

2023 Easter Message from Fr John Larsen s.m.

Good morning, confreres, wherever you may be, throughout the world.

From a beautiful spring morning here in Monteverde in Rome, I bring this reflection to you in the hope that it may inspire some ways of thought or development in your own lives and your own communities.

We are entering into Holy Week, into the celebration of the sacred mysteries of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord. As we reflect on this holiest of times for us as Christians, I wonder what the mysteries might be saying to us as Marists throughout the world. How can this Holy Week help us to understand better what Mary is asking of us as Marists, wherever we might be in the world today?

Palm Sunday

This Sunday, we will be celebrating the entry of the Lord into Jerusalem. We are reminded of the Prophet Zechariah and how he helps us to understand that the Messiah, the universal savior, comes very humbly on the donkey. We stand, as it were, hidden and unknown with the crowd, and we search for signs of hope, the coming of the Lord. We know that we, with that crowd and with that Messiah, are called to great humility to be people of the earth and to be with the humble people of this world as they try, and we try with them to see how is the Lord coming into our lives.

The Messiah, the universal savior, comes very humbly on the donkey. We stand, as it were, hidden and unknown with the crowd.

That earth, that humus, that humility is also a call for us to be grounded. Those palm branches they are waving; they are praising the glory of God. That's part of what we've been called to by the Church, by the signs of our times, by our own chapter, to see the glory of God in creation and celebrate God's glory among us through such humble things as palm branches and earth and life and creation.

We move slowly through Holy Week from passion Sunday.

Chrism Mass

Each of us, wherever we may be in any of the 30 or so countries where we find ourselves, will probably be united at some time in the Chrism Mass with our bishop and with the local church. We affirm our support of the local church and our strong presence with the bishop and with the people of that church.

But at the same time, we are mindful as we celebrate the Chrism Mass that our greatest gift to the local church is our Marist Charism, lived faithfully and robustly in Marist communities. Bishops naturally want the job to be done. They are there to see that the diocese is administered well and they want workers and we are privileged to participate.

Our greatest gift to the local church is our Marist Charism, lived faithfully and robustly in Marist communities.

But we are mostly called to contribute to the local church by living our Marist vocation to the full. That's our contribution. We know that Father Colin counseled us strongly against being in parishes, and we reinterpret that in various ways for our modern times. But the very least interpretation, the very least we could say, is that Father Colin is calling us to transcend a diocesan mentality where we are called to simply do the work of the diocese, however good that work is.

We are called to contribute, most especially, by living our charism to the full. That's our contribution to the Church. That's what we celebrate in the Chrism Mass with our bishops, with the priests, with the religious, and with the people.

Holy Thursday

That leads us naturally into Holy Thursday and the washing of the feet. This has a whole lot of themes that are important for us as a society. One of the themes is the centrality of the Eucharist in our Marist lives. It wasn't just by chance that one of John Claude's closest collaborators is St Peter Julian Eymard, who left us to found a congregation specifically centered around the blessed Eucharist. The mysteries of Nazareth that are at the core of our spirituality, link very closely our Marist charism, our Marian way of life, and the Eucharist.

The last chapter called us to spend at least an hour in private prayer, and that's often with the Eucharist

The last chapter called us to spend at least an hour in private prayer, and that's often with the Eucharist.

The Holy Father includes everyone in the washing of the feet and says the priesthood is about serving the people inclusive, especially the poor.

Also, we are united with all people in the priesthood, which we celebrate on Holy Thursday, the priesthood that we share with all people in baptism. Some of us are called to celebrate it, particularly through the ordination, sacrament of ordination. There'll be Marists in the world who are calling people together this Holy Thursday for the mass of the Lord's Supper. Some will be leading big congregations and big churches. Some will be in tiny Chapels. Some of us might be within our own communities. But all of us are united in placing the centrality of the Eucharist in the heart of our

conversion to Christ as Marists, and the whole connection with the washing of the feet, the inclusivity of the Eucharist, of the washing of the feet.

The Holy Father has expressed it beautifully in recent years. He includes everyone in the washing of the feet and says the priesthood is about serving the people inclusive, especially the poor. That whole theme of Eucharist, personal prayer, prayer with others, and the call to service is important for us as Marists this Holy Thursday.

Good Friday

That leads us, as it were, naturally in the Easter mysteries, to Good Friday. We stand as a beloved disciple with Mary at the foot of the cross this Good Friday. All of us as Marists, we are there at the foot of the cross. We see the suffering of Jesus and we focus on that, the body tied, nailed to the cross out of love, the nails of love, the saving love of Christ. We are united with that. We look at the cross and we get our energy and our strength and our hope from that. That's the cross.

But we see it expressed in our modern world too, not far from here, too close to here.

The Ukrainian and the Russians and their allies are battling it out and tens of thousands of people, mostly young, are being slaughtered. That's Good Friday for today, for this year. That's very widely known. But many others are suffering too. I think particularly of the Good Friday, the extended Good Friday that the people of Myanmar are suffering at this time. It's an awful experience for them and for many other people.

Closer to home, too, it's a Good Friday experience. Closer to home, many of our confreres are struggling and feeling the pain of the cross in their own physical sickness, whether it's external or for some of us, a very internal suffering too, the passion that we are going through. We unite that with Christ as a saving sacrifice for our people.

Closer to home, too, it's a Good Friday experience. Many of our confreres are struggling and feeling the pain of the cross in their own physical sickness.

There's also the physical death of our confreres. We lost a lot in COVID. A lot are dying at the moment. In the last year, the province of Oceania alone has lost 10 confreres who've died. Death overwhelms us sometimes. That's Good Friday. That's the mystery.

We're also suffering with our church, with society, and as a congregation, some pretty heavy body blows. I think particularly of the scandals and those who are affected by the scandals in so many parts of the world. People who have been hurt by what's happened, their families, the perpetrators, some of our confreres.

All of this is Good Friday experience.

We also see some of our communities, some of our works, some of our iconic works that confreres have worked in, sometimes for 200 years. These works are going and we wonder, what's left? Is this the death? Is this the end?

That's Good Friday. That's the Good Friday reflection.

Holy Saturday

The veil of the temple was torn in two and we realized we need to look at things afresh. The old covenant, the old ways, that's going. There's a new covenant and new life. To enter into that new life, it's not just turning on a switch, but we need to go through the Holy Saturday experience.

Holy Saturday is a precious time, a quiet time, where we discern the signs of life with a heavy heart, acknowledging also frailty and vulnerability and death all around us.

And that's the time of purification, the time of deep faith, when all of us are throwing back on what we really believe, the Gospel, creation, God's love, the Holy Spirit.

Our call is nourished by Mary, and we remember the dreams, the dreams of the church that gave us baptism, our own dreams at first profession, our dreams at ordination, we remember those and we reflect in the darkness of the night how they are to give new birth.

Holy Saturday is a precious time, a quiet time where we discern the signs of life with a heavy heart, acknowledging also frailty and vulnerability and death all around us, which takes us to the empty tomb.

The Resurrection: Signs of Life

Nobody saw the resurrection. All they saw was signs of the resurrection. I believe that we as Marists see signs too.

Sometimes we think, long ago there was a golden age. The Marists were a couple of thousand in the world. The seminaries were full. We were taking on new missions. We want that.

No, this is our time. 2023. This is our moment of living the Paschal mystery. We look for signs of life among us today.

I think we can see them in communities where people are serving the people with joy and with freedom and with fraternity. We see signs of life in so many confreres and all our confreres who are doing their best and are really trying to live this life as well as we possibly can. There's a sign of life.

we are called to be discerning towards the signs of life that show greater life, show the Christian life particularly strongly

At the same time, I think we are called to be discerning towards the signs of life that show greater life, show the Christian life particularly strongly.

That's where we are living in communities that are strongly missionary, preaching the good news, giving praise to God, and serving the poor. Some of those communities, and there are new ones, are intentionally designed that way. We have called them *omnes gentes* communities because when our

congregation began in 1836, Gregory XVI sent us out with a papal letter that began, *omnium gentium salus*, for the salvation of all people, "I am sending the Society of Mary on mission". That phrase, *omnes gentes*, comes in the sense that we are starting again, bringing all the best that's happening now and encouraged to go forward.

They are communities that are *small*, usually that are *prayerful*, certainly, that are *servicing the poor* clearly, that are *intercultural* with Marists from different parts of the world expressing in community the Catholicity of our Church and *intergenerational*, expressing by our way of life the Gospel.

That way of life, that expression, bears witness beyond our communities as we preach the Good News by our Marist way. That's a sign of life.

There are other signs of life, too, besides the goodness of our confreres, the goodness of our community and our missionary communities.

We think, for example, of the seminary and we thank our Italian confreres for vacating their rooms and their space to make room for the biggest seminary community we've ever had here in Rome of theologians. We're grateful for what's happening in the novitiate. There were big challenges during COVID and great response from districts like Africa and the novitiate here in Europe. But now we're back in the Philippines and there's a strong novitiate community there struggling to start again post COVID.

These are signs of life and hope. There are many good things happening.

I send you the Superior General's report to CS2022, to help, if you like, the reflection on searching for the signs of life around us today that encourage our Marist mission, the efforts.

It's a different world. It's a different Easter Sunday morning in 2023, but we're struggling and we are seeing signs of hope. It's an individual struggle for each man and woman to try and understand the mystery of Easter Sunday, but it's also a communal effort. And we as communities try and depth the mystery of Holy Week in our missionary activity as Marists.

To help us to do that, I'll also send you along with this, the report that I gave to our Council a few months ago, slightly edited in the light of what's happened during the Council and since, to help, if you like, the reflection on searching for the signs of life around us today that encourage our Marist mission, the efforts.

This Holy Week, we know, will lead us naturally as the liturgy will take us to Ascension, where Jesus seems to disappear into a cloud, but we know it's the same cloud that accompanied the people through the desert, the Shekinah, the glory of God. We know it's the same cloud that revealed the son of men to them at the transfiguration, and will take us then to Pentecost, where Mary unites us together as Marists throughout the world and sends us out on mission, whatever that might mean in our context, whatever that might mean, but sends us out to bring the good news, to give praise to God, to serve the poor.

That mission that Mary calls us to, we are called to live, confreres, with great depth, not superficial jumping, jumping, but with a profundity and with great commitment. Sometimes the going is really tough. And also, confreres, with creativity, not just the same old, same old, but trying to respond to the needs of our times with great creativity.

We enter into the liturgy over this time with hearts full of faith, hope, and love, praising God with the church, recommitting ourselves as Marists, acknowledging that there is suffering, that we need to go deeper, but there's great life around us and living that life, confreres, to the full as best we can, wherever we can.

A blessed and happy Holy Week, Easter and way beyond to each one of you.

Thank you.