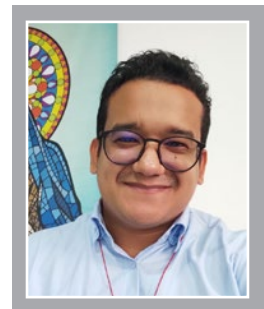

Leadership and spirituality

“The spirit of sacrifice and the desire to serve are essential elements necessary to achieve this goal.”

(Marist Voices, chap.3 - Br. Seán D. Sammon)

Br. Walberson Martins
Pastoral coordinator of Águas Claras School
Province of Brasil Centro-Norte



I am from the state of Pará, from a town called Igarapé Miri, which means small canoe path. I'm the eldest in a family of three children. Natalina Martins, my mother, and Valdecir Martins, my father, are simple people, but they have a very deep and practical spirituality. My brothers Wanilson Martins and Wanderson Martins are the benchmarks of friendship and empathy.

God called me from the heart of my family at a very early age, when I was 15, I entered the diocesan seminary and underwent 10 years as a seminarian, where I grew as a citizen and as a Christian. Today, I have been living my vocation and mission in the Province of Brasil Centro-Norte since 2020, when I joined the Marist College of Belém in Pará (Amazonia), taking on the mission of pastoralist and then as a religious education teacher, pastoral coordinator in Varginha - MG. I have worked on several fronts, including Director of Sport and Leisure for the municipality of Ananindeua - PA, Philosophy Teacher, Music Teacher, Secretary... all by the grace of God and the intercession of Mary and Father Champagnat.

I begin my reflection on the spirituality of the leader by placing myself as a layperson in pastoral ministry, saying that I am a neotophile of youth-following in the footsteps of Champagnat, believing in the possibility of another possible world and in personal and community growth in all areas of human life.

To be a pastoralist in Marist schools today is to take up the cause of Jesus in a more radical way, to be a significant presence among people, to contribute to their happiness and to be a positive witness and reference point for children and adolescents and show that the vocation is worth living, and taken up, in today's world.

We know that evangelizing children and adolescents is one of the main pillars of the work of all Marist schools. We have the objective of making Jesus Christ known and loved, and pastoral activities must provide Christian foundations for children and adolescents through reading, music, catechesis, and the practice of cooperation in sundry projects. That is why the mission of the layperson who speaks of the charism in schools is very important. I'm not only saying this to pastoralists, but I would also point out that all collaborators are called to a pastoral way of life.

Pastoral Leadership and Spirituality

The dynamism of life and service of a pastoral leader, at any level, cannot be compared with that of political leaders or leaders from other sectors of society. The difference is not a technical one. It is a spiritual and ethical difference that comes from the center of God. He is the perfect quintessence. That is why St. Paul advises: "Renew your spirit and your mind. Put on the new man" (Epistle to the Ephesians 4: 23-24).

That is why the psalmist says: "He who trusts in the Lord is like mount Zion; nothing can shake him, for he stands firm forever" (Psalm 125:1). "Blessed are those who have their strength in you and resolve to journey, and the pilgrims, when they cross the desert valley, make it a bubbling spring, because you endow it with the blessings of rain; they walk with increasing enthusiasm and in God's presence" (Psalm 84:6-8).

For this reason, life at school today must be based on a spirituality steeped in the spirit of God who sustains us. We must cultivate this relationship with Jesus, who is the center of the charism, and trust in his divine providence.

Consequences of neglecting the spiritual life

The weakening of the leader's concern for the spiritual life leads him to distance himself from the evangelical mentality and to the weakening of his passion for gratuitous service on behalf of the Kingdom of God and the Marist charism.



When this happens, little by little, the leader begins to adopt attitudes incongruous with the life of Jesus Christ, the servant par excellence, who spent some time in this world doing good (cf. Acts 10:38).

When the pastoralist forgets about the spiritual life and neglects it, a process of internal corrosion begins which leads the leader to stress, fatigue, discouragement, disenchantment, fear, insecurity, crisis, exhaustion, aggression and psychological and moral weakening.

The abandonment of the spiritual life, when profound, places the leader as if on a slippery slope that distances him from his impulsiveness and his needs, almost inevitably leading him to fall into the pit of self-reference, self-sufficiency (independence, syndrome), arrogance, neglect of those he leads, corruption, addictions or moral deviations in the emotional sphere. In fact, this is what we see in reality, and no one is safe. That's why St. Paul warned: "If anyone thinks he can stand, let him beware lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

To turn away from the spiritual life is to escape from the font of love that allows us to serve as we should and to face the crosses of the mission with serenity and determination. "No one conquers by his own strength" (1 Samuel 2:10). Here we can mention the founder himself, Father Champagnat, who showed us the importance of relying on people and Mary. By becoming aware, the wise leader who wishes to serve and walk as the charism prompts and is aware of his own weaknesses, continually opens himself to be nourished by divine strength, which is the source of the charism, as God makes up for our weaknesses (cf. Rom 8:26).

We know that our day-to-day lives at school often force us to fill our time with more bureaucratic tasks, and for this reason we end up forgetting this flame that was lit in Champagnat's heart and that needs to live on in us, but we need to change.

Only in this way will we spread the charism that Father Champagnat envisioned. In so doing, we will more effectively validate our responsibilities and our actions, knowing that the world in and outside our schools is based on speed and fluidity, and it is our role to present something that is ingrained in people's lives.

Communion with Jesus and fruitfulness

There is no room for self-sufficiency for the Pastoral Leader. That's why Jesus warned his disciples, telling them: "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he cuts off, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, so that it may bear even more fruit. You are clean because of the words I have spoken to you. Remain in me and I will remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, so you cannot bear fruit unless you abide in me" (John 15: 1-4).

Jesus Christ does not want sterile disciples like decaying branches that only consume energy but produce nothing. But for a good branch to bear fruit, it must be connected to the trunk in order to obtain nourishment. No branch produces fruit on its own; no branch has the autonomy to generate life and produce fruit if it is not connected to the trunk. The same applies to Jesus' disciples. The fruit to be produced is love, and a leader who does not love is ineffective, selfish and becomes sterile. Love is what makes us purposeful, and it is through love alone that we will carry out an evangelizing education.

Jesus teaches us that there is a relationship of dependence between the master and the disciple. We are not spiritually autonomous! The Church is submissive to Christ and only in the condition of dependence and communion can it be faithful to him. Every Marist leader who isolates himself atrophies and falls by the wayside.

At Marist, there is no room for independent, isolated, self-sufficient leaders. As for the pastoralist, fidelity to leadership for the sake of spreading the gospel depends on his communion with the charism/spirituality and with the educational community. Those who follow their own instincts and ideas do not love the charism. Communion with the charism/spirituality generates fruitfulness in the service of leadership.

Finally, let us remember Jesus' reminder to Martha. "Martha, Martha! You worry and are troubled by many things. But only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her" (Lk 10:41-42).

The good Marist leader must know how to blend action and contemplation, work and prayer, discernment and decision, faith and reason. Therefore, neither Martha nor Mary!

The Marist leader is called to be "contemplative in action" and "active in contemplation". Contemplating in action means acting with our eyes fixed on Jesus, thinking what he would do in our place; being active in contemplation means putting our mission and its challenges into prayer. "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Col 3:17).

Means at the service of spiritual life

The Word of God: wisdom forms the friends of God, his leaders, and the prophets (cf. Wis 7:27). All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refuting, for correcting, for educating in righteousness, so that the man of God may be perfect, prepared to do good (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17). The prophet Jeremiah, going through turmoil, fed on the Word of God: "When I received your words, I devoured them. Your word was a feast and joy to my heart" (Jer. 15:16).

Personal prayer: prayer is listening to God's voice and dialoguing with him, before whom we present our lives, our setbacks, threats, weaknesses and dreams with hope and sincerity. Through prayer, the Marist leader places his trust in God and Mary; he relies on them for support, foundation and growth.

Father Champagnat nourished himself spiritually in difficult times and found sufficient strength and comfort to continue his mission. A pastoral leader who does not practice prayer tends to be more vulnerable. Prayer is an experience of trust (faith) in the goodness of God the Father, on whom we can always count. The certainty of his invisible presence brings us inner security! On the other hand, prayer is an act of freedom because we can express our feelings and needs to God (cf. Mt 7:7-8).

The Sacraments: in the sacraments we have the opportunity to have a special experience of intimacy with God, especially through the Eucharist and Reconciliation. The Eucharist is Christ the Living Bread that nourishes us spiritually and the Sacrament of Reconciliation gives us the grace to encounter divine mercy through the forgiveness of our sins. The sacraments nourish, renew, encourage and strengthen us.

Retreats/Deserts: another very significant means of spiritual growth for leaders is the experience of spiritual retreats. It is downtime, silence, rest, prayer, meditation, self-evaluation and spiritual renewal. Retreats, especially longer ones, offer the possibility of a spiritual relaunch by making new life commitments.

Being among the little ones: Father Champagnat used to say, "To educate children well, you have to love them and love them equally," so it is very necessary for our spiritual life to be with them, because they teach us on a daily basis.



Spiritual life comes from trusting in the presence of God, who accompanies his servants and therefore does not fail. St. Paul declares: “We are troubled on every side, but we do not lose heart; we are put to the test, but we are not overcome by any obstacle; we are persecuted, but not abandoned; we are cast down to the ground, but not annihilated” (2 Cor 4:8-9).

In the book of Ecclesiasticus, we find this message: “My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trial. Unite yourself to the Lord and do not separate yourself from him, so that you may be exalted at the last day. Trust in the Lord, and he will help you; make your way straight and wait for the Lord” (Eccl 2:1, 3, 6). Spiritual life gives new meaning to our existence, enabling us to always serve with joy, optimism and generosity.

So, Marists of Champagnat, we know that the challenges we face in our mission are innumerable, but let us not be discouraged, let us take care of our spiritual life. Let us embrace the future with hope and with our feet firmly on the ground of the reality that surrounds us. Take care of your spirituality and your closeness to God, Mary and Champagnat, which bless the mission of leading and evangelizing. May the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph and St. Marcellin Champagnat intercede for us, so that we may continue to be firm in our evangelization, with a view to building in solidarity, the Kingdom and a just society.



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