
Prophetic leadership at the service of the Mission

“Those who exercise Marist leadership are immersed in a great diversity of cultures, concrete situations and ministries entrusted to them.

This fact needs to be viewed as a source of institutional enrichment.”

(Marist Voices, chap.11 - Gabriel Villa-Real and Pere Ferré)

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There is a phrase in the Tetun language of Timor-Leste; lao hamutuk, which simply means ‘journey or walk together’. For me, journeying together is the essential pastoral action of being a Marist leader and integral to developing the mission, in partnership with others.

Timor-Leste is Asia’s youngest nation. It is a small country of 1.3 million people, still trying to rebuild their lives after the traumatic years of the Indonesian occupation which saw 200,000 of their fellow Timorese die through violence and starvation. It is also a nation of faith, hope and great aspiration. Outside the Vatican, Timor-Leste arguably has the highest Catholic population in the world with 97% of its citizens, baptised Catholics. With 44% of the population under the age of 17, there are also major challenges facing the nation’s leadership in supporting its emerging generation, especially in the areas of health, education and employment.

In the aftermath of the 1999 referendum for independence and the subsequent withdrawal of the Indonesian military, the Marist mission began in September 2000. Brothers from the former Province of Melbourne, with support from Brothers from Portugal and Brazil responded generously to a request from the Diocese of Baucau, to establish and administer a Catholic Teachers College. The College known as Instituto Católico para Formação de Professores de Baucau (or ICFP) has now celebrated seventeen graduating classes since that time.

The initial success of the mission also helped to nurture the Marist charism and prepare the fertile Timorese soil for accepting local vocations. By 2023, we can give thanks to the Lord and our Good Mother for the 22 professed Timorese brothers who have said ‘yes’ to following in the footsteps of our Good Mother and Fr Champagnat. Even after 23 years, the mission in

Timor-Leste is still very much in an infancy stage as the Province continues to form the required personnel to undertake the evolving ministries.

Coming to Timor-Leste in 2020, my mission was simple; to teach and accompany our Marist aspirants. Then in 2022, following the establishment of the new Province of the Star of the Sea, I was asked to take on the role of Provincial delegate as well as being the local Community leader.

From a personal perspective of, lao hamutuk or journeying together, it would seem that the development of the Marist mission involves four key leadership qualities: listening and encountering, collaboration, doing Mary's work, and empowerment. What do these qualities entail?

Listening and Encountering

Listening and encountering, or more precisely, discernment requires putting aside preconceived notions of how the mission should progress within a new culture. As Marists we need to be attentive to the needs and desires of the local people and their culture. Through communal prayer and reflection, we are able to come to a deeper sense of what God is asking of us, all the while, using the gift of our Champagnat charism and the calls of the 2017 General Chapter.

It has been through moments of listening and encounter with the diocesan bishop, other religious, local leaders and communities, and our own Provincial Council, that a practical response has been made with the establishment of a Marist primary and secondary school in the Lautem district, commencing in 2025

Collaboration

The fruit of listening and encountering opens up a 'heart space' which leads to collaboration and development of the Marist mission. Collaboration enables the 'new' not only in terms of ideas and cultural encounters, but also in terms of growing strong partnerships with the local community and church.

Learning and speaking the local language is critical to the development of the mission and forging strong relationships. To cite a case in point, another international religious congregation did excellent missionary work in Timor-Leste for many years, undertaking significant projects.





However, because the members of the congregation could not speak the local language, they were unable to transmit the charism and collaborate with the people at a deeper level. This diminished their contribution and long-term sustainability, eventually leading to the closure of the mission.

Marist leaders who have come to know and use the local language have forged new partnerships for the mission, and in the process, have been able to transmit the charism, especially the importance of family spirit. These partnerships form the foundation of the future Champagnat family in Timor-Leste. Already there is a strong sense of journeying together with lay partners in mission.

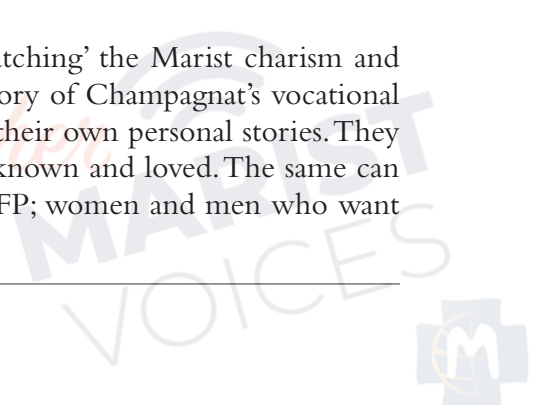
A Passion for doing Mary's work

In developing the Marist mission, a leader must tap into the same desire and enthusiasm that Father Champagnat and the first Marists had for making Jesus known and loved, in the way of Mary. We must hold to the belief that we are truly doing Mary's work and, in our own small and simple way, bringing Christ-life to birth among local communities.

With an ample supply of 'hill-country' around the Diocese of Baucau, there is a growing passion among our young brothers and ICFP students who are members of Pastoral Juvenil Marista or PJM group. Every month they go to remote, out-of-the-way places and villages to take the Gospel of life to poor families, disabled children and elderly people in need. Essential food items are delivered, but more importantly, some simple moments of joy, companionship, singing and laughter are shared. I reflect with gratitude on the wonderful collaboration of our Brothers from Brazil who introduced PJM and are passionate about growing Timorese Champagnat Marists who are enthusiastic collaborators for the mission.

Empowerment

At this present time, we rejoice that young Timorese are 'catching' the Marist charism and embracing the Brother's vocation. They are captivated by the story of Champagnat's vocational transformation from humble rural beginnings, not dissimilar to their own personal stories. They too seek to transform their lives into a gift so as to make Jesus known and loved. The same can be said of our young Timorese lay teachers graduating from ICFP; women and men who want





to bring a unique style of Marist education to the country in a way that a the dignity and rights of children, forming them to be good Christians and good citizens.

As Marist leaders, our task is to empower and accompany our younger brothers and Cham-pagnat Marists. We must enable and encourage them on their journey. Initially, it is to empower our Timorese brothers, through good formation processes, even in their early years of apostolic ministry, enabling them to give themselves freely and enthusiastically to the mission. It is they who will take up the mantle of leadership in the not-too-distant future.

The formation of a Timor Community council in 2022 has been a positive initiative in helping the process of modeling good leadership with the younger brothers. They are developing skills such as teamwork, consultation, expressing differences of opinion, resolving issues and identifying actions and outcomes. The Council has also provided a voice for the local Timorese brothers and a say in the development of important aspects of their unfolding mission.

I would conclude by saying that the growth in mission cannot be effective without the leaders and all those involved leadership exercising humility, accepting personal limitations, in true humility and openness. We need to seek advice from others, even from our youngest brothers. With reliance on God's grace, the giftedness and goodwill of each other, we can journey together confidently in carrying out Mary's work in Timor-Leste.



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