

---

## Empathy and compassion in a working-class neighborhood

unforgettable memories!

---

“And we asked ourselves how to raise and prepare leaders with this profile, really focused on serving people, to share closely in people’s journeys.”  
(Br. Óscar Martín)

Br. Ricardo Reynozo

Teacher and community leader in insertion communities  
Province of Central Mexico



**A**t 25 years of age, my world was small. I was appointed to start up a new community of Marist Brothers along with two other brothers: Brother Pedro, another brother and I were asked to found a community-based school. In addition to youth and zeal, it was trendy to be critical of everything, whether justified or not. The rhetoric of show-offs made me feel like a mythological hero on Olympus. It had been three years since I had finished my degree as a primary school teacher, and I was already halfway through my graduate studies. Due to a lack of teachers at the secondary level, we divided all the subjects among the three of us.

We discussed with Pedro about liberating education, the oppressive system, solidarity, and the militarization of Latin America... We left speechless the other brother who was the director and community leader, whom we considered to belong to an older generation and who refused to change socially and doctrinally.

This brother listened patiently to our cocksure arguments.

The relationship we had with the parish, which was linked to the foundation of a school, connected us to the parishioners at wakes, their novenas, blessing of homes, prayers for the sick... Moreover, as our car was the only one in the township, we were often asked to drive the sick to the hospital at a moment’s notice, day or night. I would generally sign up for any evening emergencies. And the Brother, although he did not share my point of view, he respected my judgment. Needless to say, the morning Salve was prayed mechanically.



We oftentimes downplayed the concerns of some of this brother's short-sighted views vis a vis the situation in our rough neighborhood, with its muddy streets and large puddles, where alcohol and drugs were rife at parties which often ended up in injuries or deaths. Sometime later, Brother Pedro was replaced by Brother José, a younger brother who had scientific concerns: "the religion of the moment". With his presence, the tone of our conversations changed, as did the subject matter, but not our braggadocio. Back then, the other Brother was in his 50s, suffered from diabetes and was measured in all activities. He knew his limits or... perhaps he saw fit to have us "learn from our own mistakes". He always asked us how classes went or if we had taken anyone to the hospital during the night hours. He always listened with a smile on his face. Occasionally, he would pass a remark which, truth be told, did not sit well with our "pompous air", but he phrased it in such a way that it was impossible to refute, reject or ignore. There was no choice but to mull over his words, for he was always right. He was a wise man.

This Brother was a born analyst, but he was of a generation when brothers were not allowed to do studies no matter how much one implored one's superiors; yet he was skilled in human relations. He was empathetic with everyone, and above all his manner was respectful and caring. José and I gradually came down from our pedestal and placed our feet of clay on the ground. This Brother, setting aside our haughtiness, was always open when we asked him for advice. On several occasions, when our pedagogical resources were exhausted to "subdue the untamed adoles-

cents to do our will”, he patiently and always with a smile on his face made us understand adolescent behavior and how to manage it so that they would be themselves, and not so much be led by the nose. José and I loved those dark, rainy afternoons that provided us with long after-dinner moments. After supper, the atmosphere would numb our egos and we would get ready to listen. Then this Brother would share his feelings, his story, his truncated dreams, and his deep yearnings. There was no doubt, HE WAS A MAN OF GOD! He was not afraid to acknowledge his limits! He knew himself well! At least for me, he left me thinking, comparing, seeing that one could live happily in this world in spite of the limitations I wished I didn’t have. Inexorably, we began to accept that this “big brother” was not as old-fashioned as we thought and that we held some ideas in common and – even if we did not quite agree with his social approach – the three of us shared a fondness for presence in that poor neighborhood and it made us feel that the spirit of Champagnat flowed in our veins. The fatigue was accumulating. “Exhaustion” was inevitable, and holidays would materialize at Christmas or Easter. In those periods of leisure, we would take advantage of the opportunity to visit other communities. This Brother took great pains to see we got quality rest and extra sleep. When classes resumed, the Brother would ask for lesson plans, on-time grades, punctuality... with the gentleness that characterized him, and the resolve that the situation required.

He recognized himself as having an unassuming appearance, although he was always smiling. He would say self-deprecatingly, “What you see is what you get”. One could often find students in his office just chitchatting with him. He was open to all students, regardless of their life story. He provided comfort and support when they were hurting. Even to the two young brothers in the community, he made us open our hearts and tended to the wounds he found there. He knew when to place his hand on our shoulder or invoke Mary for our comfort and support. He sensed when we were deceiving ourselves, denying falling in love. He taught us how to channel our anger, when to face frustration or when to place it in God’s hands as we faced our shortcomings. He helped me to grow and live gracefully. My personal gratitude and indebtedness is late but no less sincere.



The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Marist Institute.

If you would like to share your ideas, reflections, or experiences about servant and prophetic leadership with the Commission as a result of these reflections, write to [fms.cimm@fms.it](mailto:fms.cimm@fms.it)

