

**Over-view of the past 200 years of our Congregations: Sisters, Fathers, Marist Laity and
Champagnat Marists, Marist Brothers**
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It is certainly no surprise to you to be told that we live in an age of change... Change that is reshaping our ways of thinking, our ways of acting, our ways of being... Change that has been growing in its impact especially over the last 60 years.

I would like to illustrate this phenomenon of change by the story of a nun who was travelling by bus from Auckland to Wellington. Nuns, as you know, always travelled in twos – but Sister Maureen was travelling alone; nuns never talked to anyone when travelling, but she had been chatting to her neighbour for the last 150 kilometers; nuns were never seen to eat in public, yet here she was – though still in her now not quite so voluminous habit – sitting at table in the refreshment stop, with her sandwiches and coffee. Three teenagers, bored with the bus travel, decided to embarrass the nun, so they came to sit at her table, talking loudly. “My Mum and Dad” one announced, “never got married. Nah, didn’t believe in all that church stuff...” “Mine neither”, chimed in another, “Mum and Dad couldn’t see sense in spending all that money on a church do... had a bloody good honeymoon”... “My parents couldn’t stand that idea of “till death to us part” said the third, “they never bothered about getting hitched”... “Excuse me,” said the nun, sweetly, “but could one of you three bastards kindly pass me the sugar?” Change can be liberating.

I would like to take us, in this session, through a general overview of the last 200 years of our Marist groups, letting the years tell their own story especially of recent change, and so coming to 2017, looking at where we are now and what the future holds for us.¹

Graph 1. Picture of Fourvière; “Over-view of our Congregations, 1817 – 2017”

Let us begin with a look at the number of members in the groups, over the years until today.

We start then, with the

Graph 2. Graph of numbers of the Marist Sisters

Marist Sisters – in 1817, Jeanne-Marie Chavoin and Maries Jottillon, left Coutouvre to go to Cerdon, joining the Colin brothers, priest in that parish... and seven years later, June 1824, Bishop Devie visited Cerdon and blessed the habit worn by Jeanne Marie Chavoin, Marie Jotillon and Marie Gardet which marks the official beginnings of the Sisters, ...over the years ,the numbers of Sisters slowly builds up, gains momentum and reaches a high point in the 1960s with some 712 Sisters, worldwide, then a steady decline to the present day’s 280.

Graph 3: Graph of the numbers of the SMSM Sisters

Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary: Precise numbers over the years have been hard to get... their inauguration as members of the Third Order of Mary in 1845, saw Françoise Perroton and her 10 companions, those marvellous “pioneers” now recognised as religious sisters... peaking in the 1960s... through to the present day, now numbering some 430 Sisters.

Graph 4: Graph of the numbers of Marist Fathers/Brothers

Marist Fathers and Brothers: Their official beginning followed papal approval by Gregory XVI in 1836... despite one or two plateaux their rise in numbers climbs to some 1700, again in the 1960s and then a decrease over the following years to the present day of 802.

Graph 5: Graph showing the three Marist Congregations

Noticing that the pattern of rise-decline is repeated in all three

Marist Laity: This Marist group shows a different pattern from the three groups shown – beginning with Fr. Pompallier in the 1820s it takes shape as the Marist Third Order through Fr. Julian Eymard in 1844, opening the Marist charism to lay people.

¹ The talk was accompanied by a power point presentation as explained in the subtitles.

Graph 6: Graph showing the number of Marist Laity

Over the years other lay groups developed – the Third Order of Mary, the Association of Mary, the Marian Mothers, former pupils of the schools, Marist Family, Champagnat Marists, friends and acquaintances attracted by the Marist spirit, coming to share Marist spirituality and mission.

Numbers grew over the years... precise data is impossible to come by... one example is that of Champagnat Marists, welcomed to the Marist Brothers' General Chapter in 1976...numbering 2,300 twenty years later and now in 2017 more than 70,900 world wide...and climbing still.

Then there are the **Marist Brothers**, or **Little Brothers of Mary**, as we originally called, founded in La Valla in 1817. Struggling with the usual difficulties of getting started with two young men... then growing rapidly through the 19th and 20th centuries to reach a peak of 9997, in 1961 (almost made the 10,000 mark...we'll do better next time) then the number drops away in the same declining pattern as we have seen with other congregations to our present total of 3320 (2016).

Let us take a quick look at a typical sample of the pattern in the Marist Brothers' Provinces, over the 200 years. I will take the Marist brothers' New Zealand and the Pacific Province.

Graph 7: Marist Brothers in New Zealand/Pacific Province

Developing from the seven missionary Brothers coming to New Zealand, Samoa, Fiji and Tonga, as Brother Edward has shown us, to reach a peak of 282 in 1980. Then they decline to today's "little remnant" of 81.

What has been happening to create such a uniform pattern of beginnings, growth, peaking, and decline.

What is the dynamic behind such patterns of rise-decline?

Why did our congregations, like so many others religious orders across the world, follow this path? What has happened in the last fifty years to cause such a (at times) precipitous decline?

We all have agonised over this...and we all have our own answers.

I have been helped in my understanding of what has happened by the exploratory work of sociologists such as Fr. Hostie, Fr. Cada, Sisters Patricia Murphy, Patricia Wittberg and I will sketch out briefly their findings in the hope that it not only is illuminating but also offers suggestions for the future.

Graph 8: The General Pattern of Rise-Decline

This is a pattern that has a universal application, not only to religious groups, but to business companies, sporting teams, townships, empires...what goes up must come down...and, of course it applies to our own groups.

Within this pattern there are several identifiable periods

Foundation Period: This centres round the founding person – who has a vision, a transforming driving vision that others find attractive, and which becomes a foundational memory for all who follow. This period lasts for 10 – 20 years, or until the death of the founder.

Growth, expansion Period: As numbers increase, the foundational dream becomes organised in a variety of ways – rituals and symbols are passed on; rules of life, constitutions appear and are elaborated. More and more people are attracted by the work that has been targeted by the group, work which is obviously addressing present-day needs...membership grows.

Stablization period...Clouds Gather Period: About 100 years after founding, everything is going fine. The work is succeeding, so why change. Adaptation to changing conditions is ignored. The work becomes more and more absorbing. The initial vision and enthusiasm become clouded. Rules and regulations multiply to strengthen the existing control and to organise operations. The brotherhood becomes more and more an institution.

Breakdown Period: This is of special interest since it is where we, in our histories presently are. This happens over a period of 50 years or so. The old institutional structures and belief systems are showing themselves to be inadequate. Individuals are under stress; community unity and purpose becomes confused. There is a growing sense that we are out of step with the changing world around us. There is a loss of identity and purpose. Increasing pressures is put on the hard-working members to keep the works going. Members are leaving in increasing numbers, recruitment dwindles, and apostolate opportunities shrink.

Critical Period: This comes about 200 – 250 years after the foundation. Three outcomes are possible:

**Graph 9: The Three possible outcomes as Decline sets in
(Graph showing 1. Extinction; 2. Minimal Survival; 3. Revitalisation)**

Extinction: The religious congregation dies out, or as one commentator expresses it “gracefully surrenders to demise” (Murphy). In the last 500 years of Church history, 74% of men’s congregations/orders have disappeared. Some 800 have folded.

Minimal Survival: A few foundations persist in carrying on the congregation with a trickle of new comers. St. Romuald founded the Camaldolese Order in 1054 and it still exists with only a few monasteries now, after all these years...surprisingly enough, there is a lay movement active in New Zealand, the Camaldolise Oblates, akin to the Third Orders of some congregations :

Revitalisation: The congregation finds a new lease of life, there is a new vision, inspired leaders, imagination at work to bring about the need changes of direction and mission, responding to contemporary times. This happens but with a relatively few congregations, who set off again on the next rise-decline 200 year pattern.

Focusing on the break-down that has happened to us in such a short time span...some 50 years, ...and not only to us, but to almost all of our religious congregations throughout the world? How do we explain this? I think that one of the decisive factors in this extraordinary change, in our Marist world, was the **Vatican Council II**, which in the course of 1961 - 1965 marked the Church leaders’ shift from maintaining a fortress mentality resisting the attractions of a corrupt and hostile world, to openness to our world, urging us to read the “signs of the times” – to enter the world more fully - which we did, becoming aware of the tremendous upheaval in the world of those days – challenge, upheaval, change in ways of thinking, judging, goals to be striven for, in behaviour.

So, we were suddenly pitchforked into a world that was itself trying to cope with history-changing events...as this survey shows...

List 10: Opening to a World of Upheaval (set against a picture of storm)

*The spread of personalism: “I live for me” mentality...personal fulfilment...breakdown of old barriers, change, and new ways of living

*The fall of communism

*The dismantling of apartheid

*The collapse of the colonial era in Africa, Asia, the Pacific; new nations emerging...freedom, independence

*Wars throughout the world...Israel, Pakistan, Vietnam, Syria, Korea; the cold war, the threat of nuclear obliteration...terrorism

*New awareness of the importance of ecology, the danger of our destroying the earth, the threat of nuclear war, the eroding of the planet with the build up of carbon dioxide and other harmful emissions

*The development of travel, breaking down frontiers, the importance of the OE for New Zealanders

*The communications explosion, bringing the world into our sitting room, linking people in ways unheard of new theologies...the emergence of the Holy Spirit...Pentecostalism...rethinking of the role of Mary in the Church

Added to this, for the teaching congregations, we had to adjust ourselves to Integration.

Is it any wonder that in the face of such upheaval, religious women and men found themselves plagued with **doubt** – did we find ourselves, as one of our Superior Generals put it, “blacksmiths in a world of cars”...“light cavalry in a world of tanks and machine guns”?

Is it any wonder, in the face of such upheaval, that religious life, with its monastic framework and its isolation...its deliberate isolation from the world, failed to hold its numbers, failed to be attractive to the young people?

Yet ...we can't blame the outside world too much for the decline... it is how we reacted, what happened within us, faced with this world, that had such a major impact...how did we re-act?

Perhaps a key word in this profound change is **doubt**.

Doubt is such an unsettling, destabilizing, undermining influence that the writer of the Epistle of James in the NT, likens **doubt** to waves of the sea, driven and tossed by the storm winds (James 1:6).

And **doubt** hit us as never before in the 1960s – 1980s ...bringing us face to face with two key issues.

Graph 11: Assailed by Doubt

1. Inspirational Doubt: crisis of identity, “Who are we?” in this blizzard of change;

2. Operational Doubt: What is the Purpose of our lives and our work today?

Inspirational Doubt: Once, the religious life was presented to us as having a special nobility, poised somewhere between the laity and the clergy...an elite strike force...akin to the SAS, the Commandoes, specialised forces of chosen people, akin to the All Blacks...

The declaration of Vatican Council II (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, art.40,43) unwittingly undermined this understanding of the religious life when it put the religious and the laity on the same dedicational level, stating:

“The Lord Jesus preached holiness of life to each and every one of His disciples, regardless of their situation – it is then a mistake to think that there is a level of holiness reserved only to a special class of Christians, e.g. the religious - the religious life is not an intermediate state between the clerical and the lay states [Arts. 40, 43, with explanatory footnote 184].

Our image of ourselves as an elite vanished – we were no longer special with the specialness we attach to the All Blacks...as if all the spectators at our Test Match had suddenly all poured down onto the playing field, submerging us in a flood of black jerseys, 70,000 strong...

Commenting on these Council statements, Patricia Wittberg comments: “In one stroke the Vatican Council nullified what has been the ideological foundation of the religious life for eighteen centuries of Roman Catholic life”². Perhaps an overstatement, but a perceptive comment.

So, as vital questions multiplied, doubt grew:

WHO ARE WE? If no longer an elite, no longer following a “more perfect way”, who are we? An identity crisis...how could we explain ourselves to people, especially young people today. Once, sounding the waters, we discussed the religious life with a group of Pacific Island teenagers... how did they see the religious life today...they cheerfully told us that we interested them as an historical anachronism, belonging to another time and place, a museum piece, interesting in its strangeness... but sadly out of consideration as a way of life today. **What is it to be a religious today?**

Added to this there was/is:

Operational doubt: Many began to question the work that we were doing and the organisational set up that we had inherited from the successful past. Was what I was doing in the classroom, the hospital, the parish, any different to the work of what lay people could do, were doing...alongside us?

² Sister Patricia Wittberg, Sister of Charity, Professor of Sociology, Indiana University, Indianapolis; *The Rise and Decline of Catholic Religious Orders*, New York Press, 1994, p. 214.i

WHY ARE WE? WHAT WERE WE INSTITUTED FOR? WHAT PURPOSE HAS BEEN OURS/IS OURS IN THE WORLD TODAY?

Could I be just as effective as a lay person...I don't have to be a Sister, a priest, a Brother to do this task...could I not be more effective as a lay person?

Were there now, open to us, alternative ways of living, perhaps more adapted to this modern world, now become now appealing to the extent of reversing former commitments for a more satisfying alternative? Were we really doing the work that the congregation was founded for... were our schools, hospitals, institutions, parishes... reaching out to the marginalised, or are they becoming just like the ordinary schools and colleges around us? What have we special to offer... were we offering it? Had we adapted our work to the current needs? Were we, as an organisation, out of date, drifting further and further into the past?

In our congregation, many Brothers did not now find in the Marist Brothers, any means of being what they now found themselves drawn to be...what they now felt drawn to do...

Which leads us to a key question...that is still in the forefront of our concern:

Is it possible for our congregations to revitalize and launch into a new cycle of growth? How do we go about such a re-birth, a re-founding, with "new hearts for a new world" as one superior general phrased it (2009)?

Again, we all have our own ideas about this...if we accept that re-vitalization is possible... one outlook would say: If the fundamental problem is **doubt** that has contributed greatly to the landslide, it is of paramount importance that we address **that doubt** in its various manifestations...how do we do that

***Institutional Doubt:** There has been a great deal of research and writing and conferencing on the **identity** of the religious today...answering the questions of "Who are we?"...

We are no longer an "elite", no longer called to a higher and special holiness. We are now those who have followed a way to live the Christian life, concentrating on a charism given us to witness to Christ in one out of a hundred ways that the Holy Spirit has endowed the Church with.

This one of a hundred ways, our one of a hundred ways, takes on a vital importance, for our identity, and the purpose of our way of life, comes from the group's inherited spirituality, the inheritance we have received from the Founders...**our Marist charism**, to put it in Vatican II terms. It is in this charism that our identity and our purpose lie.

It is what we, and we alone, have to offer to the Church and world...it is the Marist spirituality, in its different forms, and it alone that makes us special, unique in our way of being and doing.

Our own, our charism, our Spirit-given form of Christian holiness...this where our identity lies...and from which our purpose springs.

Focusing on our purpose, facing up to the problem of

***Operational doubt:** We see that the work that has absorbed us in the past, has now largely passed into the hands of lay people, who can do the same work, with the same dedication and enthusiasm as we offer. What then is our purpose, our mission today?

If we look, in broad, basic terms, at the Church and ask, what is the mission of the Church, we would probably say something like - the Church exists to make Jesus Christ known, loved and followed.

How the Church does this takes on numerous forms – praying, preaching, teaching, caring for the needy, promoting spiritual life - forms that vary according to changing circumstances, but essentially, the Church exists to promote the life of Christ active in our world today.

Within this overall mission of the Church, what then is our Marist mission...what are we called on to do? To be?

It seems to me that we, as Marists, exist in order to make Mary's way of following Christ, of serving Christ... making this visible and active in our world of today.

Father Colin puts it beautifully when he says: Our task is to follow Jesus, to make Him known and loved, and followed...by seeing as Mary sees, by feeling as Mary feels, by thinking as Mary thinks, loving as Mary loves, acting as she would act, conscious always of her loving and active presence with us.

How we do this will vary according to the situations we are in – it may be by preaching, by teaching, by tending those in need, certainly by finding ways to meet present needs, as Mary did at Cana...but essentially we are there to live the Christian life in Mary's way, together with her sharing her holiness, her eagerness to continue to present Jesus to our world.

Does this call on us to be pathfinders...pathfinders – like Henry Lewis and Christopher Maling in 1860, finding a way through the mountain chains from Canterbury to the goldfields of Reefton and Murchison.

No longer blacksmiths in world of cars, but car-makers now, working alongside the other workers, adding our gifts to produce together, a superior model.

Adapting the traditional apostolic Marist ways to the new insights that are developing in theology, Mariology, current trends and needs... to bring to our understanding a clearer grasp of the ever-rich, ever-expanding, ever creative Marist charism, the Marist way of seeing, knowing, living, of being...by deepening the gifts that has been given us, as we have heard in this morning's sessions...and thus finding a renewed wonder, enthusiasm and inspiration.

What could help us is a better sharing of the understanding of the Marist charism between our Marist groups, each of which has its own insights and traditions from the Founders and Foundresses.

New ways need to be found ways to work with our ever more numerous and enthusiastic laity, who have their own particular ways of reaching out to the needy...perhaps in some sort of volunteers abroad, some sort of "gap year" experience offered to young. One of our Provincials, Brother Gregory Ryan, called on us to follow us a pattern of action suited to our times – see a need, he said, establish a work to meet that need, train helpers, hand over, move on to the next need. Pathfinders rather than settlers.

But unless the work that we take up, expresses the charism, it is off-track. Without this, we have nothing original to offer.

Graph 12: Our Founders

(Picturing the four founders) What are our Founders saying to us in our situation today... not a crisis, rather a challenge...there is always something positive on the horizon! Some gleam of light through the gloom.

There is a story that tells of God summoning Donal Trump, Vladimir Putin and Bill English into conference to warn them that in three days time, the world would cease to exist. Trump announced to his people that he had seen God and that incredibly, in three days the USA which he had made so great would disappear in three days. Similarly, Putin announced to Soviet Russia that, though he did not believe in God, he had reliable intelligence informing him that within three days the world would cease to exist. Bill English, consummate politician, appeared on New Zealand Television announcing to the country a National Government breakthrough... in three days time, he said, the problems of housing and of traffic in Auckland would be forever solved.

Our problems continue to exist but they can be solved, because, as Champagnat says: "This Marist group is not of our making, but of yours. You have gathered us together to promote the knowledge and love of your Son. If you do not come to our aid, we shall fail, like a lamp without oil, flickering out. But it is your work, and we trust in you, now and always". (Jack London outlines neatly the task ahead of us today: he says, "Life is not always a matter of holding good cards, but often playing a poor hand well").

And we still have a couple of high-value cards...Mary, Champagnat, Colin, Chavoïn, Pioneers ... just need to play them with daring, skill, and faith. Come to think of it , those are pretty good cards, a full house, a royal flush – let us play them right!

This calls for inner resources – first a refusal to give up when faced with the problem, then the ability to think creatively so that what seems almost impossible, becomes simple, so that we accept the challenge to do things differently and daringly, with a revived enthusiasm, a renewed vision, that comes from the living inspiration of who we are and what we do.