



Report

From the Superior General

Council of the Society

Rome, 8-21 October 2022

Confreres,

Greetings from Villa Santa Maria, in Monteverde, Rome!

I am writing as your brother trying to discern, together with each one of you, how the Spirit is leading our Society of Mary now and into the future. I would like to ask you to read this letter with a prayerful heart and an open mind. I wrote these words originally for the report for the Council of the Society in October, 2022. In the light of the discussions of the Council and of the wider Marist audience I have made a few minor adjustments. I am sending this to you in the hope that together we can respond even more courageously to our Marist call into the future. I am mindful, too, that we are beginning to prepare for our next Chapter in September, 2025, and hope these reflections may help us find a sure footing for our journey towards the Chapter and beyond.

I am addressing three questions that seem important to me:

1. What are some of my main learnings as Superior General for the last five years?
2. How has the 2017 General Chapter helped (or hindered) our direction?
3. What is the proposed direction for the next three years, and possibly into the longer-term future?

While I am presenting a personal view as seen from my role as the Superior General of the Congregation, I am very aware that we are together on a synodal path, journeying together as pilgrims. We Marists are working together as brothers towards creating a renewed Church, with Mary gathering all her sons and daughters together at the end of the journey just as she did at the beginning.

Also, while I am writing from a personal perspective, I am very mindful that we are one team here at “Villa Santa Maria”, Monteverde. I enjoy working as a team here and appreciate each Councilor’s unique contribution and the contribution of everyone in this community and in this house. I appreciate that as a Council we do not always agree. However, we are certainly “of one mind and one heart”.

1. What are some of my main learnings as Congregational Leader for the last five years?

- a. That leadership is a challenging and worthwhile ministry in itself and that leadership skills need to be developed.



When I was in Lake Atitlan in Guatemala before the Marist Youth Day in 2018 I met an elderly North American missionary priest and followed him around for a few days as he celebrated Masses among the indigenous people. I admit I was somewhat jealous of his ministry and feeling rather sorry for myself. I thought: “this is dynamic missionary work and I am stuck in a glass palace in Rome, far removed from “reality”. One day he said to me: “This mission is easy for me. I have been doing it all my life. It’s all I know.

In leadership you are at the cutting edge of mission in the Church”. It woke me up. This gnarled old missionary helped me to understand that I needed to embrace the ministry of leadership not as a necessary evil to be endured but as a graced way of living my Marist vocation. There would be no mission at San Lukas in Atitlan, Guatemala – or anywhere else in the world - without leaders and structures to direct it. The ministry of leadership is a special way of serving in the church and an essential charism that needs to be embraced.

When I started in this role in 2017 I had an interview with Arturo Sosa, the Jesuit Superior General, whom I still meet with fairly regularly in another capacity. I have learned a lot from him. I asked him: “Just how do you do well this assignment as Superior General?”. His answer was that our principal task is to keep the vision alive. Keep praying and reflecting and trying to discern the big picture. Our task is to enunciate the charism, the mission, the direction of the Congregation and call people to be faithful to it. Others will always be asking us to put out local forest fires, to seek our support for one particular side of the story. Stay above the fray and keep proclaiming the vision and calling people to account for their faithfulness.

I have come to understand that the ministry of leadership is very demanding indeed. While there are good moments, Resurrection moments, a lot of our spiritual support comes from praying with Jesus carrying the cross.

Thank God for changing models of leadership towards a more community-based style. A lot of human support comes from our Councils with whom we work fraternally, “synodally”. The same is true as we support each other as superiors at all levels in the Society.



I learned more from Arturo Sosa S.J. One of the practical tips he gave me was – get up early and say your prayers. Don’t have any interviews before 11.00 am and spend the time up until then just praying, reading and reflecting. After 11.00 am the interviews and meetings will not stop. That’s ok. Insist that Sunday is strictly a Sabbath, or you’ll burn out. Since talking with him, I know I have suffered from not following this advice well enough. Along the same lines, he said to be careful that the community and Council meetings are not always only business. Make sure we keep being challenged by prophetic outsiders or all we fall into “group-think”.

Several confreres, myself included, have also benefited from an intense Jesuit led leadership course, called “discerning leadership”. The Jesuits, following on a request from Pope Francis, are helping people to develop a more discerning and Gospel-based model of leadership. Also, having leadership-coaching and on-going training can help. Leadership in the Society is not just something that we do as a side-line but is a real and essential ministry in the Church, different from but including management, and the ministry of leadership requires constant up-dating and mentoring.

We need to be developing confreres with leadership skills within our Society and our Church. The younger Marists – professed about 5 – 15 years – need to be given opportunities to hone leadership skills. These skills need to be more focused than the older style of only “on the job” training. The skills required for formation and for leadership often overlap and so those trained in formation often go very quickly into leadership leaving a dearth of formators.

b. What I learned from Covid.

We all have our Covid stories to tell. You would know that Italy was hit early on and with a vengeance. Through our closed doors, windows and gates we were hearing frightening stories about the numbers of deaths, including in religious houses in Italy. (In passing I would say Pat Devlin, as house superior here in Rome, was a wise and generous companion to all of this over this nerve-racking time.) Basically, Covid was a horrible time, and it still may return to haunt us.

However, Covid did stop us in our tracks and raised helpful questions which would not go away as long as the vaccines were still a future dream. What was the role of “visitations” anyway, given they were on ice for the meantime? How do we communicate in these locked-down days? We are saving thousands of Euros on airfares and not creating carbon footprints anywhere. It was all very quiet. We would have appreciated the silence more if we had not been afraid of an imminent kiss of death. That feeling of our personal mortality stopped us from rushing around and made us face the question: “what of institutional mortality?”. Is this the end of the story, or close to it, for us as Marists?

Covid-time was a tough teacher but we all learned that we could communicate rather effectively even without physical visiting and regular virtual meetings became part of the scheduled life of our major superiors. Also, there were the individual Zoom meetings and many other communications. These were a great help and we need to look at how to develop these tools in our leadership. Yet, I am sure they are not sufficient. It is hard to beat the person-to-person encounter, the shared discernment and a shared meal. Perhaps the key is to keep travelling to what is essential while always trying to live more simply and frugally.



The key learnings from Covid came from responding to questions about how to improve our quality of communication, including questions around travel, as well as the call to ever greater mutual support and encouragement in local communities.

c. I have learned that the word “mission” or “Marist missionary” can mean very different things for different Marists.

I met a Marist about six months after I started as Superior General who said: “well, at least I haven’t received a letter from you yet assigning me to Kyrgyzstan. I feared you might dispatch me to some exotic place!”.

It made me remember one confrere who wrote in a reflection after the especially difficult 2001 Chapter: “I didn’t appreciate the Chapter at all. I was made to feel a second-rate Marist because I had stayed at home while the “real Marists” had gone on mission abroad”. There is unease about what the word “mission” means in the Society of Mary.

I have come to understand that the old distinction between “Marists at home” and “Marists overseas” as being two different species still lingers to haunt us. I had hoped that that distinction died along with the post-colonial age after World War Two.



I have learned the need to keep clarifying with any Marists who may be open to re-thinking their understanding of “mission” that Marists do not “have” a mission – neither in Oceania, nor anywhere else - just as the Church does not “have” a mission. God IS mission and the Church participates in the outpouring of God’s love, and we Marists participate in God’s life by living our own Spirit-given charism, to live the Gospel as Mary lived it by the grace of God, who is mission. There is one Society of Mary and where we actually find ourselves living and working

is a matter of discerning-obedience and really rather secondary. Missionary geography is not a matter of world maps but it is a call of the heart to love our sisters and brothers as Christ has taught us and to hear the “cry of the poor and the cry of the land”. Our Constitutions are there to guide us, especially numbers 12 - 14.

Sometimes it is more helpful to replace the words “Marist mission” by “the Work of Mary”.

d. I have been enlightened and encouraged by how much good work is being undertaken by Marists in so many places.

You can find a Marist officially assigned in any one of twenty-nine nations in the world. In spite of Covid I have been able to visit a fair few of these places (though we are necessarily running behind with our official visitations). I have been struck everywhere by the good work quietly being carried out, day by day, by so many confreres. When I have met bishops – most recently in Bahia in Brazil and Oslo in Norway – they have spoken most warmly of the ministry of Marists in their dioceses. Both these bishops were clear that they would like more Marists in their dioceses and would be happy if young vocations from their dioceses went to the Marists “as an investment in the future”. I have received very few “murmurings” from anyone against the Marists as I have travelled. It is encouraging to hear so much affirmation of our Marist presence and balances so many “issues” of Marists in difficulty that can occupy our time as leaders. Sometimes Marists in leadership can see only the problems and the Marists who are going through a hard time and overlook the good work quietly being accomplished by so many. Sacraments administered. Life-giving conversations. The Word of God preached. Encouragement extended. Students taught.

This gives reason for hope and for rejecting any form of cynicism or despair or “death wish”. The future will surely be different but it will be building on a solid tradition of two hundred years of mostly quiet, faithful and compassionate ministry in a Marist way.

We know that in many units the average age is already high and increasing daily. However, the way we care for our senior Marists is a sign of our appreciation for them. We value their generous hard work, their wisdom and especially their prayer and their on-going interest. Many of our senior confreres are always open to keep learning new things. One joy of this service of leadership is spending time with our senior Marists whose stories and good will is almost always very encouraging. Of course, there is the odd exception but mostly our senior confreres are a source of great hope.

e. I have learned that it is a temptation to keep things going “because we have always done this” rather than ask the hard questions in the context of the basics of Marist Religious Life.

We all need to be challenged by the basics of Marist Religious life for fear of doing mostly just the “same old, same old”.

In some regions where we serve there exists little or no sense of the Transcendent, of God, of the love of Jesus Christ or the power of the Spirit. The Church can, at best, be perceived as irrelevant. We ourselves can easily atrophy by becoming “this worldly” and avoid facing up to the hard questions around our own faith and beliefs around why we remain as Marist Religious in the Church and in the world. We can easily become more-or-less agnostics ourselves, because it is in the air we breathe as we use our energies just “to keep the show on the road”. Constant flicking from one assignment or ministry to another, simply maintaining the *status quo* – or allowing too many distractions to enter my life that take me away from a simple, contemplative, missionary life – tends towards a superficiality or degeneration that is moribund.



We need to keep returning to the basics: Religious Life is primarily a quest for the living God in response to his loving call; it is a call to constant conversion to the Good News; we are called to be disciples of Jesus by being sent on mission to proclaim to the Good News to the poor; we undertake this mission in fraternal communities and we do it inspired by our Marist Charism and Tradition. By commitment to prayer, study, and discernment we return to the basics and re-imagine how we need to live and how we need to undertake mission.

It has been encouraging to see many of the young priests coming to Rome for a time of more intense study and renewal. It is also a sign of hope that there is another Colnian renewal early in 2023 at La Neylière. We are also introducing more summer seminars, including one on Marist Studies and one on Marist mission spirituality based in Asia and especially designed to assist younger Marists. We all need to be striving to live our Marist vocation with depth and imagination.

f. What has the sexual abuse crisis taught us?

In varying degrees, the crisis of sexual abuse in the Church, not least in our own Congregation, has been a dark shadow over our time. I personally dread receiving a message like: “I need to talk to you urgently”. It is usually another horrible situation.

Of course, we need to respond by making sure the bases are covered. Good protocols, updated regularly, and followed carefully.



It is now obvious that it is not just a few “bad apples” who abuse. The potential to abuse is within the system. Some have even wondered out loud if our Marist compassionate charism and culture of tolerance has not allowed abuse to fester. We need to call out “the desire to dominate, lack of dialogue and transparency, forms of double life, spiritual emptiness, as well as psychological weaknesses, the terrain on which this corruption thrives.”¹

Some of our leaders have faced the effects of sexual abuse head-on. It has been traumatic for everyone – especially the one abused against and his or her family, but also for our leaders and for all the Congregation and for the abuser himself. When we can model best practices, both by way of just and healing responses and by being pro-active in creating safe environments, we can offer a healing way forward for a systemic problem that lurks much more extensively than just within the Catholic Church.

It is a blessing that one of our key formators, the socius in our novitiate, has completed a two-year Licence Programme specializing particularly in this area of protocols. Formation is a key area in treating this cancer in the church. Others in the Society of Mary have dedicated considerable energy to helping us improve our response to those who are affected by the crisis. We need to keep working in this area.

The abuse-crisis in our Church and our Congregation is also a call not to retreat from ministry but to give special and respectful attention to those who are most vulnerable in our society. Our institutions can shield us from the lives of those who are suffering most. The crisis is a challenge to make the tough decisions for our communities to go to the peripheries and live and work from there.

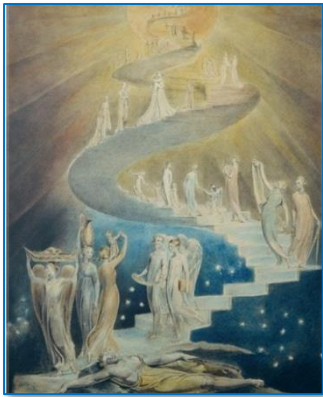
¹ Final Document of the 2018 Synod of Bishops, 40. Also in *Christus Vivit*, 98.

2. What has been helpful (or unhelpful) from the 2017 Chapter decisions.

a. The call to a more contemplative life. (GC2017 4, 9a, 30, 31)

There was a strong call in our Chapter for a more contemplative life “as the energy source, the mystical heart of Marist mission” which is remarkable given our traditionally very apostolic nature. However, it is an expression of the heart of Religious Life which has as its primary goal to “search for God”. Also, our modern world can be searching for more spiritual directions as evidenced by such phenomena as wide-spread loneliness, opioid crises and high suicides rates in some areas.

For us Marists it is this call to the contemplative life, sometimes in tension with the more active ministry, that has been a natural inclination since the beginning – “hidden and unknown” can be interpreted that way. This tension between active ministry and contemplative prayer was discussed by Fr. Jean-Claude and Fr. Peter Julien Eymard. Also, Fr. Jean-Claude and Mother Saint Joseph struggled with this tension. While we are all called to the meet God in the silence of our heart – “in the gentle breeze” of Elijah - our lives were never meant to stop there. The God of “the gentle breeze” is also the God who inspired the prophets, and Jesus’ mission and the apostles, with Mary, going out from within the early Church.



While we can encourage personal initiatives to live more contemplatively and avoid an unhealthy activism, institutionally it is hard to know how to respond to this call of the Chapter for a more profoundly contemplative life. I have tried to send a monthly Reflection Letters to all confreres. The two Colnian renewals are also an effort to implement the direction of the Chapter. The encouragement to dedicate at least one hour daily to personal prayer has certainly been adopted in some of the formation houses and in some apostolic communities I have visited where the community tries to pray together for this hour. It seems to me this call of one hour of personal prayer daily is at the heart of the renewal of the Society of Mary. Perhaps it is also age-related and has a special echo in the hearts of our retired confreres as they develop a ministry of prayer and intercession. However, the call to contemplative prayer is never meant to be palliative care!

This call is not just for Marists be more prayerful, either personally or communally, but to see it as missionary imperative to respond to the “spiritual” needs of our times, to accompany people on their own quests. Our missionary call includes accompanying people as they ask their own spiritual questions and reflect on their deepest experience and then inviting them to seek “enlightenment” in the joy of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

An inter-religious dialogue centre in Ranong, the hostel for pilgrims in Sahagún in Spain, an ecological spirituality centre called “dawasamu” in Fiji and a “poustinia” in Norway are some of the steps some of our confreres are taking to respond to the need to lead our contemporaries along a more profound spiritual “path”.

b. The Chapter called us to promote new missionary communities. (GC 2017 20, 21, 25, 26)

This call of the Chapter has led to a new initiative which we have called “omnes gentes” communities taken from the first words of Pope Gregory’s letter in 1836 giving the Society of Mary the mission in Oceania. (*Omnium gentium salus...*) Omnes Gentes communities intend to be, in a real sense, a new missionary impetus to the Society.

These communities are meant to be small, inter-cultural (and sometimes inter-generational), prayerful and responsive in a Marist way to the needs of the poor in the areas where they are established. They are especially appropriate for younger Marists who have experienced an international formation, although not exclusively for them. These communities can also involve the wider Marist family, including Lay Marist Missionaries.

Our hopes to do more in this area have been challenged by Covid, but we have made some progress. Hopefully we can develop moves in this direction more in the future. I will come back to this topic later in this letter.

c. **The Chapter called us to continue working for vocations. (GC 2017 64 – 69)**

Apart from all the individual unit initiatives in this regard we have formed a “vocations’ think-tank” of confreres who have special expertise in this area. From them evolved the idea of one “year of Marist vocations”. That involved themes for each month, including material for monthly reflection days, various seminars and on-going Zoom meetings for vocations’ promoters. We were very happy with the overall response. We hoped it would deepen a sense of gratitude for our own Marist vocations and encourage Marists to invite others to join us.

Now that the year is completed, I would like to encourage every community in the Society to offer the Eucharist every Saturday for the expressed intention of increased Marist vocations. Also, some time, hopefully one hour, of community adoration of the Blessed Sacrament would also be life-giving. I ask each of you to encourage this in your communities.



We also need to be accompanying young people along their ways, too. Their culture can seem so different that we become fearful and keep our distance. Also, abuse of trust within these relationships in the past can keep us very aloof. However, the young are also searching and, as far as possible, we are called to journey with them. Education has been an important Marist mission since the days of Belley.

It is good that we were able to participate in the Marist Family World youth day in Guatemala in 2018 and will again be inviting young people to Lisbon in 2023.

d. **Initial Formation. (GC. 70 – 79)**

We have appointed a general councilor as “the coordinator of initial formation across the Society”. (70)

We have worked on the development of the formation directory “to ensure that the uniform set criteria ... are followed”. (71)

We have continued to develop international formation along the lines set out by the previous administrations even though, with Covid, there have been particular challenges especially for the international novitiates.

We are looking forward to bringing together our formators from throughout the Society this August, 2023, here in Rome. It will be an opportunity to encourage each other, to learn from each other and to check we are walking along the same Way.

There is an on-going issue of calling confreres to the formation ministry, training them properly and assigning them appropriately especially given all the various formation demands in the Society, both

locally for the initial stages and internationally for novitiate and for post-novitiate formation. We are always searching for well-suited confreres for this ministry, including senior confreres to be important members of the formation communities.

e. The Chapter called us to develop the professional formation of the young Marists. (GC 2017 9b, 84, 85)

The international theology programme has developed to help “raise the bar” of theological competence in the Society. This ideal was especially close to the heart of the Founder.

We have expanded the initial theology programme from three to four years of theology in Rome, worked with Major Superiors to ensure that the first years of ministry are consistent with the needs of our younger confreres and not only the immediate needs of the unit, and invited younger Marists after several years of ministry to return to Rome for some renewal and on-going theological studies, ideally leading to a Licentiate in Theology. (There is always the possibility of a doctorate, too, for those developing an academic apostolate.) This is the template but the reality varies from situation to situation. We need more time to evaluate this programme, but it seems to be being received very positively so far.



We had hoped to bring together all our young Marists for a week or so but Covid put an end to that. The issue remains of how we are helping our younger Marists to adjust to Marist life and mission in those first few years. While a gathering of all the younger Marists together in one place seems unlikely now we hope that the summer seminars, especially the seminar on Marist mission spirituality in Thailand, will achieve some of the same goals.

The Chapter called us to “a higher level of professionalism in missionary involvement through further education ... for the wider Church and the world” (9b) One way we have responded to this call is by establishing three Marist Commissions – one for inter-religious dialogue, one for migrants and refugees and one for ecological concerns. These Commissions bring together confreres and some others within the Marist family of similar interest and expertise in these areas from across the Marist world and they meet regularly on Zoom. It has the advantage of encouraging these confreres in their areas of interest as well as increasing professionalism within the Society, enabling more outreach in the local churches and across the Society. The weekly blog sent to all confreres invites everyone to keep up to date with some things that are happening in the areas of peace, justice and the integrity of creation.

f. *Laudato Si'* (GC 2017 44 - 47)

The Chapter was very strong on promoting the teaching of *Laudato Si'* especially towards ecological conversion.

Apart from the weekly blog, and the Commission for Ecology, we have some confreres who are especially pro-active in this area. Two Oceanians – where the issue of ecological injustice is especially urgent – are working in this field in academe. As a Society we have signed up to the Vatican-led initiative of the seven-year action plan. We also have a Marist family project, working together with the Sisters and the Brothers. We also proposed an ecological covenant for each Marist community and we are in the process of updating that covenant. Apart from that, many units, communities and individuals are making real efforts to simplify our lifestyles and respond creatively to the calls of *Laudato Si'*.



Here at General House we have made significant efforts to implement the teaching of *Laudato Si'*. We are trying to live without a car in the community. We have developed systems to harness the sun with solar panels and the rainwater with storage tanks. We are constantly trying to improve our systems to save power, including power saving lighting.

g. Lay Marists. (GC 2017 91 – 104)

The article on Lay Marists was one of the longest sections coming out the 2017 Chapter.

There seems to be a clear call for well-established programmes for formation for Lay Marists and a clearer way to express the Marist Lay identity. The professed Society of Mary seems to claim that this is the task of the leaders of the Lay Marists throughout the world and yet the lay leaders seem rather paralyzed without the express leadership of one or more charismatic professed Marists directing a way forward. As a result, there seems to be quite a lot of talk, but little concrete action apart from some international or regional meetings.

The Province of Europe made a welcome initiative by suggesting one or two forms of life which may be open to Lay Marists who wish to make a more formal commitment in the Church.

The commission of the Chapter that demands “the general administration, in collaboration with Marist laity, compile a directory on the relationship between Marist religious and lay Marists” has not been fulfilled. Where would we start and who would be involved?

h. Brothers in the Society. (GC 2017 48 – 56)

The Chapter requested that “the superior general seeks approval to appoint brothers as local superiors” (55). The situation has changed recently in this regard with a special *Motu Proprio* of Pope Francis and we are in the process of clarifying what that means for our leadership in the Society. We hope to propose a change of legislation in the Constitutions at the next Chapter. Meanwhile in the Church it is more straightforward to appoint a Brother as a Superior – even Superior General, in some circumstances – in the Society.

i. Finance. (GC 105 – 112)

There have been some special developments under the General Bursar’s leadership in the area of finance in the light of the demands of the General Chapter and of changed financial circumstances in the world. We have hosted a finance meeting of key finance personnel in the Society here in Rome. We have continued the work of establishing trust funds, especially for formation and for mission, which are directed towards investments for the future. These funds are part of our patrimony and need to be safeguarded and developed carefully. While it is difficult to build a succession plan for future Bursars General, the work of the Bursar General has been streamlined considerably by significant changes in

the finance office, including employing a Lay Assistant to the Bursar General who assists in all manner of finance management including much of the work that would be undertaken by a specific “Mission Procurator”. (112)

j. La Neylière. (GC. 113)



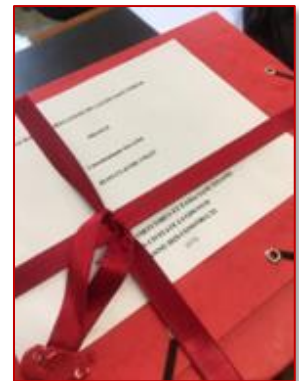
A last-minute intervention at the 2017 Chapter included this statement: “the general administration before the next Council of the Society shall consult the major superiors with a view to entrusting the responsibility of La Neylière to the general administration in close collaboration with the provincial of Europe”. Over the last five years we have set a committee to discuss this directive and have we have decided that the general administration is not in a position to accept the principal responsibility for La Neylière. The leadership in Europe

has generously assumed a key role in the future of La Neylière for which we are grateful. There has been a sense that this direction of the Chapter was rather rushed and was not really well thought through. The issue of the future of La Neylière is still very debatable especially when we try to maintain a robust Marist mission community there.

k. Founders’ cause. (GC. 114) Marist Studies.

We continue to work on the Cause of the Founder as instructed by the Chapter.

The dossier for the cause has now moved to Rome. We await the appointment of a “relatore” in the Dicastery for Saints in the Vatican. Our Postulator continues to be Fr. Carlo Maria Schianchi. However, we are searching for another Marist who may be able to write up the “positio” and, indeed, carry on with Marist Studies, whatever form they may take, into future. It seems evident that the “golden age” of Marist studies and research is over, at least for now, and the future will be different. However, we are searching for a younger confrere who will continue to contribute new material into the future. Meantime, some of our confreres are still publishing new material and it will be appearing on a new “on-line” Forum Novum on our Marist website.



We have held one Marist Studies summer seminar here in Rome for interested Marists to develop their interest and proficiency in this area. We hope to conduct a second summer seminar in 2023.

3. What direction from here? Some directions.

a. A new paradigm.

A lot of our work in leadership seems to be maintaining the status quo (and the administration that goes with that) and the principal criterion for decision-making can seem to be: “how long can we sustain this ministry, or this confrere, or this way of governance?”. I believe it would be better to



change our approach to move towards a new vision that started with the premise that only our Marist charism is sacred, a gift to us from the Holy Spirit for the sake of service, and after that – ministries, ways of governance, assignment of confreres, formation for mission – were by way of a Marist response to the needs of our times, especially listening to cries of the poor, including the cries of the land. This new paradigm which allows us to hold only lightly and

freely onto our past and ask “what are the most pressing needs of our time and how can we respond most authentically from within our Marist charism?” would help us to move forward with courage and faith. We appreciate the past; we do not live there. The call would be to move from a priority of maintenance (while acknowledging the need of good management and administration) towards a Marist charismatic response to the needs of the world around us and a commitment to employing our patrimony and resources to respond to those needs. Due to good financial management in the past and in the present, we are blessed with good, solid financial resources. They are not “ours” but are to be put in our safekeeping for the sake of the poor.

b. Discernment of our apostolic priorities?

In order to do so I wonder if we need to undertake a discernment of Marist apostolic priorities internationally. Units have been asked to prioritize ministries in the past within our units. Perhaps it is time we looked at priorities across the world. (The Jesuits have already undertaken such a discernment process over a few years and established four “universal apostolic preferences”.² Would we do well to undertake a similar discernment process in our Society as part of our preparation for the 2025 Chapter?) One mantra for a prioritization of ministries could be taken from the 2017 Chapter – “the poor, the youth, the migrants” (9.c) and this may be deemed quite sufficient for the meantime – but perhaps these priorities may not be widely appropriated without universal consultation and wide discernment. In a word, “ownership” of our priorities.

c. Conversion to the Gospel.

A vibrant Marist future presupposes a lively faith life for each Marist and a spiritual life centered around conversion to the Gospel and living relationship with Jesus Christ and hearts discerning the working of the Spirit. This cannot be presumed for everyone just because they once underwent a novitiate or a formation programme. We can encourage our confreres to grow in our spiritual lives

² They are: 1. “To show the way to God through discernment and the Spiritual Exercises; 2. To walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice; 3. To accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future; 4. To collaborate in the care of our Common Home.

beyond “the noon-day devil”. Our own conversion to the Gospel is in the context of speaking to the world in a language that gives the people of our time a sense of life and hope in the message of the Gospel.

d. commitment to community life.

Some confreres just cannot live in community or communities cannot live with some confreres. That is life, but hopefully it is the exception. However, vibrant communities are our goal where each confrere is respected for his individuality yet is also encouraged to live the Marist way of life authentically. Ideally communities are of at least four or five confreres, though, sometimes we can manage with only three. The needs of individuals and of communities need to be prioritized above ministerial commitments. Our primary mission is our community life. (Constit. 127) Where we cannot sustain a community over time, or where our Marist life cannot be lived in a life-giving way, we need to move on.

Increasingly our communities will be not only inter-generational but also inter-cultural. It seems difficult to sustain mono-cultural communities or units into the future even if we wanted to. However, it is also a way of living mission where people see the witness of Marists from different backgrounds living together as the way of reconciliation, justice and peace. Our inter-cultural living is a sign value of the Gospel more radically.

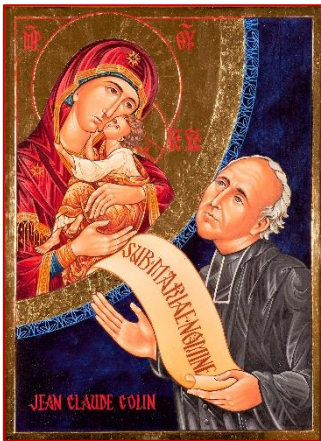
e. International formation.

International formation is presently forming Marists who experience inter-cultural living. It is challenging but over time it becomes a richness for everyone. While we may debate what Fr. Jean-Claude’s aversion to Marists’ ministering in parishes means for Marists today, surely the very broadest interpretation was he meant us to leave behind the “diocesan mentality” to enter into religious life in an international congregation, as he himself did in his own time. There are great challenges to international formation but it seems the most hopeful way, and probably the only way, into our future.

Learning the required languages is a good training ground, especially for our younger confreres, to form the heart to be open to different ways of living, thinking and speaking. English may be becoming the international language of the Society (though Italian is sometimes more used in international meetings now among our younger confreres) but a Marist is limited if he speaks only English. I know this opinion is fiercely debated and arouses a lot of passion because language is power and an expression of our culture and if I feel my own language is unappreciated I can feel I myself am unappreciated or powerless. I can feel disenfranchised when I am not able to communicate easily in the dominant language. Also, there are diverse abilities to learn languages within the Society.



f. “hidden and unknown” as a missionary principle.



“Hidden and unknown” is one of the key phrases of Marist spirituality. I wonder if its significance needs to be broadened for our present age. Certainly, Fr. Jean-Claude and the early Marists did believe that Marists should act in an unassuming manner, indeed always “hidden and unknown”, but I believe it can also be a great principle for missionary discernment too. Marists go in solidarity to live with people who are “hidden and unknown”, the poor who have no names and so we become hidden and unknown, while working in solidarity with them to give them a voice. It is the Marist phrase which expresses very well Pope Francis’ clarion call to go the “peripheries”, both physical and existential. This is one of the criteria for the way forward: to live as a Marist community in solidarity among those who are hidden and

unknown through no choice of their own and to respond to their needs in a Marist way and especially by enabling these people to speak for themselves in a world that is often unwelcoming. Education is a key ministry in this context.

g. Marist lay missionaries and their formation and missioning.

There was a lot of talk at the last Chapter about Marist communities being open to live with lay Marists. In practice it seems very hard to do. However, I do wonder if that criterion of several Marists living together would be more dynamic if we included among Marist communities not only professed Marists but also those who are willing to live our ideals for a limited time. It would certainly make it easier to establish new mission communities in new places. I am happy that one of our younger confreres, Dani Fernandez, is proposing a practical way forward involving recruiting and forming Lay Marists for our international mission. He addressed the Council.

h. Formation of formators.

Formation is always a sensitive issue. A life-giving pattern for formation is developing in the Society from postulancy to several years after Perpetual Profession. However, we need to be training more formators. Usually this demands the agreement of some of our most talented young Marists and the cooperation of their Superiors and then several years of training. Unless we keep working in this direction our streams of life for the future will dry up. At present we have only four younger Marists in training – three in Rome and one in Dublin - and this is insufficient. Often, after years of training, they are re-assigned to some other ministry such as leadership. Sometimes, even after the training, they find that this is not their real strength.

i. “omnes gentes” communities.

One new initiative has been the formation of the “omnes gentes” communities. Covid has really slowed us down. We hope in the next few years to establish several more – perhaps in the Americas somewhere, in Africa and in places in the world where Christianity is not well established whether in Buddhist or Muslim milieux. In March of 2023 we accepted the invitation of the Bishop of Anatolia in Turkey to open a mission in Samsun. It is a collaborative mission with two Marist Priests and two Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary. There is always the question: “but whom will you send?”. So far, thank God, Superiors have been very generous in encouraging their young Marists to partake in this international mission.

j. Finances.

There is always the question of where to how to develop our financial resources, our patrimony for the sake of formation and mission. Those units which are relatively well-off financially are often in the phase-down period of life while those Marist communities in the economically less-well developed parts of the world have greater financial needs. We are indebted to John Harhager, our Bursar General, for outstanding resource-management for the Society. He has been establishing reserve funds for formation and for mission and for administration. Handling them requires considerable expertise. We are grateful for the arrival of a lay financial assistant bursar to add to the finance team as well as the work of the various committees associated with finance. We are grateful, too, to Pat Brophy, and to the New Zealand Province, for agreeing for Pat to come to Rome and to undertake the linguistic and financial training to become a General Bursar before too long.

k. New governance structures for mission.

The tectonic plates underpinning Marist governance are shifting. The demographics speak for the themselves. Recently two Provinces have become Districts and there was talk of going that direction in the Chapters both in the USA and in Canada. Will this lead in due course to several Districts uniting and forming new Provinces with wider borders? Whatever the implications of such a move the reality is that the “power” of the traditional Provinces – strong, independent and self-sufficient – is waning. Sometimes the problem seems to be not so much the governance structures of a province but the attitude of “provincialism”. However, we are being forced to think differently because the self-sufficient Province is sometimes becoming unsustainable for leadership and management, let alone mission. As the Constitutions say: “Marists have understood the Society as a single body, dispersed for the sake of mission, but united in spirit.” (Constit. 157). During these next three years issues of Governance need to be addressed in order to make practical proposals for the Chapter of 2025. The old order is changing.

l. General House in Monteverde.

The General House in Monteverde continues and seems the best place for the General Council at least for the meantime. The General House is certainly benefiting from being able to host younger Marists coming to Rome for on-going studies and the Society is benefitting from their dedication and up-skilling in theology. We have been so very blessed to have Fr. Pat Devlin here fulfilling not one but three major roles in the Society – house superior, general secretary and the priest who accompanies the student priests. Pat has now gone to Davao to accompany the formation team there and Juan Carlos has replaced him as Superior of the community. We are grateful to the wider Society for the support in so many ways of all that we are asked to undertake here.



The future:

The future I am proposing for the Society might be summed up along these lines: the way forward is to express our profound gratitude for the spiritual treasure that is our Spirit-given charism and tradition by embracing it to the full. At the same time, we need to be “detached” from everything else, even that which has so often been life-giving in the past. We discern how the Spirit is calling us to live Mary’s life from listening to the Word of God in the cry of the poor and the cry of the land and respond as Marists to those needs as graciously and generously as we can and with a joyful freedom of spirit. Ours is a Marian gospel-based spirituality that expresses itself in detachment, discernment and especially in commitment to communion for mission. Ultimately this is the way that our small, prayerful and often inter-cultural Marist communities give our expression of the Good News for the poor, always guided by Mary.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Larsen s.m.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

John Larsen s.m.
Superior General.