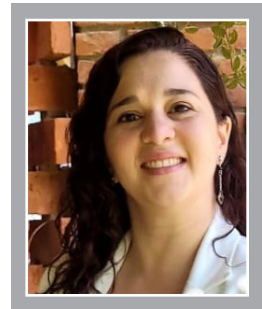

Empathetic leadership: a matter of decision and of body

“Putting the person at the centre, care for it, empathetic care for it, is a leadership option in which we want to grow, and with which we want to build our relationships, structures and projects”.

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

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I am a lay Marist; I am 39 years old. Married for 12 years to Edgar, mother of three beautiful and challenging treasures: Josué, Isabella and Ezequiel.

Throughout my life I have been in various places in the Marist educational and pastoral spheres which have given me opportunities to discover and develop my vocation and my profession.

At present, I work as an educator in Basic Sciences and as a Teacher Guide at the Middle Level (Baccalaureate); I am a member of the Evangelization Animation Team, with the specific task of accompanying the processes of School Religious Education (ERE), and I also collaborate in the team of Marist lay leaders in the area of Paraguay.

I remember hearing the word “**empathy**” for the first time as a teenager, and along with it the phrase: “*empathy is putting yourself in the other person’s shoes*”. That phrase, for almost two weeks, triggered a certain restlessness and confusion within me, with several questions: What does it really mean to put myself in the other person’s shoes? Is it to do things for the other person.... is it to help.... is it to listen.... is it to offer solutions.... is it to cry with him or her.... is it to laugh with him or her.... is it to give advice.....? How do I put myself in the other person’s shoes without leaving my own place, without ceasing to be myself? This is how the challenge of discovering what empathy was all about was born within me. And *it is here where I highlight a first important key: **Being empathic is a decision***. In fact, just like any other value in life, it is necessary to have the desire, the will and together with them the decision to be who you want to be and how you want to be, with all that the dimension of “*being*” entails.

As I went through this personal challenge, I discovered, experimented with, and built certain clues on how to live empathy, which led to the second key, which I call: **Being empathic is a matter of the body: eyes, ears, mouth and hands.** Let's see:

An attentive gaze. It is a gaze fixed on the eyes of the other person, a gaze willing to observe not the shape of those eyes, but the background, what is behind that other being who is there, with you, as the phrase has it: *the eyes are the windows of the soul.* Be willing to look through those windows; a gaze that is also attentive to body language. It seems so basic, so simple, but it is not—our thoughts, our distractions, or the multiple activities of everyday life, sometimes do not allow us to look attentively and connect with the other.

Active and contemplative listening. I remember several years ago, in 2006, I participated in a workshop for teacher guides, led by a Marist Brother, whose words left a deep impression on me:

“... the people who come to you, whether they are students, parents, other family members, or even colleagues... do not need advice. People need to be listened to. He repeated slowly and slowly: “People need to be heard. Many are tired and even fed up with receiving advice. Listen without interrupting and give advice only if they ask for it.”

In the performance of my different roles, it is in the moment of active listening, where I put myself in prayer and dialogue with the indwelling Spirit; I ask Him to help me to quiet my inner noises and be attentive, and depending on the circumstances, to enlighten me with discernment, wisdom, and strength. It is by practicing active, contemplative listening that I feel truly connected to that person.



Assertive dialogue.

Sometimes, we are very quick to make interpretations, give opinions, criticisms, or advice, without having asked questions that foster a real dialogue. I have discovered in interpersonal encounters that asking key or impactful questions helps to focus the moment, to generate deep dialogue, to better understand the other person, to understand what they are going through, to connect with their story, their feelings and thus generate a communication in which trust is present, building answers or solutions together.

Hands that act. I feel that empathy is incomplete if it is not translated into action, and I am not referring to large undertakings that require a lot of organization or management. I

am referring to small, simple, concrete actions that make us feel the presence, the fraternity, that allow us to live and experience that closeness and connection with the other: a sincere hug, a hand on the shoulder, a gesture of closeness, a message, a call, a crystal clear voice, a few words of encouragement or consolation, or even, at the next level, when certain situations require it, the hands must become collective, take on community strength, offering themselves to others who need that set of helpful, compassionate, supportive hands.

I firmly believe that empathy is lived in the day-to-day, there in the routines where we are called to exercise our leadership among those people with whom we are easily attuned and, of course, with those people with whom things are not so easy in our mission fields, or in turbulent and complicated situations. This is where it becomes more challenging to practice being empathetic. Like Mary at Cana: observe, contemplate, question, intervene, but with humility and modesty. Brother Oscar Martin mentions: “The reference to this empathetic woman, sensitive and aware of her own emotions, but attentive to the emotions of others and their needs, is very challenging. And capable of confronting her son, with great freedom and without protagonism” (*Marist Voices*, 2022, p. 80).





The most beautiful thing in this journey is that each person discovers his or her own gifts. It is to allow other people to help us to build what we want, what we decide to be. These other people are our examples, our testimonies, our companions along the way, those voices of the Spirit that enlighten and inspire us, so that later we can be the ones to inspire others.

Building and living experiences of empathy is at present and in future times, an indispensable tool: it allows us to generate genuine encounters, it allows us to connect with other people's lives, to connect with our own being and to connect with our God. *Let us make the decision to be empathetic servant and prophetic leaders, let us put our bodies and senses attentive to others and to ourselves, drawing inspiration from Our Good Mother, trusting her always, as Marcellin did, and when we feel ourselves faltering or wavering, let us return to the source.*



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