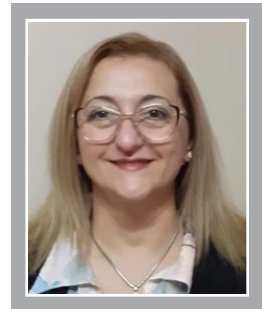

Empowering children and youth as the core of our mission

“Protection aims to uphold children’s rights and empower children as subjects of these rights, and empowering children as subjects of these rights. This change of mindset is essential for good leadership.”
(Marist Voices, cap. 11 - Br. Gabriel Villa-real and Br. Pere Ferré)

Analía Ruggeri
Educator, Director, Advocate, and Promotion of Rights
Province of Cruz del Sur, Argentina



I was a teacher and director of the school “Marcelino Champagnat”, which is celebrating its 30th year of providing education for children and young people in a multifaceted neighborhood in the city of Rosario. Currently, in the Cruz del Sur Province, I am team coordinator for the Defense and Promotion of the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Young People and Advocacy in Public Policies (DDyPP). From this window of engagement, I participate in the Marist Inter-American Solidarity Heart Network and for an interim period of time, I served as coordinator of the commission. From there, we accompanied and advocated in transforming solidarity in the American continent. We dreamed of guaranteeing the rights of children and young people in such a diverse land.

I try to live this leadership of service with a sense of harmony between feeling, thinking and pressing forward. I understand it for there to be a need for honesty with what is real, and a determination to come to grips with the truth to use as a springboard for action.

Throughout this time, I recognized that I had been building a style of leadership in which reality had always imposed itself on me and this required that I develop a readiness for contemplation when faced with distress and helplessness. This experience forged in me a sense of personal shortcomings and at the same time a privileged place to build with others. Sensing that my eyes and hands were inadequate, the community rescued the ego and the potential for transformative leadership emerged from within. It required much personal work to claim and direct what injustice and pain could create from leadership at the service of a worthy cause.

I am still learning how to take charge and deal with reality as it is (and not as I would like it to be) and help make things happen for the common good. To be able to recognize in each person I meet that he or she has something priceless to share for human transformation which at the same time humanizes him or her. Transformational leadership bears the pain and creatively presses ahead “to bring forth the dawn” (to paraphrase one who continues to be a great leader beyond his time, Brother Basilio Rueda).

But let’s talk about leadership and empowerment in the first person: when am I a servant Marist leader and a prophetic one who empowers children, adolescents and young people? First of all, as a Marist woman I have always lived the commitment to the task alongside my Brothers. The trust that I always experienced before each challenge and the co-responsibility assumed with the mission were significant for my process of empowerment. I am deeply grateful to those who trusted me, for the empathetic and sensitive listening, and for the decisions taken together by a recognized authority which required me to respect and care for others.

I identify myself as a servant and prophetic Marist leader who tries to nurture others by generating a transforming synergy from the very empowerment of people as transformational advocates. By this process, I intend to be a catalyst in empowering young men and women as Jesus himself did in his time; putting them at the center of all movements, seeing the world through their eyes, always remembering that they are “holy ground” that is cultivated first and foremost with tenderness, and inviting them to enter the kingdom.

When I was asked to write about empowerment, my first challenge was the very complexity of the term. I see it as a process in which people take power over their own lives, enabling them to cope with personal challenges; a trajectory where leadership can open a door of access to empower people to be involved in making decisions that personally affect them; I see it as a call to follow their own voice; a space where there is a place for empathetic and an effective contemplative, enabling transformational listening. From the point of view of Marist servant and transfor-



mative leadership, we assume this responsibility that we have with people and, in a very special way, with children, adolescents and young people. We seek to empower them to trust their gifts and accept the consequences of their actions which will positively affect their lives and those of their communities. Empowerment can be a valuable tool for the personal and social development of children and young people when their opinions are taken into account.



As servant and prophetic Marist leaders, we can empower children, adolescents and young people in a number of ways. One that I prioritize is the defense of their rights. This new mission field is a response to the times when we have not had the capacity to listen, when we have silenced their bodies, when our adult-centeredness has generated abusive power relations, when we have ignored their words, and failed to make them the center of our mission. This happens when institutional reputation is paramount, or because of the simple ignorance or carryover of lackluster paradigms. To connect with the pain caused by demoralized children impels us today to guarantee in our institution's clear spaces for their participation and nurture the process of empowerment. "Where talking is always prevention", "because secrets have no place" and "caring is not an option", but a right.

To benefit children, adolescents and young people means working to improve their lives in every way. This implies developing policies (within my Province Cruz del Sur and in all the Marist spheres in which I am invited) and programs that promote and guarantee the rights of children, adolescents and young people. This is done first and foremost by guaranteeing quality education with meaningful learning experiences. It also means working to create safe and healthy environments for them, promoting pertinent treatment and a culture of care in our institutions. It also means providing space to listen to their needs and concerns, and working to solve the problems they face. It means encouraging active participation in making decisions that affect their lives. It means providing opportunities to develop skills and talents using multiple avenues (artistic, musical, technological...). It involves fostering self-esteem and self-confidence as a shield against possible abusive situations. It means providing a safe and healthy environment. It involves recognizing risk

plans in our educational institutions and experiences. It means fostering respect for human rights and diversity. Finally, it is educating in interculturality and internationality for global citizen-



ship. They all contribute to the empowerment process that reinforces our Mission: that children are children and can enjoy their rights to the fullest.

We are invited to generate intergenerational dialogues (not monologues or lectures) in order to offer leadership that contributes significantly to this process of empowerment of individuals and of the community itself; providing space for the word to circulate across cultures with the respect and responsibility that this implies; using the necessary tools to strengthen mutual trust, acquiring a greater capacity for empathetic listening, to make informed decisions and act for their own good and the good of the community. We need educational accompaniment and encounter with children and young people based on their own historical and social realities. In my experience, a need to focus Marist leadership in a more comprehensive and systemic way. Initiatives must have an impact on the creation of new, fairer, and more equitable reality for the present.

Children are not the future; they are the present that challenges and commits us through the institutional decisions we take so that they can enjoy this vital stage and full citizenship. It is with them, not only for them. As Marist educators, we teach meaningfully those unjust realities that deserve to be deconstructed, appealing to critical thinking and the responsible use of the spoken and written word. We promote participation which makes us co-responsible in setting up guidelines and respect for dissent. We strive to “form good Christians and honest citizens” linked to a quality educational proposal, which sets in motion a democratic and fraternal life.



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

