brother Superior General and his Vicar" in accordance with the "General Plan" worked out by the Central Commission. Their proposal to the assembly was approved. It was a question of obtaining agreement for

the change of some wording of the regulations for the election of the Superior General. Today the assembly is smoothing the legal ways for bringing the regulations up to date. The legality of the process is studied in the Constitutions, in the Rules for elections, and in the procedure used in previous chapters. Tomorrow they will define the practical way to propose lists of candidates' names and the concrete mode of carrying out the elections. Approving the proposal "in accordance with the General Plan" means that they keep the days programmed for the elections of the Superior General and his Vicar, namely 25 (retreat day) and 26 September, Friday and Saturday respectively.



The second group to make significant progress in its work was the one charged with studying the dynamics of dialogue and consensus, in order to realize a practical way of carrying out the "animation and government of the Institute" over the next eight years. This group also made a proposal to the assembly. As a beginning, they formulated the following question: "What may be the best model of animation and government responding to the needs of the Institute today?" The contributions from each table were sent in writing, through the intranet, to the secretary of this group. The results will be known tomorrow.

We spent a long time today with the group studying how to transmit the decisions of the Chapter and how to communicate the experience of the capitulants. Opinions were shared about the publications foreseen, the printing of resources, and the possibilities offered by the web to rapidly spread the message of the Chapter to the whole Marist world.

A travelling companion leaves the Chapter

Dr. Bruce Irvine has been working with the Preparatory and Central Commissions. Bruce was born in South Africa but is now living in London, where he

is Executive Director of The Grubb Institute UK. On our web page, he is presented as facilitator. His work has consisted of observing the processes at work in the human groups taking part in the Chapter. His professional training allows him to recommend more appropriate dynamics to help the large group function properly. At this stage of the Chapter, his task is finished. Today, 23 September, he departs the Chapter assembly. "I am sorry to be leaving when the baby is still to see the light, but I hope it is very successful". Brother Sean addressed Dr. Irvine some words of gratitude and presented him with a little statue of the Good Mother.



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A rapid glance at the web www.champagnat.org allows us to highlight some details. Our page has passed from 1200 visits a day on average, before the beginning of the chapter period, to 6500 during the two long weeks the Brothers have been meeting in Rome. The exchanges prompted by the happenings of the chapter by means of this electronic page, have produced 358 messages sent from all parts of the world. Behind these messages are the faces and hearts of friends, Brothers, former students, members of Fraternities and the Marist Family, etc. We note with special interest those which express feelings. The general tone shows a deep communion with the Brothers in the chapter hall and a joining with them in spirit through prayer. The warm allusion to the quality of the Roman pizza of Trastevere raised a happy smile. Many thanks to all.

