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## Empathy: a characteristic of a servant leader

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“Empathy is a characteristic which, even though some people can express it spontaneously, can also be learned and cultivated.”

(Marist Voices, chap.4 - Br. Óscar Martín)

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**M**y current mission gives me the opportunity to talk to young people about our congregation, with the aim of inviting those who are interested in embracing the Marist life.

In fulfilling our Marist mission, there are many factors a servant leader must consider. But in this article, I would like to share with you my thoughts on only one of them: Empathy. Empathy is an attitude or characteristic that I value very much, and which seems crucial to me as a Marist Brother, because thanks to it, children and young people approach us naturally. To live this component part compels us to embody simplicity, which is a significant aspect of Marist spirituality.

The definition of the word “empathy” that seems most appropriate to me is—that intelligence of the heart which leads us to put ourselves in the place of others and to feel what they are going through.

This is confirmed by the Larousse dictionary, which defines it as “the intuitive faculty of putting oneself in another’s place and perceiving what he or she is feeling”.

To put ourselves in the other person’s shoes, we need to step outside ourselves and focus on them. Empathy then drives us out of our comfort zone and makes us available, open to others.

A Marist servant leader is invited to live empathy in his mission, whatever his responsibility or field of apostolate. He should not undervalue, but rather live out empathy. This helps us to understand the situations experienced by the children and young people we serve. Young people easily confide in us when they see that we show them an understanding attitude and tenderness in our conversations.



### **A servant leader in a school environment**

I remember when I was principal of a school for seven years. Parents and students came to see me in the office to talk about their family, and their social and financial problems. I noticed that a welcoming, understanding and listening attitude was vitally important during the meetings. This welcoming atmosphere helped them share more deeply. It then became easier to find solutions that could help them cope with their problems.

Empathy plays a key role in this encounter, as it enables us to better understand and educate children and young people along with their parents. Empathy also makes it easier for others to approach us. A servant leader who embodies empathetic attitudes attracts children and young people because they sense that he or she is trustworthy.

### **A servant leader in vocations ministry**

A vocation promoter is a servant leader because he leads and guides young people in their vocational process. He or she is then expected to embody empathetic attitudes such as attentive listening, open-mindedness, and a willingness to understand and help young people seeking their vocation.

I share with young people the different walks of life as a Christian--the priestly, religious, and lay walk of life. Knowing the environment in which young people find themselves, I see that it is important to reformulate and adapt my message. When I meet with young people, I do not just talk about vocations; it is also an opportunity for me to make them aware of their future. Today's young people need enlightened help and guidance in preparing for their future lives. This is part of the responsibility of a servant leader.

As I look at my current experience in vocations ministry, I see the importance of empathy. Indeed, having a welcoming attitude full of tenderness and availability favors my interactions with young people. Through my posture and my alertness during the conversation, my listeners sense what I want to communicate to them. The gestures I display and the way I try to make myself understood shape my approach to them. This encourages and motivates them to listen to what I am going to share with them about Christian vocations, and more specifically the vocation to Marist religious life. They feel interested when they see my approach during the conversation. It is empathy that I experience when I do this.



Before concluding, I would like to suggest two ways that can help us to live empathy in our different missions as Marists.

On the one hand, having an open and available mind or heart is an integral part of empathy, because it forces us to look at and listen to others, and to put ourselves in their place. This is to understand and try to experience what the other person is feeling. Such an attitude enables a Marist servant leader to understand young people and their experiences.

Another way of exercising empathy is attentive listening. Being attentive in conversations with others enables us to welcome them as they are, with the message they want to convey. Indeed, attentive listening presupposes a total willingness to look at or hear only the other person. It excludes all judgment and incorporates a welcoming acceptance of the other. To act in this manner is an expression of empathy.

At the end of my reflection, I would like to draw our attention to the importance of empathy for a Marist servant leader. It comes down to us from Father Champagnat when he says, “I cannot see a child without wanting to let him know how much Jesus loves him”. This unique quality enables us to understand the other person so that we can help him or her in the process of human and religious growth.



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)

