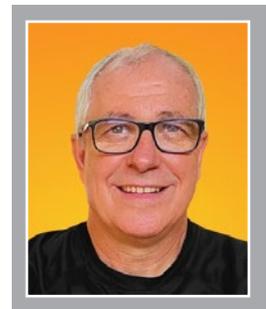

In the service of the other

“Leadership must not only serve the present while being faithful to the past,
but it must be a vehicle to move towards
the future of the project to which it is committed.”

(Marist Voices, chap.16 - Br. Josep María Soteras)

Br. Jesús Balmaseda Aragón
Missionary
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Forty years ago I boarded a plane in Madrid on my way to Guatemala to begin my missionary life as a Marist Brother in Central America and the Caribbean. I could have ended up in Venezuela or Ecuador, but it seems that God wanted me in the Marist Province of América Central. They say that time passes quickly when you are happy with what you are and what you do. These 40 years as a Marist Brother have passed very quickly and I thank God for all that he has given me. I have had the privilege during all of these years of being able to share my life with children, young people and adults in six different countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Cuba and Nicaragua, each country with its own idiosyncrasies. In all of them I have been happy and I have tried to make those whom Providence has entrusted to me happy.

I am writing these reflections on the relationship between service, leadership and fraternity on the most appropriate day for it: Holy Thursday (28 March 2024). Today's Gospel reading is the perfect framework for understanding this. Jesus, surrounded by his friends, knows that his "hour" is approaching and that he has very little time to "do/say" something that sums up the essence of his message and his project. He can think of nothing else than to wash the feet of his disciples. Not only that, but he gives them a command, a mandate: "... you also ought to wash one another's feet: I have given you an example, so that what I have done for you, you also may do" (John 13, 14-15). It is as important to let oneself be washed as it is to wash others, to let oneself be loved as it is to love others, to let oneself be served as it is to serve others.

God has given me the possibility of being able to share my life in places of great need, with people in very difficult situations and with vulnerable children and young people. Marcellin Champagnat founded us a little more than 200 years ago to educate the most needy children and young people and I have tried to fulfil his dream in each of the missions in which I have been: parish schools, marginalised neighbourhoods, insertion communities, formal education, street children, schools in populous environments, youth ministry, management of charities, social projects, parish work... Many experiences undergone with simple people in which I have learned much more than I have been able to teach. Although it sounds a bit strange, in the end every missionary comes to the conclusion that he or she has received much more than he or she has given. We thought that we came to evangelise and it turns out that in the end you have to recognise that you have been evangelised. The mission and the people with whom you share your day-to-day life shape you and, to some extent, sculpt you inwardly and outwardly.

And it is not only the people who shape you, but also the social, economic and political realities of the countries in which you live. When I arrived in Guatemala in 1983, the President was Efraín Ríos Montt, a military man responsible for the deaths of thousands of Guatemalans and who ended up being convicted by a judge for the crime of genocide. You had to be careful what you said and did, who you hung out with and where you went... My first nine years after finishing my studies in Guatemala were spent in Puerto Rico (Commonwealth of the United States) ... and the last six years of my life have been spent between Cuba and Nicaragua... All political/social systems have their limits and their opportunities. No system is perfect, no ideology, whether right-wing or left-wing, has the human being at the centre of its interests. On a day-to-day basis you have to be very aware of where you are, what opportunities you have, what you can ask of those who work with you. The ability to adapt is fundamental to the ability to offer a quality education for the children you work with. There is a saying: "If God sends you lemons, learn to make lemonade". In the end you come to the conclusion that you have to do things in such a way that the recipients of your educational work are able to discover goodness, truth and beauty. In everything and in everyone we can discover "Seeds of the Word". In every place and in every circumstance we can be witnesses of Jesus and his Good News. The life of Jesus also guides us in this. The socio-political-religious situation he had to live in during the thirty or so years he



spent among us was neither simple nor calm: a people invaded and subdued, a country militarily and culturally occupied, authority imposed... And yet the Gospels do not show Jesus overly concerned about this. Jesus is not constantly picking on or pestering the Romans. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" was his criterion for action and I think it could guide our discernment in situations of conflict and contradiction.

There is a saying of Jesus that does not appear in the Gospels: "There is more joy in giving than in receiving" (Acts 20:35). Every person who dedicates his or her life to serving others experiences this. That is the life of a missionary: to dedicate 100% of your time and life to serving and being available to the one who asks for your help or your presence. There are times when leadership involves coordinating many people or doing many things, carrying out many activities and being very creative, on the move all day long, but other times leadership involves being calm, relativising things, listening to people's problems, being with them in times of pain or everyday life, doing what people do every day: cleaning the house, running errands, going to the shop, paying the phone bill, walking around town, having a coffee with friends....

Viktor Frankl spoke of the need to "self-transcend" in order to be happy, that is, to think more of others than of oneself. Selfishness is suicidal behaviour. We Marist Brothers are educators and in the field of education we exercise leadership/service so that the people and societies in which we work can grow in Freedom, Equality and Fraternity. Love and service lead us to these three great values. "In all things Love and Serve" said Saint Ignatius of Loyola. This sums up true Leadership. There is no need to give it much more thought. What really moves the world is love, expressed in service in a thousand and one ways. The life of Jesus is that love, taken to the extreme.

At the moment I am "working" in two educational projects we have in the north of Nicaragua. Each year, we Brothers and laypeople attend to about 1,600 children and adolescents between primary and secondary school. Educating in these times is not easy, just as it is not easy today to be a father or a mother... But we have to try, not give up and always do it with love. A phrase from a film I saw a long time ago has stayed with me: "Nobody is immune to fifteen years of love". Someone was trying to encourage a mother who felt that everything she had given to her daughter had been in vain because of the behaviour she witnessed in her daughter. I bring this up because we must never lose hope. Every good seed that is sown will sooner or later bear fruit. Do not doubt it: every good seed sown will sooner or later bear fruit.

I invite and challenge you to consider your personal and professional life from the point of view of love/service. Marcellin Champagnat said that it is impossible to educate someone without first having the capacity or the gift to love them. The children and adolescents with whom we share every day deserve "absolute respect" and "unconditional love". It is not easy to live out these two values on a daily basis. But that is what we are called to do. May our students remember us not so much for what we said to them but above all for how we treated them. May Jesus, Mary and Marcellin continue to bless and encourage us all.



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

