



# NEW FRONTIERS

## EMERGING REALITIES





Transforming the lives of children and young people particularly those on the margins is foundational to Marists of Champagnat. It is a fundamental part of our journey. Marcellin's own experience as a child who missed out on education and his work as a curate in the parish of La Valla provoked in him a deep empathy for children and young people unable to fulfil their potential. La Valla was an isolated village where children had limited access to education, and this meant these children lived on the margins of French society. Marcellin founded the Brothers as a response to his experience of young people living on the margins. Throughout his life, he continued to express this desire to move to the peripheries by his personal longing to head



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out to the mission fields of America (1820's) and the Pacific (1830's). Marcellin's original intuition has developed into an Institute with a fine tradition of moving to the margins in response to the needs of children and young people.

## IN TODAY'S WORLD

Marcellin's original intuition continues to be relevant in the world today. The number of children and young people living on the margins in our world is a critical issue. There are those suffering from geographic isolation where access to education and other basic rights is limited.

More and more young people and children are forced to be on the move. For some this is due to the poverty in which they live. They leave their homes in search of economic opportunity and a better life. Others are forced to flee their homes because of violence and war. It is impossible for them to live in the ruins that are a result

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of these conflicts. Still others are climate refugees. Island homes are disappearing as sea levels rise; the changing climate has resulted in the degradation of fertile land, and there is diminishing access to clean water. And there are those who remain living in poverty without the

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necessary resources or continue living surrounded by the violence of war and have no access to education.

We don't have to look too far to find vulnerable children and young people at risk. Homeless children who couch surf<sup>1</sup>, those involved in

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delinquency and those impacted by family violence are often found in our schools, social centers and universities. Many of us can relate stories of children persecuted and isolated because of race, sexuality, gender or beliefs. There are

those on the existential frontiers, suffering from various mental health issues, living meaningless lives, lonely, isolated and segregated.

The current pandemic will undoubtedly leave its mark on the lives of children and young people, particularly poorer children. It will take some time to understand the full impact, but there is already evidence of the rapidly growing divide between the haves and the have nots. The most obvious example is what is blandly called the “digital gap” -- the divide between those who continue to access education because they have the technology and those who have no access to education because the schools have moved to online education and they have no access to the necessary technology. In some parts of the world there are also

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<sup>1</sup> Couch surf: staying temporarily in a series of other people's homes, typically making use of improvised sleeping arrangements.



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serious questions about the quality of education that is being offered during the time of lockdown, and there is growing evidence of increased poverty, mental health problems, isolation, and segregation because of being locked inside to avoid infection.

## THE CHAPTER AND THE STRATEGIC PLAN

The Marist response is to reflect, to empathize with the young, to dialogue with them and to act where we can. This is part of what it means to be Marist. The recent General Chapter calls us to journey with and be present among children and young people living on the margins of life. It also calls us to open our eyes and hearts, move out of our comfort zone, and hear the cries of those who are voiceless and marginalized being creative in responding to their needs and empowering those without a voice. There





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The strategic plan of the General Administration continues to use the same language to reiterate our commitment to those children and young people on the peripheries. The document passionately commits us *to an innovative*

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*mission without borders, at the service of children and young people, especially the most vulnerable and excluded.* Two of the projects commit us to a presence in places on the margins with children and young people in emerging realities and to listen to them, to encourage their participation in projects designed for them, and to empower them to become artisans of their own formation.

## MARISTS OF CHAMPAGNAT

Marists of Champagnat have a deep-rooted awareness of the situation of children and young people living on the peripheries and a clear commitment to be present among them. There is a growing inequality in education, and many are denied access to quality and appropriate education.

This is more than a reaction to geographic isolation and a traditional “missionary” response. The Institute

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continues to explore new ways to be present among those young people on the margins of life. Through projects such as La Valla 200, Fratelli, South Sudan and its continued support of the Marist District of Asia, the General Administration gives visibility in different ways to working with vulnerable children, adolescents and young people. These projects make evident the new frontiers and margins towards which we are moving.



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They don't only provide service for meeting specific needs but also have prophetic and symbolic edges, the engagement of the lay vocation, inter-congregational collaboration, volunteers and new forms of community living. The recent implementation of the Global Marist Family Fund for

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Humanitarian Emergencies also gives us the ability to respond rapidly to help young people and communities in urgent need of assistance. Through FMSI and the Secretariat of Solidarity, we continue

to develop our expertise in Child Rights advocacy particularly in participating in the Universal Periodic Reviews by the United Nations in Geneva. This work of advocating for Child Rights has also been taken up by many other regional Marist groups such as “Corazón Solidario”.

The Marist charism has been enculturated in such a way that encourages brothers and lay people to respond generously to emerging local needs. There are numerous innovative regional and provincial initiatives that give expression to our commitment to be present to children and young people on the frontiers and peripheries. There are presences with the marginalized and ministries that creatively work with the most disadvantaged, where attention is given to those discriminated against, minority groups, indigenous people and migrants. Provinces and Districts work with those who have been displaced due to war, poverty, and COVID. Many of our current projects have been built on sound intuitions and have taught us valuable lessons. We must continue to





devote resources -- including finances and personnel -- in order to allow these projects to develop and fulfil their mission.

We need to keep our eyes and heart open to identify new situations where children and young people are vulnerable and at risk. The world is changing rapidly around us, and this leads us Marists to explore and understand better the new frontiers and margins where there are vulnerable and needy children and young people. More importantly, this will require us to create space for dialogue with the children and young people. It is through their eyes and listening to them, creating a culture of dialogue that we will come to a deeper understanding of their needs and how best to be present to them. Also, our intuitions will need to be

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based on solid data and understanding. In making ourselves available to the world of the young, we need to develop new ways of being with those on the margins. Our responses require us to be agile and adaptive. Our communities need to have mobility in order to respond creatively to emerging needs, and we need the appropriate resources to ensure that our efforts can be sustained.

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congregational alliances and coalitions with other agencies. It may involve collaborating with civil organizations and linking with already existing networks.

## POPE FRANCIS

Our own desire to be present to the edges is reflected in the thoughts of Pope Francis. With Pope Francis, the Church has a leader calling us to the margins, to be present to those most in need. This is evident in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* where he describes fraternity and social friendship as the ways to build a better, more just and peaceful world. In his January 2021, speech to the participants at the meeting promoted by the National Catechetical Office of the Italian Episcopal Conference,





Pope Francis elaborated on this theme.

*This is the time to be the artisans of open communities that know how to value the talents of each person. It is a time for free and disinterested missionary communities, which do not seek prominence and advantage, but rather walk the paths of the people of our time, stooping to tend to those on the margins. It is a time for communities that look disappointed young people in the eye, that welcome strangers and give hope to the disheartened. It is a time for communities that fearlessly engage in dialogue with those with different ideas. It is a time for communities*

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*that, like the Good Samaritan, know how to approach those wounded by life, to bind their wounds with compassion. Do not forget this word: compassion. How many times in the Gospel does it say of Jesus: “And he had compassion”, “he had compassion”?*

Pope Francis is not just calling us to the margins, he is calling us to be present in new ways. He uses the language of community rather than the example of heroic individuals. He uses the language of humility rather than looking to advance one's own reputation. He talks about dialogue, compassion, and hope -- all qualities we need to take to the frontier lands, while at the same time looking young people in the eye, treating them with dignity, respect, and equality. We are called to do no less.

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