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## Servant leadership and decision making

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“The whole world turns away when it sees  
a man who knows where he is going”

(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry)

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**T**he reflection promoted by the Institute of the Marist Brothers on servant leadership seems to me to be timely, attractive and thought-provoking.

I dedicated the first 19 years of my life as a Marist Brother to youth ministry and the educational mission in three Marist schools in Catalonia. During that time, in addition to being with youth groups, I spent 13 years as Principal of three Marist schools. In 2012 I was appointed Provincial Administrator of the Province of l’Hermitage, residing in Lyon. In July 2022, at the suggestion of the Brother Provincial, I took on the responsibility of Vicar Provincial, and I have been residing in Paris since 2023.

Sharing our opinions and experiences about how Brothers and lay Marists experience leadership as an attitude of service can help us grow in this way of applying the Gospel to our day-to-day situation: the servant attitude. Combining reflection on servant leadership with that on strategic leadership can favour a boost to Marist life and mission as developed by our Institute in this XXI century.

In recent years, I have had the good fortune to share community with Brother André Lanfray, the well-known researcher in Marist history. It is a pleasure to share with him, in informal chats or after-dinner conversation, small bits and pieces of the history of our Institute. On the subject of leadership, he himself suggested to me some texts from the notebooks of Brother François, which I am including here:

*The Brother is responsible for his class; the Director for his House; the Assistant for his Province; the*

*Superior for the Society. The one and the other share in the good and in the bad, in the punishment and in the reward, according to their work or their negligence (Recueil 301, n 26. After 1840).*

Brother François explains it in an exemplary way: in our Institute, we all exercise some kind of leadership based on our responsibilities, be they large or small. The individual exercise of this leadership has an impact on others and on the whole. The Institute, in a broad sense, is made up of all of us: Brothers and laity, men and women, young and old. Everyone is responsible for the development of the mission.

An essential element of this servant leadership is decision-making. Robert Teoh, in Chapter XIV of *Marist Voices*, reflects accurately on shared decision-making.

Serving others as a leader involves learning to make decisions. What a difficult task! We all know organisations, even religious ones, that due to internal difficulties, instances of crisis in their history, perhaps the age of their members, the institutional culture or other elements, have not been able to make the necessary decisions at the right time. At the same time, we all admire those individual leaders, and above all those teams, who have made us move forward thanks to their decisions. In these times in which we live, making decisions from the attitude of service is very timely.

Reading the statements collected in *Marist Voices* on servant leadership, especially in relation to decision making, has helped me identify experiences and lessons learned from my personal life. I thank the authors for this. In these lines I share with you some of these experiences.

The community element is a key part of our charism. Decision-making also takes on a communitarian dimension. Consulting, contrasting, dialoguing, enriching, maturing together, perhaps rejecting a decision with the work- or management- team to which each of us belongs is part of our way of making decisions.

And how lucky we are when we can open creative processes in dialogue with our team! Times in which we can generate initial ideas, share the seeds of projects, analyse possible changes of direction. How wonderful when this is done in a climate of openness, trust, sincere disagreement and co-creation.



Together with the community dimension, the decision is a personal choice of the leader. The more important the decision, the more necessary is the deep conviction of the person or persons who make it.

Discernment requires a connection between the heart and the head that is fluid, continuous, very personal and that can be shared. The soundness of a decision is known after it has been made, when the consequences, the effects, perhaps the difficulties appear. It takes energy to face this second instance of decision making. This conviction is born deep inside.

Serenity and inner maturity help us to recognise our difficulties in this process, to identify recognised or unrecognised fears, the impact of our emotions, and the influence of our ego. If one finds oneself in a moment of imbalance, of authoritarianism, of ambition or dissatisfaction, of rivalry or need for prominence, it is better to leave the making of a decision until tomorrow.



### **Rereading Brother François:**

*Qualities of a Superior. 1° Union with God; 2° Charity, humility towards his neighbour; 3° Ability, experience; 4° Mortification of passions and disordered affections; 5° Discreet circumspection; 6° Gentle firmness; 7° Strength of mind, greatness of soul; 8° Excellent judgment; 9° Profound discernment; 10° Consummate prudence; 11° Active, universal vigilance; 12° Adequate knowledge (Const. 1p ch. 3). (Recueil 303, n 572. 1844-1845).*

Reflection on servant leadership is thought-provoking for me because making decisions in favour of the community is not an easy task. Making decisions about people, participating in changing the culture of an organisation, promoting today what we could not in the past, generating life in situations of decline or loss, taking on the past in its entirety.... Moreover, despite our dreams, few decisions end up being truly transformative; some are even wrong.

Subsidiarity is a third key element in this decision-making from the will to serve. Each level makes its own decisions, and we all respect each other's decision-making limits: neither the one at the top making decisions for the local level, nor the one at the local level believing that his idea should be automatically applied to an entire Institute present in 80 countries!

We also learn to distinguish between the strategic and the operational: we must be clear about which team we belong to serve others through strategy or operation, without mixing the two. Both are important and necessary, but they are distinct and correspond to different responsibilities.



### And one last comment from Brother Francis:

*The great skill of a Superior consists in winning the minds and hearts of his inferiors, in making them love and esteem him, and in gaining their confidence (...) His vigilance must be continuous and sustained (...) This vigilance must extend to all parts of government and administration: it includes piety, discipline, studies, economy, etc. (...) But do not forget that without the Lord one works in vain (Ps 126). (Recueil 304, n. 796 bis. 1850).*

Brother François suggests to me that when decisions become a trajectory, a continuity, their effect on the common good is multiplied. Continuity, perseverance, the duration of the decisions taken, the long-term option, succeed in moving organisations forward.

I hope that we Marists, lay people and brothers, can follow the example and teachings of Brother François in our responsibilities today.

### Summary:

Servant leadership is built on the ability to make decisions. It is influenced by the need to count on the team, the maturity, balance and depth of the person who must make them, respect for subsidiarity and the value of giving continuity to the decisions made. We find in the writings of Brother François significant teachings on leadership.



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)