

DEFENDERS OF RIGHTS AND COMMITTED TO THE CULTURE OF PROTECTION OF CHILDREN IN ALL MARIST MISSIONS

MESSAGE FROM MARIST INTERNATIONAL
MISSION COMMISSION





FIRST PART

MARISTS OF CHAMPAGNAT: DEFENDERS OF RIGHTS AND COMMITTED TO THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN.

Signs of hope

The Marist background and its relationship with the promotion, guarantee and defence of the rights of children can be traced back to the influence of the social and political context in which Father Marcellin Champagnat was born: 1789, the effervescence of the French Revolution and the same year in which the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was approved, a universal event, since it constituted the basis for the Declaration of the United Nations in 1948. At the family level, his father, politically committed, inherited Marcellin's taste for *action, his sense of responsibility, and his openness to innovative ideas; his mother and an exclaustrated aunt awakened in him a strong faith and a deep devotion to Mary*¹.

From this sensitivity, two events mark a crucial turning point in Champagnat's life: the personal experience in his childhood of having witnessed the

¹ https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_19990418_champagnat_sp.html

physical violence of a teacher against his pupils and, later, when he became a priest, his helplessness in the face of the death of the young Jean Montagne, of humble origins, who died without knowing how to read or write, or how much Jesus Christ loved him. This was the source of his firm conviction to found a congregation of Brothers dedicated to Christian education.

His audacity and perseverance to achieve his objective in favour of the most humble children and young people in his context and in his time, those who lived in the countryside, can be translated today as a clear and decisive response against the violation of the right to education. A response with a distinctive stamp: an education mediated by love and not by violence - “*To educate children you must love them*” - and which forms *good Christians and virtuous citizens*. The issue of protection from sexual abuse was also addressed by Marcellin².

Today, as then, there are many realities that children, adolescents and young people (BGTYJ) face and that put at risk the guarantee of their rights, especially those who live in situations of greater vulnerability, accentuated at this historic moment by the pandemic: invisibility, insufficient health services, forced mobility, exposure to multiple forms of violence, economic deprivation and unemployment in families, lack of access to education, physical and psychological abuse, sexual violence, discrimination, etc. Faced with these problems, the Marists of Champagnat, brothers and lay men and women, make the calls of the XXII General Chapter our own and we are taking steps to make them a reality:

1. ***The Institute promotes, protects and defends the rights of children and young people and their empowerment as agents of transformation. (22 General Chapter).***

The theme of children’s rights has recently become a permanent reflection in the Institute, driven by the progress of the Church and especially reinforced by the 22nd General Chapter, where the Marist Congregation made a declaration and a commitment to promote and protect the rights of children. The exchange of good practices and theoretical-conceptual approaches, the definition and enrichment of Provincial Child Protection Policies, has strengthened this reflection.

² “Life of Joseph Benedict Marcellin Champagnat (Bicentenary Edition, 1989). Original edition 1856.

“Rule of 1837”, chapter V, art. 23, p. 44.

“Spiritual Teachings of the Venerable Marcellin Champagnat: collected and expounded by one of his first disciples”. Ed. Luis Vives. Saragossa, 1948.

First edition 1868. Ch. XXXVIII.





Prior to this strong call of the Chapter, the Institution had already taken steps with its presence at the United Nations in Geneva, establishing alliances with institutions that have had a positive impact on public policies in favour of the rights of children and young people, establishing accompaniment in the elaboration of the UPRs of some countries and concrete lines of action in each of the Administrative Units of the Congregation.

The FMSI office is a reference for all Marists in terms of protection and commitment to the rights of children, thanks to which, in some Provinces and sectors, teams have been created to encourage the promotion and defence of the rights of children and young people, as well as to prevent and offer integral protection in situations of abuse. Added to the above is the logic of community participation that articulates the Marist ministry with direct incidence in the awareness and promotion of evangelical values related to children, especially the most vulnerable, strengthening the structures of care, promoting initiatives for the construction of safe environments and contributing to public advocacy in favour of a culture free of violence.

- II. *The Institute vigorously and proactively pursues child **protection policies against all forms of abuse** that are consistent with internationally recognised agreements upholding the rights of children and young people. (22nd General Chapter).*

The Institute has taken a clear direction for the protection of children, with the creation and implementation of policies and protocols for the protection and creation of safe environments, moving towards an awareness of being transparent and accountable in reporting situations of abuse, with provincial and local protection delegates.

Investing in the strengthening of institutional capacities for the respect of children's rights and their comprehensive protection, through participation in advocacy networks and exchange within the Institute and with external actors at local, national, regional and international levels, has led to giving vital importance to the issue of empowerment of children and young people, with them taking on a greater role in activities that are promoted.

There is greater clarity in the processes, in the attention to victims and in the training of brothers and staff, in the dissemination and in the legal processes, creating virtual spaces for complaints and accounts of violations, respectfully attending to the processes of all the situations reported. And in the face of the commitment to be transparent and accountable in the face of allegations of abuse, the Institute has revised its protection policies and procedures for the care of victims.

Another not minor issue is the training of adults and collaborators of the Marist Mission for the construction of safe environments, free of violence and promoters of rights, including that of participation. Thus reaffirming Marist values and expressing them clearly in "family spirit", "loving everyone equally" and the "prohibition of physical punishment". We have also intensified learning spaces and the sharing of experiences between Provinces, with the aim of raising awareness and making visible the situations of violation of the rights of children and young people that may be naturalised in our institutions (emotional, verbal, conscience, power abuse, etc.) and establishing standards of prevention and care that safeguard the stipulated measures and results.

Let's keep walking

As Marists, we recognise in Jesus of Nazareth a defender of human rights, especially for those whose rights have been violated. In the same way, we follow in the footsteps of Marcellin who chose to transform reality and, faced with situations of abuse, put the protection of children at the centre. None of the above tasks can be done individually; both Jesus and Marcellin walked with others, they made community.

Inspired by the Gospel, our Mission is in tune with the call we have as a Church when Pope Francis calls on young people to be protagonists of change:



“I ask you also to be protagonists of this change. Continue to overcome apathy and to offer a Christian response to the social and political concerns that are emerging in various parts of the world. I ask you to be builders of the future, to get involved in the work for a better world. Dear young people, please, don’t just sit on the sidelines of life, get involved in it”³.

A change that millions of teenagers around the world have brought to the table by vehemently denouncing the unacceptable priorities of our system:

“They have stolen my dreams and my childhood with their empty words. And yet I am one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of a mass extinction. And all they can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare they? ”⁴.

That is why today, in this context marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought us face to face with our human fragility and has shown us the importance of caring for life, we are moving resolutely towards an Institution where all people are respected, especially children, adolescents and young people, and where the culture of Buentrato nourishes our relationships and our coexistence.

Let us therefore continue to strengthen our education for the respect of rights, involving children in their defence and decision-making; creating guidelines to bring to life the ethics of dignity and care; taking a stance in favour of the culture of peace, reparation for victims and non-repetition; supporting and accompanying educational initiatives for rights and solidarity; promoting the recognition of young people and children as active citizens; strengthening our links within and outside; investing resources and systematising our experiences to continue improving the way we bring the Mission to life.

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³ Prayer vigil with young people, 28th World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2013.

⁴ Speech by Greta Thunberg, Climate Action Summit, New York, 2019





SECOND PART

A CULTURE OF CHILD PROTECTION

From our origins the culture of child safeguarding has been central in our ministries. Marcellin's insistence that the pointer used by the brothers in the classroom be attached by a string to the blackboard so that it would never be used to hit the children is just one example of what was done to create a safe environment for the children.

In more recent times building a culture of child safeguarding has become an imperative in our institutions, schools, and social works. All our ministries should be places where the safety of children and young people is embedded in all that we do. Many of us have attended workshops; our ministries have developed child protection policies and have implemented programmes that educate children and young people about their rights. The General Council has established a commission whose sole concern is child safeguarding.

These measures ensure that prominence is given to creating safe environments in Marist ministries. Having stated this, it is important that we as an Institute working with children and young people continue to reflect on what it means to promote a culture of child safeguarding in all our encounters with children and young people.

In the words of Pope Francis

In responding to this current crisis Pope Francis has spoken often about the obligation the Church has to protect minors and vulnerable adults. In writing to the Catholic Bishops of the USA on January 1, 2019, Pope Francis focused on the Church's lack of credibility in dealing with issues of the sexual abuse of minors. In the letter he described abuse and in particular sexual abuse of minors as "*these sins and crimes*". He also recognised the failure of the Church and its institutions in dealing with cases of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults *by the efforts made to deny and conceal* the allegations. In addressing the US Bishops, Pope Francis called for the Church to change its mindset, change its way of handling power and money, and change its way of relating to the world. In short, he called for a change in Church culture which has become distorted by some.

Pope Francis described the consequences if this change does not eventuate:

Without this clear and decisive focus, everything we do risks being tainted by self-referentiality, self-preservation and defensiveness, and thus doomed from the start. Our efforts may be well-structured and organized, but will lack evangelical power, for they will not help us to be a Church that bears credible witness, but instead "a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1).



In his Apostolic Letter, *On the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults*, issued as a Motu Proprio on the 26 March 2019 Pope Francis wrote:

The protection of minors and vulnerable persons is an integral part of the Gospel message that the Church and all its members are called to proclaim throughout the world. ... we all have the duty to welcome openheartedly minors and vulnerable persons and to create a safe environment for them, with their interests as a priority.

Speaking at the end of the Eucharistic celebration at the conference “The Protection of Minors in the Church” (Vatican’s New Synod Hall, 21-24 February 2019) Pope Francis said:

The primary goal of every measure must be to protect the little ones and prevent them from falling victim to any form of psychological and physical abuse. Consequently, a change of mentality is needed to combat a defensive and reactive approach to protecting the institution and to pursue, wholeheartedly and decisively, the good of the community by giving priority to the victims of abuse in every sense. We must keep ever before us the innocent faces of the little ones, remembering the words of the Master: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of scandals! For it is necessary that scandals come, but woe to the man by whom the scandal comes! (Mt 18:6-7).

In these statements Pope Francis is undoubtedly calling for the Church to undergo a change in culture. There are four central transformations outlined in his statements. There is the movement from viewing the sexual abuse of minors simply as a moral failing to what it really is: a crime. There is a change in focus from protecting the credibility, reputation, and money of the institutions to dealing with all allegations of abuse with accountability and transparency. There is the movement from a defensive position to being victim-focused, doing all in our power to bring about healing for the victims of abuse. Finally, there is the Church’s commitment to ensure that the abuse of minors will never happen again.

The Marist Brothers 22nd General Chapter (2017)

As an Institute, the Marist Brothers have also taken up the challenge of the Pope. In his statement to the 22nd General Chapter, Br Emili Turú, at the end of his mandate as Superior General, said:



Institutes like ours, that should have protected minors from any form of abuse, failed them undeniably. Maybe we can find explanations to help understand how such situations of sexual abuse came about in our institutions but none of these explanations can be used as an excuse, for they should never have occurred in the first place. The very existence of victims is a permanent reminder that we failed them as an Institute. And if this was the case in the past, we cannot fail them again, not under any circumstances.”

In their statement to the victims and survivors of abuse, the participants of the 22nd General Chapter agreed to the following:

We support the work that has been done in the Marist Institute in recent years to protect children in Marist schools, institutions and ministries, to require all parts of the Marist world to implement Child Protection Policies, and to provide training and awareness to prevent child abuse from happening again in our institutions. As our General Chapter comes to an end, we commit ourselves to be pro-active in ensuring that The Marist Institute at all levels conforms to the highest standards of child protection, so that all our works are child-safe and child-friendly. (20th October 2017).

In both these statements there is a real commitment to ensure that changes are made in Marist ministries so that the evil of abuse never happens again. This is indeed a commitment to change the culture so that the safety of all children and young people in Marist institutions, schools and ministries is ensured.

Developing a Culture of Child-Safeguarding

The crisis caused by the increasing number of allegations against some staff members in our institutions in several places in the Marist world has resulted in deep soul searching to understand the causes of the sexual abuse of minors. In 2017 the Marist Brothers' Province of Australia in the light of the Royal Commission's investigation held a roundtable discussion to explore the causes of sexual abuse in our schools. The purpose of the conference was to respond to questions about why sexual abuse occurred and it tapped in to the experience of victims, academics in various fields and those involved in the schools at the time.

The final report stated that:

The insights provided by criminology, psychiatry and sociology encourage us to look, not at the psychopathology of individual abusers, but at the failure of the context to prevent abuse. Certainly, a number of the most consistent abusers were predatory paedophiles, but their motivation to offend was supported by

a culture in which abuse was possible, and the risk of detection was minimal. Much of the abuse was opportunistic.

The report highlighted three aspects that added to a culture which enabled abuse to occur.

- III. *There was the considerable personal autonomy and lack of professional supervision and support of those teaching and supervising children and young people.*
- IV. *Often staff were expected to survive and thrive in ministry with limited access to professional monitoring and assistance.*
- V. *The tolerance of physical punishment and the ignorance of the nature and impact of sexual abuse also added to a culture that allowed abuse to occur.*



The report also emphasised the need for a solid formation in child-safeguarding, good mentoring, and appropriate supervision of all staff in our schools as a means to bring about a change in culture. As Marists dedicated to the education and evangelisation of children and young people our task now is to ensure that we develop a culture where the safety of every child shapes the environment of our institutions.

The Institute’s Child-Safeguarding Standards

Creating a culture that safeguards children in our ministries, where the sexual abuse of minors is prevented and such abuse is recognised when it happens, is of paramount importance. The Child Protection Standards of the Institute outline the procedures that are a minimum of what is needed to create this culture. Implementing these is a start.⁵ But, if we are serious about creating a safe environment for children and young people, we need to build on the Institute’s Standards. We need to embed the protection of children in the culture of



⁵ The Institute’s were originally published and distributed to the Provinces in 2012. The Standards were reviewed in 2021 and will be published and distributed to the Provinces in October 2021.

our ministries within our local context and we need to dialogue with other religious orders and people with expertise about such matters. It therefore becomes a natural part of all that we do.

These standards are concrete ways in which we show our commitment:

- VI. *to being victim-focused.*
- VII. *to act on all allegations – whether historical cases of sexual abuse or current allegations – and to do so with transparency and accountability.”*
- VIII. *to give time and resources to ensure that policies and procedures are developed for our local context and implemented.*
- IX. *to form and train all those in contact with children and young people including those in leadership of our institutions.*

Change of Mindset

To have a culture of child-safeguarding in our ministries means the safety of children is central to all we do. It becomes a distinguishing mark of who we are and how we work with children and young people. It is something that we hold in common. It is basic to the way we interact with others and react to different situations. For all Marists the safety of children forms and shapes the environment of the places where we encounter children and young people. Marists ensure that measures to protect children are carried out as a normal part of the life of the ministry, without exception and with accountability and transparency.

This requires a change of mindset at all levels – leadership, administrators, and staff of our institutions. This involves a paradigm shift in our thinking to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of children. This becomes an expected part of the life in our ministries. We do all in our power to ensure that children are safe and this priority is reflected in the procedures and processes implemented in our institutions.

When an allegation – whether current or historical – is made, it is treated with transparency and accountability recognising the dignity of all people, most importantly children. Transparency guarantees that matters are not concealed and that all those involved are kept informed. Accountability requires that everyone is held accountable for their actions or their failure to act.

Some of us are tempted, even unconsciously, to frame the allegations as “victim versus the Institute”. The motivations of the victim are questioned or



they are perceived to be after money. The victims are not the problem, nor are their motivations or their desires for reparations. Our response must take into the account the needs of the victims rather than blaming them or protecting our institutions from attacks, even if some consider them unjust or unwarranted.

The change of mindset is to recognise that the abused child did no wrong and that adult victims of childhood sexual abuse are not out to destroy the Institute. All victims need to be treated with justice and respect and their allegations need to be dealt with transparently and honestly. It is about honestly admitting to the abuse, dealing appropriately with the matter, and making a commitment that the abuse cannot / will not happen again.

We do not try to cover up the allegation or protect those who have been accused. We can easily fall into the trap of defending and supporting the accused instead of insisting on following the protocols and working to bring about justice and healing. These matters cause major dilemmas for Provincials. The Provincial is the executive officer of an educational system. His first priority is to the victim and to his obligations under civil law (C. 90.1.5; 133.5). However, when the accused is a Brother the Provincial also feels a pastoral responsibility. This does not mean protecting the Brother from the consequences of such allegations but he ensures that the Brother is given the necessary psychological and legal support.

A significant change is to understand that the sexual abuse of a minor, whether it is civilly illegal or not, is a crime and not a moral failing. It is not the same as consensual sexual activity between two consenting adults. In most countries today, abuse of minors must be reported to relevant civil authorities. Also, the fact that many countries have laws that enforce a statute of limitations for crimes of sexual abuse of minors does not make it any less of a crime. It simply means that the perpetrator cannot be prosecuted after a certain number of years.

Being Victim-Focused

We Marists of Champagnat have made a commitment to be “victim-focused” – an approach which puts victims first, and not the Institute’s reputation, financial assets, or the protection of vowed religious and staff. Our response to victims is a very good gauge of how well the culture of child safeguarding is embedded in our ministries and institutions. Putting the victim first requires an understanding of the impact of abuse which can be devastating.





Having a victim-focused approach means treating victims with compassion, listening to them, being open with information, and putting their care and concerns before other considerations. It requires a transformation that engages with victims and does not keep them at a distance or treat them with suspicion. Importantly we need to create safe spaces for victims so that they feel they can come forward. In fact, we should be inviting victims to come forward so that we can help them heal.

There is among some of us a fear of victims. We are not sure of their intentions, of the outcome of their allegations or of the impact the allegation will have on our institutions. It is necessary to overcome these fears and understand that usually victims are after healing, justice, and surety that this will not happen to other children.

Each allegation, no matter how it is received, must be taken seriously. An anonymous claim by a victim or an allegation received through social media are not excuses to delay following up on the allegation. Divulging an allegation is difficult enough for the victim without forcing them to comply with the “correct” procedures. It is of value in many cases to have an independent person or body receive complaints, some form of independent investigation of



the allegations, independent counselling for the victim and an experienced body of experts—persons independent of the Marist Brothers—to advise the Provincial.

Our desire to bring about healing of past abuse calls us to take reparations seriously. Victims have been hurt through their engagement with our schools and institutions. In many cases they have been hurt by our Brothers. It is crucial that we commit ourselves to do whatever is possible to bring about healing in the lives of these victims who have often lived with the hurt for many years. Our desire to admit to the hurt, to bring about justice and to promote healing which will include the payment of financial compensation. Paying reparations of course would be the result of a process of dialogue and discernment. We have examples in the Institute where reparations are being paid after such a process. In many countries such payments are determined by courts or independent bodies.

Our treatment of victims is of primary significance. It sends a message. We need to be focused on their needs, on efforts to bring about healing and provide them with justice.

Formation and Training

Great changes in the safeguarding of children have been carried out in recent years. This is a start, but we need to continue this journey. Relevant formation and training of all staff in our institutions need to be a priority. This formation includes an understanding of the behaviours which cause wounds to victims, their families, and communities so that such events can never happen again.

In regard to the formation of Brothers, our new Constitutions include a number of articles that refer to this area of our life and ministry: e.g. living celibate chastity in a mature and balanced way (23.1); screening (66.8); safeguarding policies (59.2). Experience is telling us that ‘juniorate / minor seminary’ structures do not provide settings for normal, healthy psychosexual development. Likewise, the education of the students and young people so that they are empowered to act when they feel unsafe is vitally important (59.3).

A Final Word

The words of Pope Francis call us to a change of culture in safeguarding of child and vulnerable adults and in our handling of cases of sexual abuse of minors. There are several elements that reinforce the work that we as an Institute are already doing to ensure that this culture is embedded in our institutions. The development and revision of the Institute’s Standards, Provincial and local policies and protocols are an excellent starting point. Ensuring that these are implemented and monitored is of paramount importance. Developing a response to allegations that is victim-focused, compassionate, open to listening to victims and geared to the needs of the victim is vital. A significant change will be the paradigm shift, a change in mindset that demands of us a move from defending our reputation and resources to ensuring that all children and young people are safe in our institutions. To guarantee our efforts to strengthen our protection of children and young people, our commitment to the formation and training of all those working with children needs to be sustained.

In fact, similar ideas are contained in our own Marist text from our origins, “*Opinions, Conferences, Sayings and Instructions*”, a compilation of texts from Marcellin Champagnat that reveal the areas of concern that were most important to him. In the chapter entitled, “The Respect We Owe a Child”, we find his uplifting vision of “a child” and practical ways of showing our respect for each child.



Great reserve and circumspection and rigid modesty in our contact with children, never permitting ourselves or them any familiarity or any liberty condemned by our profession.

Constant attention to our own behaviour, so that we always act to offer children our own example of every virtue and a model of conduct which they may always imitate or admire.

He also speaks in no uncertain terms of the consequences of scandalising children.

How sad and frightening to think that instead of being the guardians of the virtue of these naïve children, we might become the corrupters!

Here we have a vision, a set of ideals, the motivation and building blocks to bring about a culture to bring about a Marist culture that protects children for all ages.

On behalf of the International Marist Mission Commission
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If you wish to share your ideas, reflections or experiences with the Commission as a result of these messages, you can write to the email fms.cimm@fms.it

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