

Homes of light

CARING FOR LIFE.
GENERATING
NEW LIFE.

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Superior General

CIRCULAR

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INTRODUCTION

Creating “*homes of light*” ... What does this expression mean? How do these words of the General Chapter resonate in my heart? What is my experience of home and how does that experience shed light on my life? Is it a call from God for Marists today? Did Champagnat dream of creating ‘homes of light’? These questions have stayed with me ever since the end of the XXII General Chapter.

I would like to address all Marists of Champagnat, starting with the older brothers who have given the best of their lives throughout the years and who are now in the majority in our Institute. I would like to address the younger brothers and the middle-aged brothers, thanking them for their faithful response in the midst of a world that is constantly changing. My intended audience includes Marist laypeople who are exploring their vocational call and who serve with dedication in various ministries in the Marist world.

While addressing this very broad group, in some sections I will make specific references to particular groups, depending on the topic being discussed. At various times, I will focus on the brothers and on the life of their communities, aware that many of the ideas that I present can be applied very well to all Marists of Champagnat, with the necessary adaptations.

Developing *homes of light* is one of the ideas that emerged during the General Chapter, as part of the call to be a *global charismatic family, a beacon*

of hope, in this turbulent world. In my words at the conclusion of the Chapter, I pointed out, among other things, the call to form *homes that care for life and generate new life*. It was from these ideas that the title of this circular emerged.

I began to write this text a few months ago, and, along the way, the Covid-19 pandemic struck. We have been through this experience all over the world, and the crisis has impacted on virtually all the countries where we are present as an Institute. In each place, in each country, we have suffered the consequences in a very similar way. At one point, I had doubts as to whether the theme I had chosen was still relevant, and whether I should change the subject or delete some sections.

It seems to me that, in the current context, there is no better time than now to talk about building *homes of light* in the face of this situation of uncertainty that seems to be dragging on. We are being called to *care for life and to generate new life* in moments of great fragility and vulnerability in the world.

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We will manage if we work together, in a spirit of self-giving and solidarity with those most in need, and place more importance than ever on relational, social and community factors. Perhaps this is a time when something new is waiting to be born and we are being asked, not only to transform our hearts, but also to make radical changes in our ways of being

and acting and in our structures and systems, in an effort to create a renewed and different future. We count on the light that comes from God and we rely on the presence of Mary.

This circular is intended to be a resource for reflection and a stimulus for decisive action, along with two important documents of the Institute: the revised Constitutions and the document *Wherever you go - Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*. At a number of points in this text, I make reference to them.

In this circular, I present my reflections in three chapters, based on its title: *Homes of Light - Caring for Life and Generating New Life*. In the first

chapter, *Homes of light*, I focus on the importance of keeping our *fraternal light* shining by being deeply spiritual people, inspired by the experience of Mary and Marcellin. The second chapter focuses on caring for life as a key element in the construction of these homes: we care for ourselves, we care for others, for the community, for our common home, and we “care for” God. In the third and last part, I offer some thoughts on generating new life: starting from a life of integrity, we dream and help each other to dream, together with young people, of a future full of hope; at the end, I underline the importance of tending new shoots of Marist life.

Dear brothers and laypeople, all Marists of Champagnat, I put this text in your hands, as an aid in your own reflection, as well as that of your communities, fraternities and families. I hope that it will be helpful to you and that we will encourage each other to create and multiply *homes of light*. Let us follow up on the invitation of the XXII General Chapter to be together *a beacon of hope in this turbulent world*.



Table at La Valla - First Marist Community



I

Homes of light

1. Our personal experience of home

In the introduction, I spoke of the call to create “*homes of light*”, with the invitation to ask ourselves: What does this expression mean? How do these words of the General Chapter resonate in my heart? What is my experience of home and how does that experience shed light on my life?

Each of us has had his own experience of home life, hopefully for most of us a positive one, whether in our families, in the communities we have been part of, or in some other group-living arrangement. Possibly, at times, it has not been so positive, or some difficulties have surfaced.

When I think about home, the first thing that comes to my mind is the memory of the tireless devotion of my mother, serving and looking after each member of the family. I also think about the unwavering determination of my father to provide for our needs as we were growing up. My home was where I felt very much loved, where I learnt to “be myself”, where I was accepted, cared for, and at times corrected. Growing up with my sisters and brothers trained me to be generous and to share, to accept our differences, to play games and to get on with one another, as well as to be reconciled, to say “I am sorry” and to forgive.

It seems to me that, at the heart of it all, there were two basic factors: love for one another and education in the faith. I learnt the first steps of my relationship with God from my parents. We prayed as a family. Sunday Mass was a special event, as were the liturgical seasons. As a small child, I was impressed to

see the devotion of my father after he received communion or during the celebrations of Holy Week. I admired my mother's great devotion towards Mary and I learnt this from her. I remember seeing her frequently praying with great faith before the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, or the Virgin of Zapopan or the Perpetual Succour. I vividly recall the moment when I was saying goodbye to head off to the Postulancy. She embraced me, with tears in her eyes, gave me her blessing and presented me with her own Rosary, with the words, "Remember that She will look after you at every moment." Further, I can add that, in times of crisis as happen in all families, I was astounded by the faith with which my parents were able to face up to difficulties.

When I think about home, I also recall many experiences in Marist communities, moments and places where I have felt 'at home', accepted, respected. There have been many occasions with brothers of all ages where I have experienced the joy of being a brother, being together on a daily basis, in ministry, at meals and in extended conversations, going on outings and times of prayer. Conversation has flowed easily even when, at times, there has been some interpersonal tension. As I think back over these experiences and places, the figure of the community leader pops up as having played an important, proactive role. I remember some places as well where the welcome mat was put out for young people, friends from work, fellow teachers, parents ... It all generated a warm, informal atmosphere of trust.

In recent years, I have had the chance of experiencing our international brotherhood, whether in the General House or in many other parts of the world that I have been privileged to visit. I have been able to witness, appreciate and feel for myself the invaluable gift of brotherhood that we have inherited from Marcellin and the first brothers. Without a shadow of a doubt, this *family spirit* continues to be very much present in the lives of so many Marists of Champagnat, in our communities, fraternities and families.

I would like to begin by narrating some experiences that could help us form *homes of light* in our communities, in our families. I will come back to this topic in a more focused way in the second chapter. Then I would like to present some ideas related to a point that seems to me to be key for generating fraternity.

Where does this wish to form homes with a spirit of brotherhood, *homes of light*, come from? No doubt communities and families are places where our natural desire to love and be loved can be fulfilled. Mission also binds us tightly as a community since we form ‘communities on mission’. Indeed, forming communities and being brothers to one another are already expressions of mission. Yet, these two aspects of community and mission, despite their importance, are not enough by themselves: I believe that a fundamental aspect of forming *homes of light* is to be found in being deeply spiritual people, each of us as individuals and together as communities.

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I would like to propose some food for thought along this line, beginning with a look at some features of Mary, and then offering some paragraphs on our spirituality today. I will finish by referring more directly to Marcellin as someone who lived by the light and was a light for others.

2. Mary, transparent to the Light

“In the heart of the Church, Mary shines forth”¹. With these beautiful words, Pope Francis introduces a section on Mary in his recent Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*. After making various references to her life, the Pope concluded by saying, “Today, (this young woman) Mary is the Mother who watches over us, her children, on our journey through life, often weary and in need, anxious that the light of hope not fail. For that is our desire: that the light of hope never fail...”²

From our very beginnings, our Good Mother has held a special place and

¹ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Synod Apostolic Exhortation to Youth and the whole People of God, n 43

² *Ibid*, n 48



Statue of the Good Mother in front of which Father Champagnat prayed

a key role in the life of our Institute. She continues to do so today, the same as ever. On more than one occasion I have spoken about “the great gift that Marcellin left us, in giving us the name of Mary. It is both invitation and commitment to let her heart beat in us”. Br François expressed it beautifully in the following words, “The holy name of Mary is what gives life to the Congregation”.³

I wonder if we Marists of Champagnat have sufficiently understood what it means to bear the name of Mary. We are familiar with and refer to very clear descriptions of Marcellin and his relationship with Mary, descriptions that remain very revealing for us today. It is interesting to remark that the last Circular of Br Seán Sammon (“*In her arms or in her heart: Mary, our Good Mother; Mary, our source of renewal*”) and the first of Br Emili Turú (“*He gave us the name of Mary*”) took up this marian theme.

³ Br. François, *Circulars*, T2, Circular of 2 February, 1858, p 314

Over recent years, especially in personal conversations with many brothers and laypeople around the world, I have been impressed by the stories and experiences they relate regarding the presence of Mary in their lives. I consider these a gift to the Institute, a type of spiritual patrimony, inasmuch as they reflect real-life experiences and testimonies of specific individuals. What has been your experience of Mary over the years? How has she inspired and sustained you? How has she featured in your spiritual quest and journey?

In Mary, we can find a veritable fount of inspiration for negotiating the new times in which we are living, for “*the light of hope (to) never fail*”.⁴ I want to stress the idea of forming *homes of light*, following up on the invitation of the XXII General Chapter. The desire for our communities and families to be real homes requires us to become more conscious that the light we want others to see is coming from beyond us.

What thoughts might have run through Mary’s mind after she dared to say a bold and confident yes to God at the Annunciation (cf Lk 1:38)? Her life plans changed completely in the blink of an eye. I think that only a heart that was free and on fire with love would be capable of accepting a situation that was so novel,

The desire for our communities and families to be real homes requires us to become more conscious that the light we want others to see is coming from beyond us.

unfamiliar and with so many unknowns... Immediately, she rushed to the hills to meet with Elizabeth (cf Lk 1:39). And just a few months later she gave birth to Jesus (Lk 2:7). We can also imagine what feelings invaded Mary’s heart as her time came, with the fear and distress at not having a suitable place to deliver her child (cf Lk 2:7). She was able to accept this new reality thanks to her heart being free and full of the warmth of God.

This is an idea that frequently comes to my mind: imagining the heart of Mary, so free and full of God, and therefore, transparent to God’s light. In

⁴ *Christus Vivit*, n 48

Mary, the light of God could be seen, a light streaming out from within. She believed that what the Lord had told her would be fulfilled and so she was called blessed when she visited Elizabeth (cf Lk 1:45). She believed in the message, she believed in the Word of God. She retained this trust all through her life, even in its darkest and most painful moments.

A recurring thought for me ever since the COVID-19 pandemic erupted is how what happened in Mary's life might shed light on this moment of crisis. She confronted her fears and doubts in three steps that might be helpful to us today: 1) we experience doubt and are afraid, so we ask God what is going on, why this now? 2) we feel ourselves like small children in the hands of God and we place our trust in God. Fiat! Let it be! 3) we bend our shoulders to the task and play our part to the best of our ability in serving others. Like Mary, in the face of uncertainty and fear, we need faith, trust and passion for God and humanity as solid ground for moving forward.

Of all the phrases in the Gospels where direct mention is made of Mary, there is one in particular that attracts my attention, "*Mary treasured all these things and pondered over them in her heart*" (Lk 2:19). The heart is mentioned often in the Bible as the inner place within humans, the seat of ideas, feelings and memories ... but, especially, where divine Being can be perceived and sensed, since this is the mystery of the incarnation. To treasure, meditate, ponder in our hearts is to read, understand, and accept our lives and events as God sees them. It is to listen to the inner voice whispered to us by the Spirit, inspiring the best steps to take.

A heart that listens, meditates, ponders and discerns is the ideal place for radiating light and, consequently, for letting God's light shine through us. Such a heart has the capacity to reduce the force of our ego because it makes greater room for the presence of God. This is how I imagine Mary in her daily life, a woman

After contemplating Mary, let us explore our own hearts. Am I thirsty and longing for God?

with a peaceful heart, busy about her household tasks, treating people sensitively, and ready to help out when needed. I imagine her, together with Joseph and Jesus, creating a home, *a home of light*. I also imagine her being

alert to signs of relational difficulties, resolving any possible tensions that cropped up from time to time in their own family or between their neighbours. Her kind face, her smile, her attitudes, her words and her patience all made visible the light coming from within that was constantly replenishing her: the very light of God that gives birth to dedication, service, selflessness, kindness and peace.

After contemplating Mary, let us explore our own hearts. Am I thirsty and longing for God? Deep down, is my heart in tune with the presence of God dwelling in me? Do I really want to be free of all the attachments that are paralysing me, that stop me from getting ahead and that prevent me from being open to newness and change? Do I have a heart that is open to the needs of others and ready to serve without counting the cost?

3. A spirituality that lights up our days

*“True to the name that we bear, let Mary shape and inspire your spirituality.”*⁵ As Marists of Champagnat, if we want Mary’s heart to beat in us and we want to be people, like her, who are transparent to the light of God, we have already made a good start to forming *homes of light*. We are called to *“be the light of the world”* (cf Mt 5:14). *“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”* (Mt 5:16). The XXII General Chapter used two attractive images to illustrate this Gospel call: to be *a beacon of hope in this turbulent world* and to *form homes that are a light on the hill*. They are really meaningful images that speak easily to all cultures all around the world.

In proposing that we be “beacons of hope in this turbulent world”, the General Chapter was not just issuing a personal invitation but rather a call to the whole Marist community: to be light as a charismatic global family.

⁵ *Wherever you go, Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*, n 28

In proposing that we be “*beacons of hope in this turbulent world*”, the General Chapter was not just issuing a personal invitation but rather a call to the whole Marist community: to *be light as a charismatic global family*. It is a call for every community, fraternity and family as a group to be like a beacon or lighthouse, a source of light and hope for all who look at it. Amongst other things, the Chapter recommended *cultivating contemplative practices* and *a spirituality of the heart*. *Living an integrated spirituality* is how we expressed this in the vision of the Strategic Plan of the General Administration.

It is important to acknowledge that as an Institute we have been on a productive journey in regard to spirituality. We have our *home-baked bread*, rich and plentiful, bread which has nourished and will continue to nourish many generations: our origins, our accumulated tradition, the characteristics of Marist spirituality, Marist apostolic spirituality, *Water from the Rock ...*⁶

We also benefit from the awesome experience of so many people, brothers and lay, who have been on profound and remarkable spiritual journeys. Many have persevered in practices that have nourished and sustained them down the years. We benefit as well from those who have devoted themselves to searching and trialling new pathways, ones that are unexplored territory for many of us. In many parts of the Marist world, there are signs of something new budding in the area of spirituality, and in fact, starting to flower. In various Provinces and Districts programs are underway that offer communities, teachers and students training in *contemplative practices* and *spirituality*, that is culturally appropriate and responsive to today’s social context.

But besides this praiseworthy record, we must also admit that we have a long way to go. Our doors are wide open for updating our Marist spirituality and making it more accessible to contemporary generations. I am not just speaking of our ministry to the young, but of fresh efforts to make new insights and experiences available to adults, both brothers and lay; most especially, creating opportunities for them to have a spiritual experience.

⁶ Cf The article, “Deep Refreshing Waters”, in *FMS Message* n 46, April 2016, pp 119-121

In our spiritual life, if we want to make progress it seems that we have to deal with strong headwinds. The main one that comes to my mind is the level of activism we can find ourselves caught up in and that has weighed us down a lot in recent years. The document *The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church* describes this well: “*In their eagerness to meet the needs of the mission, Brothers may fall victim to the temptation of activism, given that a lot of bread needs to be prepared for the hungry. Activism will quickly empty them of evangelical motivations and prevent them from contemplating God’s work which is being done in their apostolic action. Allowing themselves to be carried away by activism, they end up replacing the search for God and His will with the search for themselves.*”⁷

We should not be surprised that in a society where communication is becoming faster and faster and quick answers are expected, it seems that everything is speeding up ... there is little space left for reflection, silence or discernment. Hence deciding to offer learning pathways on contemplative practices and deepening our spirituality is essential if we are serious about our homes being light for ourselves and others.

It is quite probable that the lockdown experience we have been through, because of the COVID-19 world pandemic, has been the occasion for learning more about slowing down, of growing in a more contemplative stance. We have had the chance to spend long periods in silence, on our own. It will be important to be careful, as we resume our daily activities, to avoid the risk of hooking onto the highspeed train of a life totally spent at work and where we so easily lose direction and depth.

Spirituality, I think, is about learning (or re-learning), about a journey, a pathway that begins when we enter our deepest centre within, what is sometimes called *interiority*. It is the place where we are accountable to ourselves, and where we can track and tell our own story. We look back over and accept our past history and, above all, we pull together all the threads of our lives in the present, at each moment, becoming fully conscious from the time we wake up

⁷ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), *The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*, August 15, 2015, n 40

each morning. *Interiority* is that dimension of ourselves that allows us to calmly accept our feelings and the world of our emotions. It helps us to see more clearly the interconnectedness of all aspects of our lives: the physical, affective, psychological aspects as well as our different forms of intelligence, including the spiritual. It makes us conscious of the present as a gift, to be acknowledged in every breath, every action, every encounter, everything around us.

Interiority prepares our hearts to be open to Mystery, thus making room for a *spiritual experience*: we open up to the encounter, recognising our longing

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to share Jesus' dream ... *if you knew the gift of God* (cf Jn 4:10). In a *spiritual experience*, we are in touch with the depths of our humanity, to the point of glimpsing the divine, seeing 'through a glass darkly' realities that remain beyond our touch and reach.

We are more aware of our weaknesses, rubbing up against a life-giving force, seeking to be healed of addictions, brokenness and anxieties. We feel the profound joy of a grateful heart. Trust, peace, beauty and, especially, mercy and understanding start to sprout – in myself and towards others. We offer and receive forgiveness. We add meaning to our lives. We experience a rush of passion for the God of Life and for dedicating our lives to God through our unstinting service of others.

It is important to cultivate *interiority* and *spirituality*, often and with perseverance *going into our inner room, shutting the door, and praying to our Father who is there unseen* (cf Mt 6:6). This demands time, the right physical place and, above all, the desire, the thirst and the felt need to go within. It means experiencing *silence*. A *silence* that puts us in touch with the deepest rhythms of our being and offers a better quality of life. A *silence* that gives us insight into the gift represented by each moment, each event and each encounter when viewed in the light of the Spirit, ever active and present. A *silence* that allows us to wonder and be caught up in a sense of mystery when in the midst of doubt and when the unknown makes us uncertain, and that brings us acceptance and peace of heart.

Silence is where we best discover the fire that dwells inside us, this inner light that makes us feel at home. When we sense this light, fears disappear. In the *silence of prayer*, we are able to sense the intimate presence of God who dwells in our hearts. This involves developing a contemplative outlook:⁸

Like Elijah, the prophet,
never hesitate to be still and to cherish silence.
Become aware of God's presence
in the *gentle breeze* or the quiet whisper (cf. 1Kgs 19:12).

Each day put aside time to be with God
and to discover the peace that you experience when you are in his presence.
Let him speak to your heart;
listen to the Spirit
who cries out: Abba! (cf. Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15).

8

Wherever you go, *Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*, n 27



La Valla - Entrance to the lower level of the house

By giving yourself the opportunity to experience intimacy with God in this way, you will come to understand the Divine mystery more fully, as well as the needs and concerns of those around you, and to respond with joy, confidence, courage.

At the beginning of this chapter, I pointed out that a fundamental element in forming *homes of light* is to be found in being deeply spiritual people, each of us and together as communities. I want to now share some thoughts on the ‘personal’ side of things. In the second chapter I will focus on communities, fraternities and families.

In the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, a beautiful story to be meditated on at depth, the woman told Jesus that he had no bucket and the well was deep, and asked, “*Where do you get that living water?*” (Jn 4:11). Jesus said to her, “*Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life*” (Jn 4:13-14). The woman said to him, “*Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty ...*” (Jn 4:15).

I ask myself what I am thirsty for. Am I truly thirsty? When I feel thirsty, do I look for living water to drink?

I ask myself what I am thirsty for. Am I truly thirsty? When I feel thirsty, do I look for living water to drink? Among all the many choices that are before us every day – sometimes to the point of being snowed under– and leading such fast-paced

lives, I wonder if maybe we are losing our capacity to feel thirsty. Or rather, when we are aware of this deep thirst, we try to satisfy it by filling ourselves up with things, activities or experiences that give the appearance of quenching it but leave us thirsty nonetheless.

Over the course of my life, I personally have lived through more than one period of spiritual dryness. I remember one of them in particular. It was a time when many things seemed to lose their meaning for me. Anything to do with

God seemed to hold no interest or got on my nerves. My passion for committing myself entirely to God diminished and almost snuffed itself out. I got to the point where I was blocking out not only any sense of the presence of God but even any thirst for God. Seeing myself in this place of desolation and darkness, without thirst, I began to pray, “Lord, grant me the gift of thirst ... Make me feel thirsty!” Deep down, I perceived the need to get back my longing for God.

In the midst of what I was going through, I discovered, among other things, that there were a number of areas of my personal life that needed attention and healing: my health; aspects related to affectivity; instances of loss and grieving which had not been fully dealt and for which there was no closure; at that time, I could see myself swamped in overwork; I had no taste for anything spiritual; I could see myself looking for and coming up with answers that, with hindsight, I recognise as not having been the best. Then, after repeatedly praying “grant me the gift of thirst ...”, after starting to share what was happening inside me and getting help, after being more faithful to my quiet time, spiritual reading, personal prayer, little by little, I began to feel a return to feeling thirsty for God and, gradually, we were happily reunited. Situations like this have led me to a deeper experience of being a disciple, to constantly feel I am on a journey, seeking and learning, to accept the ups and downs and to hope that I never again lose my thirst ...

During the retreat he preached to Pope Francis and the Roman Curia in 2018, Mons. Tolentino spoke about thirst. He pointed out that, on the physical level, we get thirsty and we hardly register the fact. And that, in general, we drink less than we should. Similarly, on the spiritual level, it is worthwhile asking ourselves if we recognise the thirst which exists in us. Are we aware of the dehydration that we are imposing on ourselves, whether we know it or not? Do we take time to decode the state of our thirst? He went on to say, “It is not easy to recognise that you are thirsty, since thirst is a pain that we discover little by little inside ourselves, behind all the habitual self-defensive, emotionless and idealised stories we tell ourselves; it is a pain from the past which resurfaces, without our knowing exactly how, and which we are afraid will sap our strength; they are wounds that we are reluctant to face, let alone accept with confidence”.⁹

⁹ Cf. José Tolentino MENDONÇA, *Elogio de la Sed*, Maliaño, Spain, Sal Terrae, 2018 p 37

We begin by feeling a thirst for God. “We are deficient beings, made with infinite longings. God alone can bridge this gap that is in all of us and that this same God opened up in making us in God’s own image. We are thirsty for the original Reign of God to be restored in us. God alone can satisfy what our eyes long to see, our ears hear, our skin touch, our palate taste, since we are made in the image of God. This explains our thirst for God, our desire for the One thing necessary, our yearning to be intoxicated with the divine.”¹⁰

As I move around the Institute, I am pleased to meet up with brothers and lay Marists who tell me about their spiritual experience: their thirst, their search for God, their attempts, their progress and also their times of discouragement. We have among us living examples of God-seekers, men and women of profound spirituality. At the same time, as I indicated above, I believe that we have a long way to go in this area. Perhaps some of us could even describe ourselves as being spiritually lukewarm.

When I meet with brothers and laypeople of any age, I always insist that it is never too late to start again and to make a fresh effort. I tell them that maybe some ideas and practices worked for us at some stage and were helpful on

I believe that our rebirth as an Institute and its future will depend a lot on the concrete commitment of each of us to be serious about how our interior and spiritual lives are going.

our spiritual journey, but today they are not so helpful or simply do not work for us anymore. So, we have to start all over again, doing what disciples do best: learn, try, experiment ... This is not to discredit any practice, nor to impose or sacralise others, but rather for each of us to look for and find the way that slakes his thirst in the here and now, helps him to develop a deeper interior life and facilitates his encounter with God.

¹⁰ Javier MELONI, *El Cristo interior*, Spain, Herder, 2010, p 101

What am I thirsty for? How is my spiritual search going? What concrete methods do I use to satisfy my thirst for God? What other means am I thinking of using?

I believe that our *rebirth* as an Institute and its future will depend a lot on the concrete commitment of each of us to be serious about how our *interior* and *spiritual lives* are going. Added to this, is our commitment to encourage one another in this process so that we can speak of a common effort and not just an individual one.

Coming back to our *home-baked bread*, to that great spiritual patrimony we are heirs to, let us now consider some thoughts on Marcellin, a man of God, a man of light. His experience and the charism we have received through him give us pointers for our spiritual search.

4. Marcellin, a light in the midst of darkness

We could envisage the whole of Marcellin Champagnat's life as a light shining in the midst of the dark circumstances of his times. A light shining in the midst of young people to whom he gave priority and preferential consideration and attention when he founded the Institute and set about his evangelising ministry. A light in the midst of his brothers, with whom he formed a close-knit community, trying to create, from the very beginning, *homes of light*. A light among his fellow priests, showing the motherly face of the Church, wearing an apron, rolling up his sleeves...

There is a symbolic story that Br Jean Baptiste tells about Marcellin Champagnat as a new-born baby. He says that Marcellin's mother, "several times, on approaching the cradle where baby Marcellin was lying, noticed a kind of *luminous flame* which seemed to issue from the child's chest".¹¹ I want to stay with the idea that the author puts forward by referring to a "*luminous flame*", without going into the historicity of the event, but noting, rather, the strong symbolism that is conveyed. Marcellin was a much-loved child, brought up in a home in

¹¹ Jean Baptiste FURET, *Life of Joseph Benedict Marcellin Champagnat*, Bicentenary edition, 1989, p 4

which the presence and influence of his parents, his aunt, his brothers and sisters had a marked effect on his life. This was the home where the foundations were laid for him to discover his call to be a light for the world (cf Mt 5: 14), to be that *luminous flame* that young people, the brothers, and so many other people had the occasion to experience on meeting Champagnat. His life radiated *life* and this *luminous flame* continues to burn amongst us.

I would also like to recall another occasion where a *luminous flame* appeared in the life of Marcellin. In February 1823, Marcellin was lost in the snow, in the middle of a blizzard, with Br Stanislaus. He appealed fervently to Mary, “full of confidence, he knelt down beside the brother (now apparently unconscious), and said the *Memorare* with great fervour. After that prayer, he tried to raise the brother again and get him to walk. They had taken only a few steps, when they noticed a light shining in the distance; for it was night. They made in the direction of the light and arrived at a house, where they spent the night”.¹² Mary was for Marcellin a *luminous flame* who accompanied his every step throughout his life.

I wonder if, when crises arise among us and we find ourselves in the middle of a storm, we are able to see the light shining close by, in the form of some event or concrete person... Seeing the *luminous flame* in such a way, always keeping our eyes open: this is the miracle! This is how it was for Marcellin, thanks to his unshakeable faith in difficult moments when he never lost hope but pressed on, keeping his eyes open to spot the light.

At the end of his days, Marcellin saw the great Light. He was in his room, really sick. Brs Hippolyte and Jerome were with him. At about half past two in the morning, he said to them, “Brothers, your lamp is going out”. “Excuse me, Father”, one of them explained, “but the lamp is burning well.” “But I can’t see it. So bring it closer,” Marcellin protested. This was done without any improvement in the situation. “Ah”, he said with a dying voice, “I understand that it is my sight which is failing; my hour has come; thanks be to God! Some hours later, when the community

¹² *Ibid*, p 344

was assembled in the chapel for the singing of the *Salve Regina*, Marcellin fell asleep peacefully in the Lord. It was Saturday, June 6th, the vigil of Pentecost.¹³

At the beginning of his life, when the symbol of a *luminous flame* was mentioned, he had a loving, pious mother at his side, and he was embraced in the warmth of the family home. During his lifetime, in all its difficulties and problems, he discovered the constant *luminous flame* of Mary in his life. In his final moments, there was a *lit lamp* which was going out before his eyes, while the brothers were singing the *Salve*, forming their *home* around Mary. It was a Saturday, the day dedicated to our Good Mother.

This light accompanied him all through life. He lived with trust. He did not doubt for an instant that his life and mission were the work of God, the work of Mary. He never put himself forward as the leading actor, but in all things, gave glory and praise to the Lord, seeing himself as the Lord's servant. He always lived under the motherly protection of Mary and often had recourse to her.

This light accompanied him all through life. He lived with trust. He did not doubt for an instant that his life and mission were the work of God, the work of Mary.

This life gave him a spirit of daring. He was always attentive to discern the voice of God in the events of life and in his personal prayer. His boldness made him open and flexible to develop new responses without getting bogged down in pre-determined schemes. He gave himself to the education and evangelisation of youth, giving priority attention to the most abandoned. He did all this while building up a spirit of brotherhood, forming *homes of light*. He had the intuition that the witness of a group is always more powerful than that of an individual. We Marists of Champagnat have these and other characteristics that Marcellin gave us in our DNA. They continue to light up our path today.

¹³ Cf *Ibid*, p 248



La Valla house, seen from the statue of Champagnat



II

Homes
of light,
caring for life

At the beginning of this circular, I posed some questions about the idea of creating “*homes of light*”: What does this expression mean? How do these words of the General Chapter resonate in my heart? What is my experience of home? Is it a call? Did Champagnat dream of creating ‘homes of light’?

In the first chapter, I began by sharing my own experience of *home* in my family and in the communities I have belonged to. Then, I focussed on the idea that, only on the basis of a serious personal journey, will we be able to engage in genuine and healthy relationships and have the passion needed to give ourselves wholeheartedly to serving others. In Mary and Marcellin we find inspiration for an integrated spirituality that helps us form *homes of light*.

Taking care of life means taking care of *the light of the house, the home*, to keep it lit and burning. It means, therefore, caring for ourselves, caring for those with whom we live, caring for those who visit, caring for the earth which is our *common home* and, ultimately, “caring for God”. Here I will share some thoughts on these aspects of *homes of light that care for life*.

1. Living in community as a founding experience

The word *brother* is inseparable from the word community; they are intrinsically connected just as the terms father, mother, brother or sister are in a

family. The interactions that we want for our communities, families and fraternities find their inspiration in God, who is pure relationship, since “*Trinitarian love is the wellspring of all community life*” (Const 35).

We are called to live our brotherhood in community as a life-giving experience: “While it is true that structures are necessary, community among brothers

The word brother is inseparable from the word community, they are intrinsically connected.

is expressed mainly through their attitudes. They come together to participate more fully in the life and mission of Jesus, to give witness to brotherhood and sonship to which all the faithful are called. Thus, the community is, for brothers, an *experience* more than a place; or better still, the brothers live together, gather

in a *place*, to experience brotherhood more intensely. In that way they are responding to the call to be *experts in communion* (VC 46), visible signs of the possibility of living closer relationships rooted in the love of Christ.”¹⁴

Brotherhood is the key word and connecting thread throughout the document “The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church”, the structure of which was adopted by our own Rule of Life. It defines the identity of the brother as a “mystery of communion for mission”, It alludes to the three dimensions that the Church as Communion uses to describe itself (mystery-communion-mission), pointing out that “At the centre of this triple perspective lies the heart of the identity of the Religious Brother, namely brotherhood, which is a gift that is received (mystery), a gift that is shared (communion) and a gift that is given away (mission).”¹⁵

Our Rule of Life expresses the idea this way:¹⁶
Your chief contribution to the life of the Church

¹⁴ CICLSAL, *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*, August 15, 2015, n 24

¹⁵ *Ibid*, n 4

¹⁶ *Wherever you go, Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*, n 70

is to be on mission as brother.
Your vocation itself is a ministry within the Church;
a reminder to the wider community
about the importance of fraternity
and our fundamental call to be
a community of brothers and sisters in service (diakonia).

Trinitarian love, attitudes, experiences, necessary structures, being experts in communion, keeping brotherhood in the consciousness of people ... how inspiring all this is for building *homes of light*.

I wonder if in our communities, fraternities and families, we often recall our common roots, what unites us and is essential, the why and in the name of whom we have come together. Maybe we do not do this enough and this can lead us to fixating on our differences: ideas, background, culture, age, formation, way of praying, workstyle ... and hence we build walls between us. Life in common can thus become a burden for us; we limit ourselves over time to the bare minimum for “survival”, letting things go, becoming “disenchanted”, and making no effort to tend and *care for* what generates hope and life.

Living community “as an experience more than as a place” is an important idea when it comes to building homes of light.

Living community “as an *experience* more than as a place”¹⁷ is an important idea when it comes to building *homes of light*, places where care and acceptance are the order of the day:¹⁸

Mary, the Virgin of Tenderness,
shows us the way to care for each other
and how to become, over time, marvellous companions to one another.

¹⁷ CICLSAL, *The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*, August 15, 2015, n 24

¹⁸ *Wherever you go, Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*, n 51

She reminds you to welcome others, as they are,
different in many ways and yet complementary.
Likewise, she challenges you to nurture a heart
that allows you to recognise when a brother is in difficulty
and to help him in a way that is thoughtful and discreet (cf. Gal 6:1).

Be sure to live hospitality in a way that is welcoming
and gives witness to our universal brotherhood.
Receive warmly, not only the families of our brothers,
but all who come to your door.
In each of them you will meet Christ
who has chosen to call on you;
ensure they all experience the joy of being at home.

Inclusion is an essential value in constructing *homes of light*. It means knowing and accepting one another in our differences and complementarity. How many of us have had the joy of feeling accepted unconditionally by others? Unconditional, because this is the way God accepts us. Or, on the contrary, when have we felt rejected, maybe because of our background, our age, some physical feature, our ideas, or simply because of unhealthy group dynamics. Feeling at home begins with being known, accepted, and respected by the others. It occurs in an atmosphere of dialogue and relationships that are healthy, natural, and honest.

As you become more generous in your acceptance of others,
you will grow as a brother.
Genuine communion comes about
when you learn to surrender your expectations of others.

So, stop trying to make them over into your own image and likeness.
Instead, allow them to be what they are,
the image and likeness of God (cf. Gn 1:27).

If you do so, gradually, over time,
you will become a brother among your brothers,
as well as to all to whom you are sent: children and young people,
every person who crosses your path,
and, ultimately, to the whole of creation.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Ibid*, n 40

When we live brotherhood, with a firm spiritual base, community becomes a founding experience. Community life is to be understood as a gift of God, a gift to be cared for and developed, a gift to be shared.

2. Caring for ourselves

In the first chapter, I referred to the importance of *interiority* and *spirituality*. Only when we take good care of our inner spiritual journey, do we have the capacity to develop healthy and lasting relationships and, therefore, focus on caring for others. When we feel cared for by God, by others and by ourselves, we can turn our attention to others. When the opposite is the case, it is hard to give of ourselves freely and generously. We have to understand better the meaning of “*love your neighbour as yourself*” (Mt 22: 39) and put it into practice.

Care of ourselves starts with caring for our health. This means leading a balanced life, without getting stressed out, and avoiding any type of self-neglect that can create problems for us in the future. It means a suitable rhythm of life that harmoniously integrates work, rest, physical exercise, study, daily living, TV and time on the internet, quiet time, and interaction with members of our community or family.

Such care involves growing in knowledge of ourselves, the world of our emotions, our strengths and weaknesses. Self-knowledge is not enough; we have to accept and value ourselves. Honest feedback from others about ourselves can be of great help. When we listen humbly we can see ourselves as in a mirror, just as we are and in the way God sees and cherishes us.

This goes hand in hand with our effort to transform what needs to be healed, reoriented, or purified in us. We keep going, serenely welcoming the gifts and challenges that are part and parcel of each stage of our lives. Knowing, accepting, and caring for ourselves leads us to have peace of mind and heart,

Care of ourselves also involves caring for the gift of our own vocation that was freely given to us.

and to be capable of giving and giving without reserve.

Care of ourselves also involves caring for the gift of our own vocation that was freely given to us. Our

vocation is inseparable from who we are, and therefore, needs to be cared for, nourished and developed. It is important that what we are doing with our lives is conducive to our vocational growth or else gradually, consciously or not, we let things slip to the point where our inner flame goes out and this gift of ours is lost. Each day we can take the opportunity to give thanks for our vocation, care for it, share it and make it grow.

3. We care for others

Caring for ourselves is a contribution and enrichment for the whole community. We care for ourselves so as to be better placed to care for others. I want to now share some thoughts about caring for others. I do not intend to write at length on community life here; perhaps this will be the topic of some future document. Ahead, in the third chapter, I will take up the idea of *generating new life*, for which having life and caring for it are necessary pre-requisites.

I have mentioned that our *family spirit* is one of the strengths of the Institute. Lots and lots of communities and places that I have visited in various continents are proof of this. This spirit is not bound by languages or cultures and it is a real treasure to feel welcomed in a family setting: the personal attention; an atmosphere of trust; time shared generously; sense of humour ... We value this Marist trait highly; it comes from our very beginnings since “Marcellin’s vision of fraternity invites each of us to cultivate a family spirit”.²⁰ Quite often, people from outside comment glowingly on it after visiting one of our communities or fraternities.

²⁰ *Ibid*, n 55



La Valla - Marcellin Champagnat with young Gabriel Rivat (Br. François)

Our *family spirit* is made of the little Marist virtues: listening attentively, being available, honesty, patience, gentleness, hospitality, mutual support, courtesy, tolerance, and service to your sisters and brothers.²¹ This spirit helps us build *homes of light* where we care for the lives of one another.

During visits in many countries, I have seen with my own eyes the great care given in the Institute to our senior and sick brothers. We have teams of brothers and laypeople who provide admirable service to these men who have dedicated their long years of life to Marist mission.

My heart has also been touched to see the way that these same senior brothers support and help one another: pushing wheelchairs, offering an arm to

²¹ Cf *Ibid*, n 56

support someone up the stairs, collecting a plate in the dining room, spending time just chatting or playing a boardgame. A quick visit to the chapel always finds someone already there, praying quietly or saying the Rosary. Many brothers have shared with me the number of hours each day that they spend in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

Most of our communities are privileged to have older brothers, men of considerable experience and faithful commitment. How can we take better care of them and profit from their wisdom and experience? By looking after each one, showing our respect and appreciation for who they are. By paying attention to their health, hygiene and personal cleanliness. By offering them our time and the quality of our presence. By showing them care by respecting their way of behaving, acting and thinking, and trying to understand what they have lived through in a world so different to the present. At the same time, by mentoring them in their efforts to adapt to new ways of doing things in community or ministry in response to today's circumstances. I have met senior brothers with a great capacity for adaptation and change; some, for example, with considerable expertise in computers, the internet and social media.

Most of our communities are privileged to have older brothers, men of considerable experience and faithful commitment.

The same could be said of our families in relation to care of the elderly. In some countries and cultures, we know the contemporary risk of neglecting the elderly in our consumerist society, our “throwaway” society as Pope Francis has called it: “God does not share our current

throw-away culture; it doesn't count to God. God throws no one away; God loves everyone, looks for everyone: one by one! God doesn't know what “throwing people away” means, because God is entirely love, entirely mercy.”²²

22 Pope Francis, General Audience, May 4, 2016

The COVID-19 pandemic, that has especially affected elderly people who are more susceptible, should make us think about their significance in our families and societies, above all when we have seen with sadness and concern how some have been treated as “disposable” and not valued for the treasure that they represent.

Besides speaking of our senior brothers and those who are getting on in years, I would like to say something about the care of brothers in the middle-age group and the young brothers. We want to ensure that they are all in situations that are truly life-giving and that they are responding as generously as their potential and possibilities allow.

Middle-aged brothers bring us vision born of their experience and vocational maturity; they engage in their ministry with initiative, faithfulness, and creativity. Their contribution and support to both our senior and younger men is much appreciated. At this stage in life, we have to be extra-serious about our spirituality. Many of them have important leadership roles in a number of areas: communities, ministries, leadership and government within Provinces and Districts.

Middle-aged brothers bring us vision born of their experience and vocational maturity; they engage in their ministry with initiative, faithfulness, and creativity.

At the same time, it is a period when people can start to look at life and themselves differently and when various types of crises or addictions may also surface. It is also a time in life for confirming our response to the call of the Lord with generosity and fidelity. Towards the end of this stage, it is quite important to learn to live with being ‘retired’, to be open to new possibilities and generous in continuing to serve others. Sometimes it hurts to leave a project to which we have dedicated years of our life, and it is not easy to channel all our experience and competency into new forms of apostolic ministry. It is important and may even be necessary to get help when this moment comes.

When we look at the younger generations, we find brothers who are living their vocation with passion and dedication. Their energy and creativity are a gift to the Institute. We have to check that they are in a good space in a community and a ministry that are appropriate to their age and where their vocational growth is cared for and stimulated. Unfortunately, at times they are placed in settings or structures that either swamp them or that have no life.

I want to highlight the importance of attending to the new generations joining our communities after finishing the first stages of initial formation. I am referring to brothers in temporary vows who have completed the first stage of post-novitiate (commonly called the scholasticate). How important is caring for this new generation! After a long period of formation, they arrive in our communities enthusiastic, energetic and ready for ministry with youth, with wonderful dreams of the future and Marist life. There are places where they are well received and mentored. But, it must be said, sadly, there are a many places where this is not so.

This stage – and that of brothers who have recently made their perpetual profession – is fundamental in consolidating their vocational journey. We have

I want to highlight the importance of attending to the new generations joining our communities.

to be more determined about finding better structures for caring for these brothers. Each and everyone of us in the community, particularly the community leader, has an important role in creating a home with and for our young brothers. Often, we ask them to adjust to our community

ways but maybe it is our communities who could learn and adjust to them, as Marcellin did. They have much to bring and we have much to offer. What is important is continuous, friendly, and open communication on all sides.

I think it is important to underline this idea of caring for brothers of all ages, as well as for the laypeople with whom we share life and mission. This

means, for example, having a sensitive heart towards others, “that allows you to recognise when a brother is in difficulty and to help him in a way that is thoughtful and discreet”.²³ How alert are we to spot a brother or sister in trouble? What means do we use to help him or her out? So often we are in our own world, on a treadmill of activities related to our work, maybe at times verging on activism to which I referred earlier in this circular. These thoughts on caring for people apply equally to the sensitivity and attention we should show the laypeople who share in the life and mission of the Institute and their families.

I think it is important to underline this idea of caring for brothers of all ages, as well as for the laypeople with whom we share life and mission.

An overloaded schedule of activities can lead us to neglect our own needs and those of the people alongside us as well. This is what happens in so many families where the parents are obliged to respect demanding hours of work and this leaves them with little space to give quality time to their children and to one another as a couple. The same sort of situation can often arise in our communities, where there are few opportunities for chance conversations, informal get-togethers, or even having meals together. What is driving us to accept such a fast-paced life? Is this just a flow-on from the lifestyles all around us in today’s world? Or is it rather a sign of an inner thirst that we do not know how to fill and that we try to satisfy using substitutes?

4. Structures that care for life

In relation to caring for life, our structures are clearly important. Mostly, the structural aspect is fine but there are times when the care of others in community is less than ideal and this situation does not help us build *homes of light*. In recent years, the number of brothers has been going down progressively. As a result, communities have been closed, re-organised or re-structured. There have also been significant changes in community living: styles and times of prayer,

²³ *Wherever you go, Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*, n 51

ways of relating to one another, activities in common, residential arrangements, even ministries.

These days our community way of life requires criteria for renewal that need to be applied if consecrated life is to “be re-born” as presence, belonging, life and mission. This demands space to be ourselves, where we can slow down, be quiet, and think of others if we want to give birth to communities that live and act from a Gospel base and achieve a better integration of life and mission.²⁴

We are living in new times in which our Institute is both decreasing in the number of brothers and increasing in its missionary outreach, one that is shared these days with so many lay Marists, teachers and administrative staff. By way of example: taking the 1960s as a baseline, the number of brothers has dropped to one-third of what it was and yet the number of students in Marist institutions has tripled and the number of laypeople involved at our side is more or less twelve times what it was.

Today the large majority of communities in the Marist world are made up of brothers, many of them reduced to a minimum number of members. In some parts of the Institute, there are cases of mixed communities of brothers and laypeople (around forty of them). In terms of ministry, we have a large number of brothers retired from teaching who continue to be involved in a range of apostolic activities.

Given this reality, it is worthwhile having another look at our structures. On the one hand, consider how the community is leading its life on a daily basis, as well as its ministry. On the other hand, examine the effectiveness of particular structures and routines for the care for individuals and the community.

Ministry is the core reason but not the ultimate goal for which we form

²⁴ Cf. Luis Alberto GONZALO DÍEZ, Luis, *El fenómeno comunitario de la vida consagrada. Hacia un nuevo paradigma de reorganización*, Madrid, Ed. El Perpetuo Socorro, 2019, p 142

community since in fact mission starts from our living as a community and its Gospel witness. It is worthwhile asking ourselves if, in some parts of the world, the way ministry is structured is perhaps overtaxing our energies and reducing our capacity to care for our personal lives and others’.

On the other hand, regarding numbers, it is a worry to find situations where communities are made up of only two brothers, or to note the large number of communities in the Institute with only three members. While the number of members by itself is not the only determining factor in the success of community living, I think that such small communities can easily become lonely places and interpersonal relationships can become complex.

Ministry is the core reason but not the ultimate goal for which we form community since in fact mission starts from our living as a community and its Gospel witness.

Besides the issue of numbers, it is time to conduct a serious discernment on how we are structuring our community life and its daily, monthly and yearly routines. It is appropriate to weigh up if the structures in place are helping us to live community “as an experience”. Do our prayer together, our conversation, our way of relating and sharing life, generate a feeling of belonging,

make everyone feel “at home”, and lay the groundwork for *homes of light*? We need to have some frank, brotherly discussion and dialogue about our personal and community routines. When formulating or evaluating our community life project, we need to ask ourselves about the type of community that really is a *home of light*; its characteristics and routines; about what we have to do to make our community experience more life-giving. Provincials and District leaders with their Councils should also make sure that the structures in place at the local level and at the level of their Administrative Unit are such as will best care for life.

Regarding structures, I would like to comment on our houses or community residences. Care and maintenance of the house play their part when it comes to having a welcoming home. This starts with basic order and cleanliness in both the personal rooms of the brothers and common spaces. In many parts of the Marist world, small communities are still using residences which previously had a large number of brothers. Such residences should be renovated to suit the present circumstances of each place and foster brotherhood. We are not monks, nor do we live in monasteries, but brothers in a family setting. This will mean developing a plan and a budget that will not always be easy to cover.

Sometimes, a good cleaning can make a start, getting rid of what is no longer in use; also spending some time in manual work to make the common spaces and visitors' rooms more pleasant. With a simple plan, it is easy to improve and care for the physical environment of the house. When possible, we should not hesitate to change houses to obtain a setting that is more favourable for community life, hospitality, and simplicity.

5. We care for our common home

In my closing address at the XXII General Chapter, I spoke about our common home, our Mother Earth. For decades, it has been crying out for us to put a brake on the unrestrained use and exploitation we are subjecting it to. Its bounty and abundance are starting to be exhausted, not because it does not 'want' to give anymore, but because we have been profiting from it in an exaggerated and uncontrolled manner.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* on caring for our common home, says that it is not enough for each of us to take more care if we are to resolve a situation that is as complex as what is facing the world today. Social problems demand community networks, not just the sum of individual good

works. The ecological conversion required to create lasting change is likewise a community conversion.²⁵

At the Synod on the Amazon, mention was made of the need for new paths of ecological conversion. It stated, “Our planet is a gift from God, but we also know how urgently we must act on the unprecedented socio-environmental crisis we are facing. We need an ecological conversion to respond properly.”²⁶ And it goes on, “God has given us the earth as a gift and as a task, to care for it and to answer for it; we do not own it. *Integral ecology* has its foundation in the fact that “everything in the world is connected” (LS 16).

“For this reason, ecology and social justice are intrinsically united (cf. LS 137). With integral ecology a new paradigm of justice emerges, since “*a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach*; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (LS 49). Integral ecology thus connects the exercise of care for nature with the exercise of justice for the most impoverished and disadvantaged on earth, who are God’s preferred choice in revealed history.”²⁷

There are numerous and constant calls of the Church to rouse our sense of care for our common home. Yet, professional studies on the topic of ecology keep pointing to the growing urgency of collective action, or else we will continue to suffer the consequences and our legacy to future generations will be an uninhabitable planet.

To care for our common home, we all have to become ecolog-

To care for our common home, we all have to become ecologically literate and review our consumption habits.

²⁵ Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’, on caring for our common home*, 2015, n 219

²⁶ Synod of Bishops, 6-27 October 2019, Final Document, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*, n 65

²⁷ *Ibid.*, n 66

ically literate and review our consumption habits. An ethic of care needs to be developed: “The care of the Earth is something global. The care of our little ecological corner is something local. We humans have our feet on the ground (the local) and our heads turned up to the infinite (the global). Our hearts unite the ground and the infinite, the depths and the stars, the local and the global. The logic of the heart is its capacity to strike a balance, one that is dynamic.”²⁸

It is not my purpose to give an extensive discourse on this topic here. I simply want to place it in the context of the *homes of light* that we want to form. The XXII General Chapter invited us to “awaken in ourselves and those around us an ecological awareness that engages us in caring for *our common home*.”²⁹ The same idea is proposed in more concrete terms in the area of mission: “creating an integral ecological awareness in all our communities and different ministries, and developing policies at all levels of the Institute that strengthen our commitment to the care of *our common home*.”³⁰

These ideas coming from the XXII General Chapter have been taken up in the Strategic Plan of the General Administration in the project, “From ego’s to eco’s”, in which an Institute-wide program of ecological awareness, in combination with the Regions and Administrative Units, is foreshadowed. The idea is to develop as well eco-environmental commitments that ensure the ecological sensitivity of our new ways of being Marist today.³¹

In this regard, I keep coming back to questions that have stayed with me since the Chapter: what positive outcomes would result if we Marists took some serious collective action, doing our bit in the 80 countries where we are present? Could we start with some personal action that has a ripple effect in our Provinces, Districts and the General Administration? There are already initiatives underway here and there ... How do we get on board with all of this?

²⁸ Leonardo BOFF, *El cuidado esencial. Ética de lo humano, compasión por la Tierra*, Madrid, Ed. Trotta, 2002, p 109

²⁹ Marist Brothers, *Document of the XXII General Chapter*, in Call 5, “To Respond Boldly to Emerging Needs”, Rio Negro, Colombia, 2017

³⁰ Marist Brothers, *Document of the XXII General Chapter*, “area of Mission”, Rio Negro, Colombia, 2017

³¹ Cf. Marist Brothers, *Strategic Plan of the General Administration 2017-2025 for animation, leadership and government*, Project 18



River Gier – Notre-Dame de l'Hermitage

II. Homes of light, caring for life

Let us be imaginative. This topic of ecology and the care of our common home could figure in important decisions about structures, constructions, and the use of our resources ...; we can have a positive influence in the lives of so many people, families, children and young people whose daily decisions are transforming the world. This would mean following through on ecology training, using our education and youth ministry structures.

Our Institute plays a key role in education. “The best ecology always has an educational dimension that can encourage the development of new habits in individuals and groups... A sound and sustainable ecology, one capable of bringing about change, will not develop unless people are changed, unless they

are encouraged to opt for another style of life, one less greedy and more serene, more respectful and less anxious, more fraternal.”³²

Each of our communities and families, as the homes of light we want to form, can be an active laboratory for the care of our great common home.

Each of our communities and families, as the *homes of light* we want to form, can be an active laboratory for the care of our great common home. We start with small, concrete actions on a daily basis, and at the same time assess and improve our structures and the way we operate.

6. We care for the light, we care for God

“*In your light, we see light*” (Ps 36:9). We want to take care of the *light*; we want to care for God. The expression ‘*we want to care for God*’ may sound strange since, in reality, it is God who watches over us constantly and cares for us. I want to speak of *caring for God* in the sense of remembering God, holding God close, caring for our personal and community relationship with God, being people who discern God’s will and want to live by it, and also in the sense of taking care of the places of God, which we consider “sacred” because there we feel or sense God’s presence to be close.

I have stressed the need for us to be on a spiritual search, with a particular focus on this being a personal journey. Here I want to take up the topic of spirituality lived in community. In the Rule of Life, we find:³³

With an open heart, share your life and faith
with your community and with others.
This type of mutual support will enrich and help sustain you.

Share not only with your brothers and other Marists,

³² Cf. Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Querida Amazonia*, February 2, 2020, n 58

³³ *Wherever you go, Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*, n 31

also become a teacher of prayer for young people and their families. Participate in the liturgical life of your local Church and let yourself be evangelized by the faith life of its members.

By being in contact with other religious families and spiritual traditions, you will come to appreciate new features in the face of Christ and to develop a spirituality of communion.

Our relationship with God is unique and singular, just as each person is unique and singular. At the same time, we search for and encounter God together. Each person is a mediation of God in our lives because each human being is a reflection of God, created in God's image and likeness (cf Gen 1:27). So, we share faith and life with our community and others since such mutual support sustains and enriches us.³⁴ This is solid rock on which to build *homes of light*.

Our ability to get in touch with our inner world, illuminated by faith, allows us to distinguish between what comes from the Spirit and what does not. It lets us sort out when our ego is clamouring for attention and feeding into our vanity or pride, or when we have to accept in all simplicity and humility that this very ego is up to its old tricks ... How many difficulties in human relations, including blockages in communication, could have been managed differently if each person involved, in the light of the Spirit, had looked honestly and humbly at his own truth and the truth of the other person. I never tire of pointing out the importance of human relationships in community, in the family, in the fraternity, as a significant fruit of our spiritual journey.

Our ability to get in touch with our inner world, illuminated by faith, allows us to distinguish between what comes from the Spirit and what does not.

³⁴ Cf *Ibid*, n 31

We take care of our spaces for community prayer. This does not only mean preparing our prayer times well, an aspect which is of course important and necessary ... Taking care of our spaces for community prayer is to ensure that there are harmonious and transparent relations between all in the group. How difficult it is to share our faith if we are not able to share ordinary things, the simple events in our own or our families' lives, or our feelings and our dreams. It is a pleasure to share a moment of prayer together in which we can freely express our joys and worries out loud, our successes and setbacks. When there is a healthy climate of open relationships, we can pray together in a more authentic way. In such an atmosphere, the Word of God, the hymns, the psalms, the periods of silence, the intercessions, are integrated by faith into a single whole, allowing us to sense the presence of our God living, active, and close by.

In contrast, I could speak of a type of common prayer such as is sometimes the case in our communities and families where the group limits itself to using set formulas, mechanically, without much conscious thought. There are lots of words but it would seem that there is little connection between the participants and God. Someone could end such a community prayer time or Mass with the feeling that nothing happened, that nothing touched his life in any way. Praying the Psalms, praying the Rosary, the daily singing of the Salve Regina, meditating on the Gospel of the day ... the use of such elements in our common prayer can be valuable but what a difference depending on how we use them!

My invitation is that you take good care of community prayers and Masses. They should be well-prepared, not put together at the last-minute, ideally with a theme, connected with life; without feeling any pressure or obligation to include this or that prayer, leaving periods of silence for God to speak more and ourselves less ... It is up to each group to find its own community rhythm, adapted to the age and stage of life of the members, and sensitive also to any visitors who may be joining the prayer. Let us be open to the creativity of the one leading the prayer, who is doing his best to help us to connect with the presence of God. Remember that it is not about being somehow original or coming up with something new but of sensitively caring for our relationship with God.

Besides times of community prayer and Mass, another important aspect is caring for our oratories or chapels. From our early days, indeed from Fr Champagnat and the first brothers, we have had a tradition of taking special care of our sacred places. The spirit of faith that Fr Champagnat displayed in the way he prayed and celebrated Mass also inspired in him a great respect for religious objects and everything to do with God.³⁵ “Although Marcellin had a predilection for poverty and carefully established its reign in the community, he wanted the chapel and everything connected with divine worship, to be an exception (...) On his arrival at La Valla, he found the church very dirty and he set to, himself, with a broom to sweep down the walls, getting rid of the dust and cobwebs that covered them; he painted certain particularly unsightly parts, cleaned the candlesticks, the crosses, the statues and all the ornaments; he waxed the altar steps each week and saw to the cleanliness of the sacristy.”³⁶

Besides times of community prayer and Mass, another important aspect is caring for our oratories or chapels.

The care taken by many communities for their sacred places, such as the chapel or oratory, is really admirable. Besides the evident order and cleanliness, there are signs of good taste in the decorations. The furniture is fitting for personal and community prayer. On the other hand, in many places the chapel or oratory shows signs of neglect. When you go in, you get the impression of being in an antiquated, somewhat abandoned place, with little attractive about it ... hardly an inviting place for prayer or a group to gather. Communities should make an effort to attend to the tidiness and appearance of these sacred places for them to be a worthy prayer space. In many places, as well, such spaces need to be renovated, with “modern” lighting, fresh air and silence, so as to be “oases of peace”, “tents of meeting” (Ex 33:17).

³⁵ Cf Jean Baptiste FURET, *Life of Joseph Benedict Marcellin Champagnat*, Bicentenary edition, 1989, pp 279-281

³⁶ *Ibid*, p 327

Many families, as well, have a special niche for the Bible or an icon, or a picture of Mary on the wall...

More important than anything I have mentioned in relation to places or times for common prayer, I believe that the main idea in terms of ‘caring for God’ is that we are *people of God*, men and women recognised as such. This touches on how we live and make God present in a society where many would like God to disappear. We consecrated religious, immersed in such a world, can sometimes give the impression that we are not much interested in making God present, some even behaving as if we too are accustomed to living without God. This is why I have given spirituality such a prominent place, stressing the importance of our community witness to the presence and action of God in our lives.

It is helpful to remember how Marcellin lived his life in the presence of God: “Father Champagnat’s favourite exercise was the presence of God. He preferred this exercise because it was especially congenial to his natural bent, had an attraction for him, and has been described by God himself as the shortest and most efficacious means of reaching perfection. ‘*Walk before me*’, the Lord promised Abraham, ‘*and you will be perfect*’ (Gn 17:1).”³⁷ Our new Constitutions

Marcellin conceived and decided on all his projects and carried them out in a spirit of prayer.

express it this way, “Like Marcellin, we are alert to recognise the presence of God and to experience God’s love in all the events of our lives” (Const 45).

Marcellin conceived and decided on all his projects and carried them out in a spirit of prayer. He began, proceeded and concluded everything he did with prayer: “I could never undertake anything”, he used to claim, “without long having recommended it to God; firstly, because it is easy for people to be deceived and to mistake the views of their own minds and their illusions, for

³⁷ Ibid, p 312

plans inspired by God; and secondly, because we can achieve nothing without the help and protection of heaven.”³⁸

Our prayer and spiritual life make sense in the light of Jesus, the man of prayer: “*No-one comes to the Father except through me*” (Jn 14:6). The prayer of Jesus was one of being caught up in the mystery of inner silence, of intimate union with the Father. As a man of prayer, Jesus lived in a constant attitude of discernment, seeking to have a sense of the Father’s vision and to do the Father’s will. Even in trying moments such as in Gethsemane: “*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will*” (Mt 26:39).

During the XXII General Chapter, we devoted a lot of time to personal and community prayer and undertook a sensitive discernment exercise, trying to respond to two basic questions: What does God want us to be in this emerging world? and, What does God want us to do?³⁹ It involved a lengthy self-questioning and discussion not only about what we should *do* but especially what we should *be*. These are two questions that could often be useful in our communities, fraternities or families, as well as in our ministries. Likewise, in Province or District discussions. So many aspects of who we are and what we do on a daily basis might change if we ask ourselves more often where God is in the midst of what is happening to us and around us, and what God’s will is.

In the *Rule of Life* we read: ⁴⁰

As communities, provinces, and an Institute,
we exercise obedience in our constant search
for the will of God.

Along with your brothers, participate in these experiences of discernment
in an atmosphere of prayer and a spirit of faith.
All the while be attentive to the Word of God,
faithful to our founding charism, and sensitive to the *signs of the times*.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p 300

³⁹ Marist Brothers, *Document of the XXII General Chapter*, section “A new La Valla, principles and suggestions”, Rio Negro, Colombia, 2017

⁴⁰ *Wherever you go, Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*, n 16

To care for God is to seek to make ourselves transparent to God's light, as Mary was. Elements of Religious Life may be in crisis and certainly there have been many changes in how it is lived today, compared to how it was in the past. Yet in the middle of such change, one element is constant: *being men and women of God*. Such a state can neither be externally imposed nor faked... if it does not emerge from within, it is not based on experience. We are being called to *care for God*, to do what we can for our societies and cultures to discover instances of God's illuminating presence and vision, for them to have a greater capacity to discern the signs of the times.

Let's face it! In the midst of all the events of life, God is present and *seeking to care for us* at every moment, but who is listening and really believing? We are

To care for God is to seek to make ourselves transparent to God's light, as Mary was.

living at a period in history when the institutions of the Church, including ours, have lost and are continuing to lose credibility. Our present age is crying out for living witnesses of the mercy of God, as was so beautifully expressed by the XXII General Chapter: Called to *be the face and*

hands of the tender mercy of God. May we able to listen to God, to encounter God without fear, to care for God ... in order to be the face of God, each of us personally and each of our communities and families.



Notre-Dame de l'Hermitage

III

Homes
of light,
generating
new life

Our Founder, St Marcellin, was born at a time of social upheaval, of crisis, of revolution. In his days, he was able to read the signs of the times and discern the call of God to be a light, particularly to the most neglected young people. He relied on the good will and boldness of the first Marists who joined in the educational and evangelising project he was just starting to get going. Community life was one of the key means they used to build a *home of light*.

Br Emili Turú, in his letter *La Valla, The Lighthouse*, spoke beautifully of this first residence: “The home of Champagnat and of Mary becomes for us a lighthouse (...) In this house our first Brothers filled their eyes and hearts with light. They let themselves be invaded by a light that filled their lives with meaning and lit up the pathways of their life’s pilgrimage. Today the house of La Valla continues to be a source of light for our spirituality. It points out the pathway for us to follow; a road that each of us is invited to walk along in our own unique and original way. More than that, along this road we are called to become, each one of us, a lighthouse for others.”⁴¹ We are being invited again today to form *homes of light* that generate new life.

The times in which we are living are not all that different to the circumstances and experiences that framed Marcellin’s life. Many models and ways of acting related to society, politics, religion, and the Church, appear to be in crisis and out of touch with our changing and evolving times. Educational and pasto-

⁴¹ Br Emili TURÚ, Letter *La Valla: the Lighthouse*, March 25, 2017, p 2

ral approaches that served us well for decades need radical change to suit today's youth. The experience the world has lived through as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be leading us to a 'turnaround', asking us to reclaim solid and fundamental values if we really want to build a more human and fraternal society.

In the midst of all this, all of us who bear the name of Mary are being called to form *homes of light that generate new life* in each of our communities, fraternities and families. This call to generate new life is addressed to each of us, no matter our age, years as a Marist, or the nature of our commitment.

In this chapter, I would like to present how I imagine we can generate new life, starting from personal and community integrity, coherent with the Marist values we are committed to, and against the backdrop of our dreams. We direct our efforts so that young people may discover their inner light and nurture the seed of the vocation they have been given. We mentor each one of them and especially those who feel touched by the Marist charism.

1. We generate life by our integrity

Nature teaches us that all living organisms generate new life. But, of course, the necessary conditions must be in place for this new life to be born and develop. So, being homes of light and living cells, our communities or families should be able to generate life. On the contrary, if there is a lack of energy, passion, or light..., it will be difficult to create the conditions to give birth to something new.

In the first two chapters of this circular, I have offered some ideas about forming homes of light and about caring for life... these form the basis for generating new life. I would like to tell you about a meeting I attended with the Pope. In November 2019, the Superiors General of the USG met in a private

audience with Pope Francis. It was a meeting without prepared speeches, but rather open to the questions that the participants wanted to ask the Holy Father directly and he responded spontaneously. The meeting lasted almost an hour and a half and was very interesting and profound.

When I had the chance to speak, I told Pope Francis that in many parts of the world we Religious Congregations are continuing to feel the impact of a decrease in membership and ageing. I asked, “You, as a Religious and now serving as the Supreme Pontiff, have a vision shaped by both the Hierarchical Church and Religious Life. What are some essential points that Religious Congregations must stress in the future? What recommendations would you make to us, as leaders of our Congregations, big and small, about the role of Religious Life in the Church?”

This was how Pope Francis replied,⁴² “The question is wide ranging, and I am not sure how to approach it. But a word jumped out at me while you were speaking, integrity... People of integrity stand out. They make themselves felt. That’s the witness part, isn’t it? Integrity gives witness. And it is not easy to provide formation for integrity. It is not easy to live with integrity, integrity in our principles, integrity concerning reality, integrity in the witness we give. This is the conversion we have to undertake: to give witness. It was Benedict XVI who, in Aparecida, coined that famous phrase: “The Church does not grow by proselytising but by attraction”. Attraction, that is, witness. We still have not taken witnessing to heart. You remember those words of St. Francis to his friars, which I have in front of my elevator (in St Martha’s), and when people come to visit me, it is the first thing they see: “*Go and preach the Gospel and, if necessary, use words*”. Giving witness. Integrity gives witness.”

By way of conclusion, he added, “Integrity implies a shift from a proselytising approach. It is a strong word – when seen from an apologetics standpoint – to move from a direct approach to one of witness; and to let the Holy Spirit be the evangeliser. For whenever we arrive anywhere with the Word of God, the

⁴² Unofficial text, transcribed text of a recording

Holy Spirit is already waiting for us. The Spirit always precedes us. But if we come with our well-rehearsed lines, the poor just keep quiet. And this, in terms of spiritual discernment, says a lot.”

In this simple and concise reply, Pope Francis has gone directly and clearly to the heart of the matter. It is by the integrity of lives that are coherent with the values we profess that we will be able to transmit light to those around

Homes of light are community-based. We have to understand that integrity in life does not mean perfection but rather transparency and genuineness.

us and in our ministry with young people. Such integrity, again, cannot be faked, and nor is it acquired by our own striving. Rather it grows out of our experience of God and God’s love. It is the loving response we make to God who loved us first.

This integrity, as I noted in the second section of this circular, needs to be seen not only in our personally leading balanced lives where we do what we say, but also in our community choices. *Homes of light* are community-based. We have to understand that integrity in life does not mean perfection but rather transparency and genuineness. Young people do not want us to be perfect: “The language that young people understand is what is communicated by those who radiate life, by those who are there for them and with them. And those who, for all their limitations and weaknesses, try to live their faith with integrity.”⁴³

In the Marist world, we have wonderful examples of open communities who radiate joy and faith. Some of them are “communities of hospitality” whose main ministry is to receive and mentor young people. I can recall moments when I was touched by the witness of a number of older brothers who were open, flexible, friendly and approachable. There are also great examples of families, formed by lay Marists, whose lives are evidence of their Christian and Marist values.

⁴³ *Christus Vivit*, n 211

Along with all this, we must acknowledge that, in many places, we need to move forward more boldly. For example, how often does a Provincial or District Leader struggle to find a community that is ready to welcome a young postulant or novice for a short period, or to integrate a young Brother into the community? Or how many communities or families would find it difficult to open their doors to young people for fear of being seen up close? From time to time it would be good to ask ourselves: what aspects of our life are attractive and meaningful to young people and other people around us? What attitudes or behaviours constitute a counter-witness?

Our trying to live with integrity in our personal, community or family lives is when general youth ministry and vocational ministry today starts to make sense. And all youth ministry, if it is authentic, will generate abundant life (the great gift of Jesus), and has a vocational edge, as we help all young people experience the gift of the love of God in their lives and respond in turn with love.

2. We dream of generating new life

Besides the word *integrity*, there is another key word when it comes to generating new life and that is *to dream*. We have to dream. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Constitution, *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis alluded to the dreams of older people: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Joel 2:28; cf Acts 2:17).⁴⁴ And he went on to say, “The elderly have dreams built up of memories and images that bear the mark of

Besides the word integrity, there is another key word when it comes to generating new life and that is to dream. We have to dream.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, n 192

their long experience. If young people sink roots in those dreams, they can peer into the future; they can have visions that broaden their horizons and show them new paths. But if the elderly do not dream, young people lose clear sight of the horizon.”⁴⁵

But if the elderly do not dream, young people lose clear sight of what might be... This thought of Pope Francis struck a chord with me. I am thinking of Institutes like ours with a little over 200 years of history and experience, and more than half of the Brothers of retirement age. As a group of brothers, we belong to this elderly group... What richness and experience we have! At the same time, we are an Institute with young blood, postulants, novices, brothers in temporary profession in various parts of the world, as well as a large number of laypeople, committed to deepening their lay Christian and Marist vocation. There are many young people engaged in our apostolates and this is particularly the case in youth ministry. Yet, *if the elderly do not dream, if we do not dream ...*

This means dreaming and journeying together, as the Pope says, “If we journey together, young and old, we can be firmly rooted in the present, and from here, revisit the past and look to the future. To revisit the past in order to learn from history and heal old wounds that at times still trouble us. To look to the future in order to nourish our enthusiasm, cause dreams to emerge, awaken prophecies and enable hope to blossom. Together, we can learn from one another, warm hearts, inspire minds with the light of the Gospel, and lend new strength to our hands.”⁴⁶

Learn from history and heal old wounds that at times still trouble us. On the one hand, we are happy to have our place in a history of over 200 years, sharing in a charism that enriches us and has brought benefits to so many people around the world. On the other hand, as with so many other Religious Institutes, how conditioned are we by feelings of nostalgia at having once had so many brothers

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, n 193

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, n 199

only to see ourselves decrease and age year after year? What must we be and do “*to look to the future, nourish our enthusiasm, cause dreams to emerge, awaken prophecies and enable hope to blossom?*”

We are also grieving over our infidelities, departures and lack of faith. We grieve a lot over the painful cases of child abuse or our lack of due care for children. We grieve over failures against brotherhood... There are so many cases, so many wounds that inflict us, some with particular force and pain in recent times and for which we never cease to beg forgiveness. Yet, at the same time, we seek healing and want to look ahead so as to never repeat such behaviour contrary to our vocation and values. We want to create a fresh future from a basis of faith, humanity, respect and protection for each child, a firm commitment for young people, and a rejuvenated and Paschal brotherhood.

We are also grieving over our infidelities, departures and lack of faith.

As an Institute we have deep roots going back to our origins and the years since. Those who can best tell the story are the older generations. At the same time, we are intent on welcoming the new times, the current generation of young people, with all their riches and limitations. “Roots are not anchors chaining us to past times and preventing us from facing the present and creating something new. Instead, they are a fixed point from which we can grow and meet new challenges. It does us no good ‘to sit down and long for times past; we must meet our culture with realism and love and fill it with the Gospel. We are sent today to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to a new age. We need to love this time with all its opportunities and risks, its joys and sorrows, its riches and its limits, its successes and failures’.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *Christus Vivit*, n. 200, quoting Eduardo Pironio, *Message to Young Argentines at the National Youth Gathering* in Cordoba (September 12-15, 1985), 2.

So, the task before us is to dream with young people and encourage them to take a leading role, e.g. in taking up the various initiatives of the Secretariat for Education and Evangelisation and those that some other teams have proposed in recent years. Let us not dream “for them”, but “with them”. A dream that is communal, not personal.

This demands giving space for reflection and listening, opening ourselves to the new, being enriched by diversity, and above all, trying to discover what the dream of God is for our days and what role each of us is being called to play in this dream.

3. Helping one another to dream

Right from our early days, with Fr Champagnat and the first brothers, many have dreamt about and looked for fresh ways of living the Marist charism in all its apostolic potential. We have had our ‘dreamers’ who have helped us to dream. Here I would like to recall some ideas from recent Superiors General about vocations ministry and caring for new shoots of Marist life.

We have had our ‘dreamers’ who have helped us to dream.

Br Basilio Rueda, after his analysis of the social and cultural changes of those years, appealed for a renewal in our vocations work: “Where traditional methods on which the promotion of vocations was based in the past have failed, it is no use persisting with them. Wisdom is telling us to draw inspiration from previous pastoral methods but to adapt them intelligently and creatively to a new context.”⁴⁸

In 1987 Br Charles Howard sent out a Circular on “*Vocations*”, the first one ever in the Institute on this topic. He said, “The danger is that (...) we may

⁴⁸ Br. Basilio RUEDA, Circular *Fidelity*, Rome, September 8, 1984, Vol. XXVIII, 003-519 General House General, 1984, p 139



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tend to put all the blame on outside factors: Whether culture changes, changing attitudes of young people, the lack of appreciation for the Brother's vocation, changes in the Church, the stress on personal development, materialistic values, etc. It would be foolish to ignore these external factors. But it would not be wise to think that we are impotent.”⁴⁹

In his Circular “*Walk peacefully, yet with a sense of urgency*” (1997), Br Benito Arbues indicated these calls for getting involved in vocations ministry and formation: “Once again, I want to avoid any dualism: We are talking about both witnessing and doing, but there is no greater action than the witness which we give. Remember: “When our life radiates Christian joy and hope, we awaken in young people the desire to give themselves to follow Christ”. So say our Constitutions (82) and I agree. Life attracts, especially the

⁴⁹ Br. Charles HOWARD, Circular *Vocations*, Rome, November 1, 1987, Vol. XXIX, General House, 1987, p 49

life of a group; the life of a community is much more convincing than that of the individual.”⁵⁰

In his 2004 letter *Rekindling the fire! On the occasion of the Marist Year of Vocations*, Br Seán Sammon was very clear that “our fundamental reason for promoting vocations has to be our zeal for mission and not just the desire to survive “at all costs”.⁵¹ He threw down the challenge of reorganising our commitments to allow us to dedicate “20 per cent of our best time directly to this work”.⁵² He used the expression *cultivating vocations* and *a culture of vocation* to describe settings that vocations need in order to take root and flourish. Then, in the Circular of Convocation of the XXI General Chapter, “*New Hearts for a New World*”,⁵³ he asked Provincials not to hesitate to free up people who might create gaps in the Provinces to carry out the vocations ministry. He restated that the best means of attracting possible candidates is still the quality of the brothers’ lives and appealed for sensitivity to current phenomena such as globalisation and internationality.⁵⁴

In 2016, in his letter *Fourvière: The Revolution of Tenderness*, Br. Emili Turu stated. “I believe that we are living through a moment of rediscovery and reevaluation of our vocation, beginning with each one of us.”⁵⁵ This was a few months after the publication of the document *The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brothers in the Church*,⁵⁶ in which, as highlighted by Br Emili, it is clear that “one of the distinctive tasks of brothers in the Church is to exaggerate fraternity. (...) Essentially, it is about recognising that community is at the heart of our life, and that the experience of brotherhood is one of the greatest gifts

⁵⁰ Br. Benito ARBUÉS, Circular *Walk peacefully, yet with a sense of urgency*, Rome, November 8, 1997, Vol. XXX, I, General House, 1997, n 34

⁵¹ Br. Seán SAMMON, Letter to launch the Marist Year of Vocations, *Rekindling the Fire!* Rome, C.S.C. Grafica, S.R.L., 2004, pp 8-9

⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵³ Br. Seán SAMMON, *New Hearts for a New World*. Circular of Convocation of the XXI General Chapter, September 8, 2008, Vol. XXXI, n 4

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 39-40

⁵⁵ Br. Emili TURÚ, Letter *Fourvière: The Revolution of Tenderness*, June 6, 2016, p 12

⁵⁶ CICLSAL, *The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*, October 4, 2015

we can bring to the wider community of the Church.”⁵⁷ Elsewhere in the same letter, Br Emili stated, “I believe that today the vast majority of brothers understand in our minds – and, I hope, in our hearts too – that the Marist laity is an extraordinary gift of the Spirit to our religious family.”⁵⁸ He went on to say that “the call felt is for brothers and lay people to journey together.”⁵⁹

More recently, the XXII General Chapter of 2017, the year of the Bicentenary of the foundation of the Institute, noted that the future of our charism will be based on a communion of fully committed Marists and that we need structures and processes that recognize and support our different vocational paths as Marists. It suggested that we commit ourselves personally and as a community to be more present among young people, accompanying them with proactive vocational proposals and renewing our plans for vocations ministry.⁶⁰

We can see that the way in which they have tried to face the vocational crisis has been to give a global response adapted to the times.

Through these snippets, we can see that, over recent years, the topic of generating new Marist life has been very much present in the dreams and endeavours of the Superior Generals. We can see that the way in which they have tried to face the vocational crisis has been to give a global response adapted to the times: one that is directed at meeting the challenge of renewal and adaptation of religious life to the present time, by way of the renewal of each brother and community and of our pastoral and evangelising activities. The emphasis is on personal and, above all, community witness.

Over recent decades, there has been a continuous evolution in the concept of *vocation* and *vocation ministry*. From terms such as *recruiting* and *vocational*

⁵⁷ Br. Emili TURÚ, Letter *Fourvière: The Revolution of Tenderness*, June 6, 2016, p 13

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p 14

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p 17

⁶⁰ Cf Marist Brothers, *Message of the XXII General Chapter*, Rio Negro, Colombia, 2017

promotion, for a long time now the language has shifted to *vocation ministry*, which is *open to everyone*, and has as its aim that *every young person find his or her right place in life*. From being a ministry that was the ‘territory’ of brothers only, it has become a shared ministry, with brothers and laypeople co-responsible for Marist life and mission, and so co-responsible for generating new Marist life. The richness implicit in our different vocations in the Church is valued and we speak of vocations to consecrated life and lay Marist life, recognising how they complement one another in regard to the Marist charism.

In our time, it is up to us to dream and help others to dream, using our strengths and despite our weaknesses. We dream about generating new life. And, simultaneously, we look for concrete ways to fulfil our dream.

4. Generating life with young people

In October 2018 I had the privilege of taking part in the Synod on “Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment”. There were around forty young people from the five continents attending the Assembly besides Pope Francis, Bishops, Religious and some lay people. The active presence and reflections of this young group, who had been at a pre-Synod meeting with the Pope, really added to the Synod process. They produced a change of attitude and way of looking at youth in me and many other participants.

Being around one another, conversation, friendliness helped us to listen and understand one another better. The Pope made this comment, “Those of us who are no longer young need to find ways of keeping close to the voices and concerns of young people. ‘Drawing together creates the conditions for the Church to become a place of dialogue and a witness to life-giving fraternity’. We need to make more room for the voices of young people to be heard: ‘listening makes possible an exchange of gifts in a context of empathy (...) At the same time, it sets the conditions for a preaching of the Gospel that can touch the heart truly, decisively and fruitfully’.”⁶¹

⁶¹ *Christus Vivit*, n 38

On the first day, Pope Francis invited us to speak up boldly and to listen with humility. He asked us to be open to what is new. He appealed to us to generate a positive future at the Synod, one that is inspiring to all young people.

Some of the ideas that emerged during the synodal process resonated deeply with me: we should not talk about “the Church and young people”, as if these were two separate worlds; youth are an important and essential part of the Church. Also, in recognition of the responsibility and leadership of young people, we should not talk about pastoral care ‘for’ young people but about pastoral care ‘with’ young people. It is so important to have a positive outlook towards the new generations, one of acceptance and understanding of their challenges and limitations; to try to be an empathetic Church, giving priority to listening; to look for ways of providing pastoral care for all young people, particularly those who have suffered any kind of abuse; to respond to the world of migration, the majority of whom are young people; to address the need for trained and updated pastoral agents.

These and many other ideas were expressed in the final document of the Synod. This, in turn, was the basis of *Christus Vivit*, the Apostolic Exhortation of the Pope which contains a number of creative sections directed at youth. These are the two reference documents I am using here, given their significance and contemporary character in relation to the topic I want to discuss.

Throughout the Synod, there were many moments of exchange in language groups in which open dialogue took place and proposals could be worked up. During the assembly proceedings, each participant had the opportunity to express himself or herself at least once, for four minutes. It was very interesting to listen to the ideas, reflections and experiences of people coming from so many parts of the world. It was also possible to detect different visions, ways of considering the situation of young people, or proposals for pastoral action. The interaction was an opportunity to search for and agree on common criteria and lines of action.

In my brief contribution to the assembly, I mentioned that, these days, we need to humbly position ourselves more as disciples than as teachers, and seek to co-create the dream of God, hand in hand with young people. Do we think that young people understand words and terms we use like vocation or discernment...? Isn't it true that the Gospel is reaching and challenging young people, but our "religious" structures less so?

I proposed that what we need to do is to promote a renewed culture of vocation, looking to connect and be in tune with the new generations, with a positive outlook, getting the language right, and understanding the context such as it is. In a particular way, we have to create situations where young people are given the lead to be the main architects of their own vocations.

Today's younger generations, like ours in years past, generate novelty and creativity. They have many positive features along with elements of fragility, as was the case with us. They are capable of easily connecting with each other

We need to humbly position ourselves more as disciples than as teachers, and seek to co-create the dream of God, hand in hand with young people.

and creating relationships, although sometimes it may seem to us that they are afraid of going deeper and making them last; they build solidarity networks with ease and are capable of altruistic actions, in spite of having to struggle against so many forces that encourage them to focus on themselves, in a society that promotes egocentric choices and indifference;

there are signs of their thirst and openness to inner and spiritual experiences, although they have difficulties with institutions; the digital age is their world (and ours), it opens them up to innumerable possibilities, while they run the risk of being depersonalised, living in a virtual world.

Taking a lead from Champagnat who went out of his way to meet young people in the villages and on the roads, how can we become more attentive to

what they have to say? How can we become more like disciples and thus learn at their side, reinventing the loving presence among them that Marcellin encouraged us to be? How can we connect better with them, using appropriate and accessible language, after the fashion of our Founder: his adaptability, his searching for new pedagogies, his openness to unexplored missions?

Pope Francis highlighted the fact “that young people themselves are agents of youth ministry. Certainly they need to be helped and guided, but at the same time left free to develop new approaches, with creativity and a certain audacity,” and that he was “more concerned with helping young people to use their insight, ingenuity and knowledge to address the issues and concerns of other young people in their own language.”⁶²

We want to form homes of light with young people. They bring light to us. Their contribution and creativity allow us to breathe fresh air, while offering us clues as to how to develop and adapt our pastoral approach. We are on this journey together, where we all see ourselves as disciples and learn from one another. We want each of our communities, each family, to be a home that cares for and brings light to its members and those in the surrounding area. We also want all our educational, evangelising and social centres, and every ministry that we engage in, to be places that replicate and multiply the life-giving, light-giving experience of our *homes of light*. We want young people at our side in doing this.

5. “That you may have life”:

Re-imagining our culture of vocation

From our origins, the eyes of so many children and young people in need, and particularly the eyes of the young Montagne, captivated Marcellin Champagnat. The love of God that he experienced in himself and what he saw in those eyes led him to respond with audacity. His generosity, commitment, and passion for caring for young people have defined us from the beginning.

⁶² *Christus Vivit*, n 203

We are an Institute that, for more than 200 years, has been dedicated to the education and evangelisation of young people, trying to give priority to caring for the poorest and most needy. This is what we have done and continue to do, always seeking to ensure that children and young people “*have life and have it to the full*” (Jn 10:10).

To want to generate new life leads us to be open and inclusive in line with the affirmation of the Pope and the Synod, “All the young, without exception, are in God’s heart and thus in the Church’s heart”.⁶³ Can we honestly say that all young people, without exception, are at the heart of the Institute, of our apostolic works, of our communities, fraternities and families? How are we captivated today by the eyes of the young, especially the eyes of the Montagnes of today?

Above I pointed out the importance of having a positive outlook towards today’s generation, welcoming the various gifts they possess, as well as their limitations. At the same time, we are being challenged to generate new life in extreme situations... situations of young people who live in contexts of war and suffer violence in the form of kidnapping, extortion, organized crime, human trafficking, slavery and exploitation; young people who are persecuted for their faith. Others are conscripted into lives of crime and violence such as child soldiers, armed and criminal gangs, drug trafficking or terrorism; young people whose lives are cut short by violence; young people who are brainwashed by ideologies, who suffer forms of marginalization and social exclusion for religious, ethnic or economic reasons. Many are victims of sexual violence, drugs, pornography.⁶⁴

To create or become *homes of light that generate new life* means leaving our world of comfort and security. It means being a light in the midst of the shadows through concrete actions of welcoming, showing understanding, and being close to young people... It also means being in solidarity, selfless, and making them a real priority in how we spend our time and resources. Light leads

⁶³ *Christus Vivit*, n 235

⁶⁴ Cf *Christus Vivit*, nn 72-74

to the generation of more light: recognizing in them their desire to feel fully alive and the dignity of being human, their desire to be treated as children of God, their dream of brotherhood, their desire to make a difference in the world, their artistic sensitivity and their search for harmony with nature, their desire to communicate... These are all starting points that await a word of incentive, of enlightenment, of encouragement.

Our mission is carried out mostly through our educational and evangelising work in formal schools, a priority platform that we must never lose. We also have a good number of social works where our educational and evangelising mission is directed at children and young people living in poverty and on the margins. Several hundred thousand children and young people attend Marist works each day in many countries of the world. The Catholic school continues to be essential as a place for evangelising young people.⁶⁵ The challenge is to ensure that our educational and youth ministries are inclusive, with room for each and every young person.

To create or become homes of light that generate new life means leaving our world of comfort and security.

An essential point in generating new life among young people is creating an environment where they can grow and fulfil themselves fully, in tune with God's dream for them. This is why we need a fresh perspective on how we walk with them as they discern the direction of their lives; on how well our educational and evangelizing action is succeeding to help each young person develop as a well-integrated person. That is to say, we want to ensure that they have the necessary tools to know themselves with all their gifts and limitations, to accept and live with their past, to discover themselves as very much loved by God and to be well-equipped to seek and find their best way of serving in this world. Indeed, "to respond to our vocation, we need to foster and develop all that we are. This has nothing to do with inventing ourselves or creating ourselves out of

⁶⁵ Cf *Christus Vivit*, n 222

nothing. It has to do with finding our true selves in the light of God and letting our lives flourish and bear fruit.”⁶⁶

Today, “it is not possible to understand the significance of the baptismal vocation in its fullness unless we remember that for everyone, without exception, it is a call to holiness.”⁶⁷ This is why our pastoral action is focused on each young person, on encouraging his or her search for life in its fullness. If we look at walking with them as they discern the direction of their lives from this new perspective, we will put our energy into seeking that each one of them has a full and joyful life. It will give us profound joy to see that each young person is growing

Our pastoral action is focused on each young person, on encouraging his or her search for life in its fullness.

as a happy, service-minded person. Pope John Paul II, who was the first to use the phrase *culture of vocation*, said, “I desire, first of all, to call attention to the urgency of cultivating what we could call, ‘basic vocational attitudes’⁶⁸, which give life to an authentic ‘culture of vocation’”.⁶⁹

There are many things we can do with young people in youth ministry activities in order to meet their vocational needs which are always present, even if not always expressed or even conscious. Activities such as education in contemplative practices and spirituality, that leads the young people to experience that they are very much loved by God and to enter into dialogue with God; experiences of volunteering and solidarity, through which young people learn to value selfless service to others, particularly those who are most in need; group living and team work that bring them into close contact with one another.

⁶⁶ *Christus Vivit*, n 257

⁶⁷ Synod of the Bishops, *Final Document of Synod, Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment*, n 84

⁶⁸ Note: The Pope mentions these basic vocational attitudes: the formation of conscience, sensitivity to spiritual and moral values, and the promotion and defence of the ideals of human brotherhood, the sacredness of human life, social solidarity and civil order. This indicates that we have to work towards a culture which allows modern people to rediscover themselves, recovering the higher values of love, friendship, prayer and contemplation. This culture of vocation constitutes the foundation of a culture of new life, which is a life of gratitude and self-giving, of trust and responsibility; at its heart, it is a culture based on the desire for God, who gives people the grace to value themselves and to constantly claim their dignity in the face of all that can oppress them in body and spirit. See the complete message at: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/messages/vocations/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08091992_world-day-for-vocations.html

⁶⁹ John Paul II, Message for the 30th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, 8 September 1992, n 2

The Marist document *Evangelisers in the midst of Youth* establishes a clear link between youth ministry in general and vocations ministry: “The dimension of vocations is an essential part of the educational program in MYM. In Youth Ministry, Vocation Ministry finds a vital and privileged space, and Youth Ministry is more comprehensive and effective when open to the dimension of vocations. This integrated approach helps young people to take a leadership role in charting the course of their lives, and presents them with an opportunity to develop their life plan.”⁷⁰

Parents need some initiation into “training the young to fly”, following the pattern of God’s way with us. Eagles, for example, first demonstrate flying, then support their young by controlling their flight, and finally allow them to fly independently to fend for themselves. Family ministry needs to prepare parents in the process of letting go, the smooth departure of the child from the protective shell of the family, which is an essential part of the vocation of parents. It involves a healthy relationship between parents and children, so that careers and other choices can be accepted together. Parents should act in a free and liberating way, neither having the last say nor hand-wringing when their child is making a career choice, including a religious vocation.⁷¹

It is not always easy for parents to welcome the life choice of their children when they feel called to something very different from what the parents had imagined. This difficulty often arises when the young man or woman feels called to the consecrated or priestly life. We know something about this from our own vocational experience, or maybe from mentoring someone in his or her vocational discernment. How important it is to include parents in the process, offering them information, a friendly ear, and remaining in touch.

We should value and promote the diversity of charisms and ministries that exist in the Church, beginning with the gift of the lay vocation, which is that of the majority of the baptized, including marriage as a vocation. We also

⁷⁰ Marist Brothers, *Evangelisers in the midst of Youth*, 2011, n 135

⁷¹ Cf. Mario Oscar LLANOS, *Servire le vocazioni nella Chiesa. Pastorale vocazionale e pedagogia della vocazione*, Roma, LAS, 2005, pp 337-338

value and appreciate the gift of consecrated life, with its various charisms, as well as the gift of priestly ministry. In the midst of this diversity of gifts and charisms, we focus our attention on the gift that each young person carries within him or herself, as a seed that is destined to germinate, grow, mature, and bear fruit.

How important it is to include parents in the process, offering them information, a friendly ear, and remaining in touch.

From this new perspective or culture of vocation, we can also speak of specific mentoring towards a particular life choice. General Marist youth ministry is open to all young people, but there is a need for specific vocational accompaniment as well. In our case, this is for those who feel that they have received and

welcomed the gift of the Marist charism in their lives and are thinking of living it out as a religious brother or as a lay Marist. This topic is the focus of my reflection in the following two sections.

6. A future with new Marist life

Within the context of general youth ministry open to all young people, we journey with them in their vocational search, which may be conscious or not on their part, bringing God into the picture. In this journey and accompaniment, there is one particular aspect for which we Marists of Champagnat have a serious responsibility: to keep alive and spread the flame of the Marist charism. This is what we received; this is what we share. We do this through the personal and community witness of our lives, our *homes of light*, and by speaking about it to the new generations.

Besides the example of so many brothers and laypeople who passionately live the gift of the charism, we need to create opportunities for showing the



La Valla - Bridge where Marcellin meets Jean Marie Granjon, the first Marist Brother (photo from 2013, when the dam was emptied).

charism in action and talking about its continuing relevance. It is our turn to take up the task of sharing the gift that the Spirit made available through Saint Marcellin Champagnat and which, over the years, has been evolving and adapting in each period of history.

In the last few paragraphs, I referred to the need for a new perspective, a new culture of vocation: to focus our attention on each young person, mentoring him or her in the discernment and development of his or her own gift, perceived as a call from God. We also need a new paradigm regarding the Marist charism, both in the way we conceive the Marist vocation as well as in the way we make it known and accompany those who feel the call to live it. In today's world, it is no longer appropriate to keep on doing vocation ministry centred on "promoting and attracting" vocations to our Institute. I am not saying that we should no longer promote the vocation of a brother and share the happiness of our life as brothers. I am saying, rather, that the paradigm that is asked of

us today is to centre ourselves primarily on the person, his or her vocation to be fully alive, and on the loving word that God is whispering personally in the interior of each young person... This is a long way from “the desire to survive ‘at all costs’”,⁷² as Brother Seán Sammon put it during the Vocation Year in 2005.

It is not easy to change the paradigm of many old ways that hinder our living in the present. Some of us are still weighed down by our collective ‘success’ of the 1960’s when there were almost ten thousand brothers, only to see ourselves gradually diminish and age. We know that this experience has been

In recent years, the vocation of Marist brothers has had greater affirmation within the Church and within the Institute itself than perhaps at any other moment in our history.

partly the result of an ecclesial and social revolution that has impacted on the whole world and on all vocations of special consecration in the Church. A welcome fruit of that revolution has been the emergence of Christian laity and Marist laypeople in increasing numbers, a great gift for the Institute and for the Church.

A new perspective, a new culture of vocation, a new paradigm, all ask us to have a new look at ourselves.

What do we imagine God’s dream to be for the Marist charism in our days and into the future? Have you begun to think about this and let your imagination run free?

In recent years, the vocation of Marist brothers has had greater affirmation within the Church and within the Institute itself than perhaps at any other moment in our history. The document “The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church” came out in 2015. It is the first full Church document ever that speaks about religious brothers. It insists on the significance

⁷² Br. Seán SAMMON, Letter to launch the Marist Year of Vocations, *Rekindling the Fire!* Rome, C.S.C. Grafica, S.R.L., 2004, pp 8-9

of living brotherhood in a prophetic way; this is the gift we have received and to which we are to give radical witness.

On January 2, 2020, we received the official version of the text “*Wherever you go: Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*”, a document of the XXII General Chapter. In this document, the main lines of the Church document just cited appear, along with reflections coming from the Constitutions and from our experience of consecrated life. It invites us to live the gift of brotherhood radically:⁷³

In your vocation as a brother,
you are called to live out this gift fully and without reservation.
Just as each religious family bears witness to an attribute of Jesus,
you and your brothers are asked
to make visible in the Church and world
Christ’s fraternal face.

The decision leading to a profound revision of our Constitutions arose from the need for a conversion of heart, in view of a new world. It was undertaken deliberately with a wide participation of Brothers, in order to help revitalize our vocation. We have made the journey. In the renewed Constitutions we have sought to bring together the essential aspects of our consecrated life in a more integrated way. Constitutions, Statutes and Rule of Life, three documents that form a single whole and that seek to encourage us to live our following of Jesus as Marist Brothers with integrity.

Besides these documents, in various parts of the world, we have living and joyful examples of young people who are responding to the call to follow Jesus as Marists. They are a gift for our family. Their lives are telling us that the Lord continues to call and that He has generous young people who wish to follow Him. It is up to us to welcome them as a gift, to walk with them and to allow ourselves to be challenged by them. They can offer us new perspectives on the charism, even as they can learn from the experience and history that we share with them.

⁷³ *Wherever you go, Rule of Life of the Marist Brothers*, n 2

As I move around the Institute, I am encouraged to meet many brothers who live their vocation with joy and passion, giving themselves daily to the service of young people and those most in need. At the same time, I get the impression that a good number of brothers are still living some sort of identity crisis, which prevents them from facing the future with enthusiasm; they have reached the stage of thinking that “It’s all over”, all hope is gone. It is sad, because consciously or unconsciously, they could be blocking initiatives and actions of the Spirit, working through those who are seeking life and renewal and want to generate new life. Now is the moment to try to look at reality from a new perspective: to welcome the gift of the Marist vocation of those who are feeling the call to live it out, whether as a religious brother or as a lay Marist.

You will have heard me say on several occasions that we should not be so focussed on quantity, as in the number of brothers. Our concern should not be

To welcome the ‘new’ that the Spirit is inspiring, particularly in recent years: the gift of so many lay men and women committed to the Marist charism and mission to the point of many of them living it as their own vocation received from God.

on how many we are or how many we might be, but to check that we are living our vocation with passion and integrity. And if we live our vocation intensely as a group, as a community, how much light will we offer the world! Our lifestyle as consecrated religious would be fascinating and attractive and would lead some young people to ask themselves if they are also bearers of this gift, since it is God who gives it.

We have a precious gift of life, happiness, and brotherhood but many times we do not know how to pass it on. Or else we hide it in our fragile clay jars, when it is something that is needed by the world today, especially young people. If we only knew how to be, in truth and simplicity, “masters of spirituality” or at least companions on this journey, “prophets of brotherhood” or at least joyful examples, “agents of happiness” or at least alongside young

people in their search . . . we would become a new light, each one of us and each Marist community, a *home of light*.

Each of us has our own vocational history, which is unique and different. Perhaps the Spirit used some small detail to attract our attention and, as time went by, we discerned and confirmed the call, seeking to give it our best response. Maybe there was also the mediation of a brother or a community, our family, a friend, an experience of solidarity, or a spiritual retreat. I believe that something similar continues to happen these days, and if young people manage to tune their ear and connect with their deepest longing, they will be able to recognize the call within themselves.

This is not just about our own life as brothers. We are open to a new perspective, ready to welcome the ‘new’ that the Spirit is inspiring, particularly in recent years: the gift of so many lay men and women committed to the Marist charism and mission to the point of many of them living it as their own vocation received from God.

The table at La Valla is a powerful and attractive symbol for all of us who deeply resonate with Marcellin’s charism today. It is a table around which there is room for everyone: brothers, lay Marists, teachers, staff in Marist works, children, young people, former students, their families, as well as some priests, men and women religious who are seeking sustenance for their vocational journey from Marist sources. It is a table that welcomes all Marists of Champagnat; a table accessible to all. This is the marvel of the gift of the Marist charism to the Church and the world; it makes us feel like and form a great family.

The document “*Gathered around the same table*” expresses it this way, “Within this ecclesiastical communion, the Spirit has caused to spring among the lay people charisms that originally existed only in religious institutes. The gift of shared charism introduces *a new chapter, rich in hope* in the progress of the Church. So too it has been among us Marists. The charism of Saint Marcellin Champagnat is expressed in new forms of Marist life. One of them is that of

the Marist laity.”⁷⁴ When we have the chance to interact with and listen in person to the testimonies of people committed to the Marist charism, it is easy to understand what is meant by ‘the lay vocation’ in the Institute and the Church.

In recent years, we have been on a significant journey with regard to the lay Marist vocation. We still have a way to go. Today we have a large number of lay men and women who are discerning their way of living and committing themselves to the Marist charism. There are those who belong to the fraternities of the Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family. Others belong to various groups or Associations. Many have been committed for a long time to our ministries. There is a group that has made a type of formal commitment within some Provinces. We know that, among all of them, there is a core group, who live their Christian and Marist vocation from the heart. We have Marist texts that offer valuable support and pointers for reflection for this vocation.⁷⁵

The vocation that the Spirit gives all of us as Marists of Champagnat is a call to be a Marial face among the young and, especially, among the poor. The XXII General Chapter insisted on communion, co-responsibility for Marist life and mission, structures and processes.⁷⁶ To journey together, in communion, as passionate and fully committed Marists of Champagnat, is an important and essential key for unlocking the future of the Marist charism.

I have tried to express the high value that each Marist vocation holds. Still, I get the impression that, across the Institute, we have not yet achieved a healthy balance in how we weigh up these vocations. I think that sometimes we waste energy on discussions that go nowhere.

⁷⁴ Marist Brothers, *Gathered around the same table. The Vocation of lay Marists of Champagnat*, Rome, 2009, n 7

⁷⁵ Note: The document *Gathered Around the Same Table - The Vocation of lay Marists of Champagnat* was published in June 2009. Two other documents: *Being Lay Marists* and *The Fraternity Life Plan* (Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family) were presented to the General Chapter by the Bureau of the Laity, after a process in which many were involved. We consider these texts as reference documents for all Marists of Champagnat.

⁷⁶ Cf. Marist Brothers, *Document of the XXII General Chapter*, section “As Marists of Champagnat”, Río Negro, Colombia, 2017

That is why I would like to insist that, as both brothers and laypeople, we firmly believe that God continues to inspire new vocations to the Marist brotherhood in our days. And further, that we continue to make a sustained effort for brother vocations even though in some parts of the world it has been a long time since there were any, or they have been very few in number. We should never stop trusting in God's times and ways.

Likewise, all of us, brothers and laypeople, are being called to believe firmly that the Spirit is arousing lay Marist vocations and that we should be putting more energy and resources into ensuring their growth. It would seem that lay vocations are appearing and finding a welcome in some parts of the world more than others where things are not as clear. So, let us collaborate a little to arouse, welcome and make the gift of the laity grow within the Institute and the Church.

It is important to continue to create forums where both brothers and laypeople can discuss this topic. Let these forums give us the space to imagine and dream about Marist life in the future, what it means to be a brother, and what it means to be a lay Marist. Coming out of this, we will be in a better position to engage in specifically Marist vocation ministry, with both vocations on display and encouraged.

I have tried to express the high value that each Marist vocation holds.

There's still a way to go. Perhaps in many of our schools, the students and staff have very little knowledge of Marist life even after spending several years there. We have to make a fresh effort and put some energy into making the gift of the charism more visible, without, of course, any proselytizing. We choose to spread the word, from the *homes of light* that we have been talking about. Thus, those who see us might ask themselves: What makes this Marist teacher and his family live the way they do? How come this brother communicates so much joy and never seems to get tired in his work? Where does the tenderness come from in the way this brother or

that layperson is approachable, listens, and understands? Could it be that I too am being called to live this way? These are just some examples of the questions they might ask. Probably the young people of today would be more direct and surely differ a lot in what sparks their interest.

7. Tending new shoots of Marist life

Building “A New La Valla” will only be possible if we can count on Marists, brothers or lay, who are passionate followers of Jesus. This is what I said in my concluding remarks to the delegates of the XXII General Chapter. “I will spare no effort in making the investment of human energy and financial resources needed to invigorate and follow through on our efforts regarding vocations. I want to insist on the power of “example” balanced by planned concrete actions for generating new Marist life. My proposal to you, and to all Marists, is that we dedicate one day per week throughout the year (approximately 50 days a year) to consciously and closely support actions or ways of being present that

I will spare no effort in making the investment of human energy and financial resources needed to invigorate and follow through on our efforts regarding vocations.

will foster and achieve the potential of our Marist life into the future, be it in the forms of religious or lay life. You can decide for yourself what you might do in practice. Hopefully, this challenge will be taken up by many throughout the Marist world. I, for my part, will be the first to respond to the invitation I am making to you.”⁷⁷

Three years after the General Chapter, I want to reaffirm the same invitation and extend it today to the whole Institute. What should our priorities be in relation to tending new shoots of Marist life?

⁷⁷ Br. Ernesto SÁNCHEZ BARBA, Closing Remarks at the XXII General Chapter, Rio Negro, Colombia, October 20, 2017.

When I look back over my childhood, my family and my time in a Marist school, I can identify a number of moments and situations that have been integral to my vocational journey. *My homes of light.* There were people who cared for me and accompanied me in my search. The example of some teachers, brothers and lay, influenced me especially during my adolescence and as a young adult.

I remember, as a student in a Marist college, feeling attracted to the vocation of a brother for the first time when I was twelve years of age. In senior high school I joined the Marist Youth Ministry group. Our solidarity experiences with needy people and contact with the brothers' community were key factors in my choice to give serious consideration to Marist religious life. One of the brothers guided us personally and as a group. I can recall the excitement I felt when I learnt about the life of Champagnat. Doing a retreat and my initiation into personal prayer were decisive moments in my quest. I remember the warm tone of the conversation between the brothers and my parents after I spoke to them about my interest in going to the postulancy, since it was not easy for me to speak to them about this. I was privileged in having quality people as my guides in initial formation. I thank each one of them, particularly for their closeness and support in times of difficulty.

When I look back over my childhood, my family and my time in a Marist school, I can identify a number of moments and situations that have been integral to my vocational journey. My homes of light.

Each of us has made his own vocational journey. Each of us has grown up inside or close to some *home of light.* In my case, besides feeling grateful for my own journey, I have also been involved in youth and vocation ministry with enthusiasm and passion throughout my Marist life. I have found the same zest in many brothers and laypeople in the Institute. I present below some ideas that I consider important in this ministry. As I was retelling my own experience, it

came to me that perhaps we do not need really extraordinary things, but ordinary and common ones, that we already have experience of in the Institute and that perhaps we could recover or give a new face to:

① To begin, it is important to approach the topic of vocation as interlinked with the process of learning and growth in **prayer life**. We adopt an attitude of openness and availability before God who loves us unconditionally. God's call is for today and every day. All prayer has a vocational character, since this is part of the dynamic of listening and responding, of openness and availability before the love of God that we are experiencing within. So, it is not so much a question of "praying for vocations" but of inviting others to share our prayer and praying together, of being open to the presence and the will of the Father. With young people, families, teachers, fraternities, communities... we pray together in a spirit of communion, celebrating God's faithfulness in the life of each of us.

② Revise current **vocation ministry plans** on the provincial and local levels. These plans should cover general lines of action for mentoring each young person in his or her search and, at the same time, contain a specific section related to Marist vocational accompaniment. We need to check that there is a programme that proposes topics suitable to the age and degree of readiness of the adolescents and young people. It is important that the plans have a solid basis of knowledge and an accompanied process of initiation into the Christian life and conversion to the Gospel, thus avoiding the risk of skipping stages.

③ Renew our **means of communication with young people**, for the digital world and our presence on social media to be at the service of the Kingdom. It is very helpful to have young people present when making such plans or to involve them in work teams where they can take the lead. Their initiatives in the use of today's media can help to present Christian and Marist values in an attractive and contemporary way.

④ Review how we are involved with **university** students. As they come to the end of their high school years, many young people start exploring their life choices at some depth. Others will do so during or after university. I have the impression that we are not sufficiently present during this stage and that we could do something more to minister among so many young people who have perhaps passed through our schools or groups and to walk with them on their Christian journey. Perhaps our best service would be to simply help them seek and find “meaning”. Some of our Marist universities, and others where we are present, have developed ministry programs and activities very appropriate for this stage. Now is a good time to review how the accompaniment of young people is going with their life choices in mind.

⑤ Offer young people the opportunity to experience **self-sacrifice and solidarity**, especially among people on the margins and those in greatest need. Direct contact with the reality of deprivation and poverty has provoked many young people to question their life choice. I am talking about guided immersion experiences with a debriefing in which the cry of the poor reveals the face of Jesus, present in them. Radical vocational options can happen as a consequence of young people living an intense experience as a volunteer. One characteristic of today’s young people is their openness to altruistic and volunteer outreach. It goes without saying that our primary focus is service to the poor, but this can also be of assistance in discovering one’s vocation in life.

⑥ Evaluate how well we are working as **a team, brothers and laypeople**, in our programs and related processes of human, Christian and vocational growth. See how well we involve communities and individual brothers and, at times, some older brothers, whose contribution can be very valuable in passing on stories of personal fidelity, of happy and even heroic lives. Encourage lay Marists to offer their life testimony. Involve young people in initial formation and brothers in temporary vows so that they can connect with the new generations and share their experience of life. There are also many volunteers who can transmit the values they have learned through their experience.

7 Accompany the **families** through personal contact, providing information, arranging reflection gatherings. Invite parents to give their life testimony, related to their marriage and also to their experience of letting their children “spread their wings and fly “. I can remember some very positive occasions when the parents of a brother or of a young person in Marist formation shared their experience with other parents. The contribution of lay Marists to this theme of the family is very valuable by their example as well as for the guidance they can offer about the Marist vocation.

8 We need **brothers and laypeople**, ready to dedicate themselves, either full time or part time, to the **service of vocation ministry**. When youth and vocation ministry overlap, it is important to define the task of the close mentors of those who are discerning specific vocations, in particular the Marist vocation. Provinces or Districts should identify the person or persons responsible for vocation ministry, who work as a team and coordinate with the local or country teams (in Administrative Units that cover more than one country). It would be worrying to find Provinces or Districts that do not dedicate people to this service. A sign of investing in our Marist future is being generous in releasing and training brothers and laypeople for the guidance and accompaniment of young people, including vocation ministry.

9 **Connecting with other religious congregations and with dioceses** can be of great help in vocations work, presenting the diversity of charisms that God raises up among young people. Getting to know one another and providing mutual support are significant features of “inter” team collaboration. It also gives us the chance to make the Marist vocation known since in many settings it is not known or given serious consideration, in part because we have not made ourselves sufficiently present.

10 Within our plans, **personal accompaniment** plays a key role, cutting across all other initiatives. It is a service that we need to offer to all young people who are interested and, particularly, to those who want to discern their specific and, in some cases, Marist vocation. How many of us brothers and laypeople are ready to offer this service of accompaniment? What programmes have we organised to train people in accompaniment? In the Synod on Youth,

the lack of dedicated people trained in accompaniment was noted and the need to prepare qualified consecrated and lay people, men and women, was recognized.⁷⁸

These and many other initiatives could be part of a **systematic and cohesive plan**, so that the theme of vocation in general and, specifically, the Marist vocation, become part of a presentation to young people in the natural setting of a class or youth group. Brothers and lay Marists are asked to support the initiatives proposed by the various ministry teams – e.g. education, evangelisation and vocations. Those in charge, personally and as a team, offer a great service as leaders and as a reminder for the group. They help us to connect more easily with young people through the activities and initiatives they propose. I believe that we can make a greater effort to put more energy and human resources into the accompaniment of young people, especially those who feel attracted by the Marist charism, and are interested to live it as a brother or lay Marist. Let us not skimp on this point; let us sow with faith and hope.

Alongside all these points on vocation ministry, there is one vital factor, which in one way or another I have mentioned throughout this circular, and that concerns **our communities**.

Begin by wanting to be truly *homes of light that care for life and generate new life*. And, consequently, put the means in place to achieve this. There are communities that are too inaccessible, with lots of physical doors to go through, many stairs to climb... and many other 'barriers' that we put up. Rather, welcoming young people, praying with them, sharing food,

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living together, should not be the exception but the most normal thing in our community life. Of course, there can be moments specifically prepared for this

⁷⁸ Cf. *Christus Vivit*, n. 244

interaction. And how good it is when we do not have to put on a 'show' on those occasions, and our normal way of praying, welcoming, and conversing allows for an easy contact with younger generations. Fraternities and families of lay Marists can also be open in this natural and ordinary way. Who knows, maybe it already happens a lot.

CONCLUSION

I place these thoughts into your hands with great simplicity, hoping to stimulate each and everyone of us to reflection and action. Maybe the times we are living in as a result of the world pandemic will bring about changes and new circumstances that we never dreamt of happening. It is quite possible that some of the ideas mentioned in this circular will need to be modified in such a new context.

As I was thinking about this conclusion, what came to my mind forcefully was the passage about the disciples on the road to Emmaus. This was the passage that came up often at the Synod in reference to accompanying younger generations. Here, however, I would like to apply it to the moment we are passing through as an Institute.

Perhaps we are often overcome by sadness and desolation; we live in confusing times. We have more questions than answers and, as men and women of action, we would like to find effective solutions and act fast. In recent years, so many things have changed in the Institute, in the Church, in society... for some of us this whole movement is bewildering. Others just find it hard to live in times of uncertainty. However, even though we may not be fully aware of it, the Lord walks with us, He accompanies us closely; when all seems dark, He sends us signs in one way or another, but our eyes do not recognize them; He explains things to us but we do not understand...



Community Oratory at Notre-Dame de l'Hermitage

It is then that faith and hope tell us that He is there, that He wants to stay among us and has wanted to do so all along, because it is getting late, because it is night... We recognise Him when we break bread together, in the synergy that He forms, in daring to give ourselves like Jesus, “breaking” ourselves for the good of others, for the well-being of each young person... Then, too, we recognise that our hearts burn with passion for God and for humanity, like those of Marcellin and of Mary. We need these burning hearts to rekindle the flickering light in our homes.

Let us be open to hope and go without delay, like the disciples of Emmaus, to share the news that He is present and alive, this Jesus who gives meaning to our life and mission.

We know that Mary was there with the other disciples, loving presence and one in heart with them, just as she is among us today in this, her work. We are in the hands of our Good Mother; we could not be in better hands! With her by our side, let us build homes of light that care for life and generate new life.

Fraternally,
Br. Ernesto Sánchez Barba
8th September 2020

