

Fourvière: The Revolution of Tenderness



Letter of the
Superior
General

6th
June
2016

Dear Marists of Champagnat,

In April last year, I wrote a letter to all of you entitled *Montagne: The Dance of Mission*, reflecting on the meaning of the first year of preparation for the beginning of the third century of Marist life.

I wish to thank you most sincerely for the wide publicity you gave that letter and for the way you received it. This was evident not only through personal reading and reflection, but also in the way it was frequently studied and shared by a number of groups. And I am particularly grateful for the communion it represents with the thorough reforms and missionary spirit initiated by Pope Francis in the Church: *I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. "Mere administration" can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be "permanently in a state of mission" (Evangelii Gaudium, 25).*

My letter to you this year is an attempt to continue this commitment to renew the Church. On this occasion, we seek to reclaim, **from a community perspective**, the **active participation** of all baptised persons.

On the 23rd July, as we commemorate *the promise of Fourvière*, we too can renew our heartfelt commitment **to be the Marian face of the Church, promoting communities that are open and vibrant, deeply Samaritan in nature**, taking up the invitation in this Jubilee year to be *merciful as the Father is merciful*.

Whenever we
look to Mary,
we come to
believe
in the revolu-
tionary nature
of love and
tenderness.

Papa Francisco
Evangelii Gaudium, 288

*The Church's first truth is the love of Christ. The Church makes herself a servant of this love and mediates it to all people: a love that forgives and expresses itself in the gift of oneself. Consequently, wherever the Church is present, **the mercy of the Father must be evident**. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find **an oasis of mercy**.*

Pope Francis, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary
Jubilee of Mercy, 12

Those first Marists also dreamed of a Church with a *Marian face*, that is, a maternal and merciful Church. They too wished to establish all over the world an *oasis of mercy*. We could even say that **they committed themselves to initiating a revolution of mercy.**

In an interview given to the weekly Italian publication *Credere*, Pope Francis, with characteristic spontaneity, stated that in a world where we are becoming so accustomed to hearing bad news, the Church needs to be good news, helping us to discover a God who is a merciful Father. The Church itself, he said, can fall into the temptation of taking a hard line each time it highlights only moral norms. When it does this, it excludes many people.



There came to my mind the image of the Church as a field hospital after a battle; it's true, so many people are wounded and destroyed! The wounded are taken care of, helped and healed, not subjected to analyses for cholesterol. I believe this is the moment of mercy...

Whenever we refer to the Bible, mercy speaks to us of a more "emotive" God than the God we sometimes imagine...Discovering this can lead us to be more tolerant, more patient and more tender.

The revolution of tenderness is what we need to cultivate today as the fruit of this Year of Mercy: God's tenderness towards each one of us.

Isn't that what the promise of *Fourvière* was: a project about mercy and tenderness? The context was a Church that saw itself as a fortified city, and that saw believers as an army whose task was to win the ultimate battle against evil. This group of young men, taking their inspiration from Saint John-Francis Régis, known as the *father of the poor*, and from Saint Francis of Sales, the *saint of kindness*, dreamed of a new way of being Church, a Church with a Marian face.

'The Society must begin a new Church over again. I do not mean that in a literal sense, that would be blasphemy. But still, in a certain sense, yes, we must begin a new Church.'

Jean-Claude Colin

Fourvière, a Dream and a Promise

The promise signed by that group of 12 young men who made their way up to *Fourvière* on the 23rd July 1816 to offer themselves to Mary, was an expression of a dream that had been maturing over a number of years. Inspired by Jean-Claude Courveille, they shared their ideals in frequent conversations in which, according to Etienne Terrailon, one of their number, they mutually *encouraged one* another until they formulated a common dream:

*We the undersigned, striving to work together for the greater glory of God and the honour of Mary, Mother of the Lord Jesus, assert and declare our sincere intention and firm will of consecrating ourselves at the first opportunity to founding the pious congregation of **Marists**.*

*That is why by the present act and our signatures, in so far as we can, we irrevocably dedicate ourselves and all our goods to the **Society of the Blessed Virgin**.*

The dream those young men had consisted in creating a great community of life and mission: *the Society of Mary* or *Marists*. In reality, however, it was much more ambitious than that. In the words of Jean-Claude Colin: *The Marists will conquer the whole world: they will spread out everywhere... Our aim is to make the whole universe Marist.*

Man is a god when
he dreams, a beggar
when he thinks.
Hölderlin

Whenever I think of that group of young men so taken up with their dream of changing the world, it reminds me of mind similar moments during my initial formation, especially during my Novitiate and Scholasticate years. Those endless conversations with some of my companions, dreaming together, at times into the small hours of the night. I am sure that, as you read these lines, many of you too will recall similar experiences during your own youth. In the words of the poet Hölderlin, we sensed that **man is a god when he dreams, a beggar when he thinks.**

Was it a case of pipe dreams that life eventually 'gives the lie to'? In the text of the promise, the twelve young men of *Fourvière* recognised the need to underline that the commitment they were making was not made *lightly as children do, but seriously, after deep reflection, after taking counsel and pondering it all before God*. We can assume that these lines were written in response to the criticism of *prudent and reasonable* people, who shook their heads sceptically on hearing of the Marist project.

I listened, in my youth, to conversations between grown-up people through which there breathed a tone of sorrowful regret, which oppressed the heart. The speakers looked back at the idealism and capacity for enthusiasm of their youth as something precious to which they ought to have held fast, and yet at the same time they regarded it as almost a law of nature that no

one should be able to do so. This woke in me a dread of having ever, even once, to look back on my own past with such a feeling; I resolved never to let myself become subject to this tragic domination of mere reason, and what I thus vowed in almost boyish defiance I have tried to carry out.

Albert Schweitzer, Nobel Peace Prize, 1952

Today we recognise the authenticity of the *Fourvière* dream. Some of these young men did not *let themselves become subject to this tragic domination of mere reason*; they held onto their dream and their promise until death. As the title of Mike Dooley's book for children states, *Dreams Come True, All They Need Is You*.

Some of us have possibly lost our dreams along life's path, at the hands of so-called *realism*. But deep within us, we recognise that the great dreams and ideals of our youth filled us with enthusiasm and gave meaning to our lives. **When did we become 'dominated by reason'?**



Our own experience of life seems to tell us that **the dream of communion is written into each person's genetic make-up**. Dreams, which flower naturally in childhood, grow stronger in youth, and are consolidated – or extinguished – in adulthood. Some 53 years ago, when Martin Luther King gave his famous *I have a dream* speech, he succeeded in awakening dreams buried in the hearts of thousands of people all over the world. It was as if, suddenly, someone had managed to express, in a simple way, deep-seated desires that people had hitherto been

The dream of communion is written into each person's genetic make-up

unable to articulate. **In every human heart, there exists a spark of goodness, an enormous desire for unity and universal brotherhood.** Nelson Mandela, recalling his years in prison on Robben Island where he endured humiliation and misery, said:

"I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity... Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going..."

Fourvière is the symbol of the Marist dream. It connects us to our origins and helps us feel that we are in communion with other visionary projects that, like us, seek a world of peace and harmony. ...

We sense the challenge of finding and sharing a “mystique” of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage... (Evangelii Gaudium, 87).

Leonardo Boff asks, **“What is our dream?”** What shape would the dream of a globally re-connected civilization, that would include all of us, take? Boff recognises that this ancestral longing of humanity has been displaced by the type of culture that has predominated over recent centuries. The result for us has been a kind of mental lobotomy, which has left us disillusioned, blind to the wonders of nature, and insensitive to the reverence which the universe evokes in us:

Is the dream of the inclusion of all in the human family, living together in the one and only Common Home, the Earth; the dream of the great integration of all the cultures, ethnic groups, traditions, religious and spiritual paths in humanity’s common patrimony; the dream of a new covenant with all the other living beings of nature, feeling them, truly, as our brothers and sisters in the immense chain of life; the dream of an economy worthy and decent for everyone, including all living organisms; the dream of one caring for the other to finally exorcise fear; the dream of a dialogue of all with their own Depth, from where all the impulses to do good deeds, cooperation and love flow; the dream of a binding again of all with the original Source, from which all beings flow, giving us the welcoming feeling of a final Womb, when one day all of us fall in the arms of God Father-Mother of endless goodness and we all live forever, without end.

The world needs people capable of dreaming with their eyes open, people who can awaken the slumbering energy around them.

Fourvière encourages us never to abandon our deepest and most authentic dreams. The world needs people capable of dreaming with their eyes open, people who can awaken the slumbering energy around them. The poet Manuel Scorza Torres expresses this in a very striking way:

*It is enough for one Man to dream,
it is enough for one single man to become infected
with the pustule of delirium,
for a whole race to reek of butterflies!
It is enough for one person alone to whisper
that he has seen rainbows in the night
for even the mud to shine!*

God is community

Andrei Rublev, who lived in Russia at the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries, is considered the greatest painter of medieval icons and orthodox frescoes. The icon of the Trinity, reproduced opposite, was declared by a Council of the Russian Orthodox Church to be a model of iconography and of all possible depictions of the Trinity.

At first sight, the icon represents the visit of the three angels to Abraham and Sarah at the Oak of Mamre (Genesis 18: 1-15). The Fathers of the Church believed that these three mysterious persons prefigured the Trinity. That scene from the Old Testament opens up a whole field of theological symbolism, leading us to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Without going into too detailed an interpretation of the icon, I would like to highlight a number of aspects, which lead us into the **contemplation of God as community:**

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- The three persons have almost identical faces. In this way, the author expresses the equal dignity of each of the three beings. Each one is also wearing a blue-coloured piece of clothing. Blue, the colour of the sky, symbolises the divine nature that all three share.

- But each person has particular characteristics, which indicates to us who each one is: in the centre is the Son; to our left is the Father, and on the right is the Spirit. The gold of the thrones, the seat of divinity, speaks of the superabundance of Trinitarian life.

- The three persons form a circle, which we can perceive if we follow the external outline. But it would be more appropriate to speak of a circular *movement* among them, suggested by the way they are looking, by the placement of the hands and the inclination of the heads. One could say that they are having a silent conversation of looks and gestures. Everything seems to express an extraordinary communion among the three, a dynamic of love that carries the whole cosmos with it, expressed in the inclination of the mountain and the tree behind the three persons.

- In point of fact, this circle of Trinitarian communion is not a closed circle. If we look closely at the lower part of the icon, we will realise that, in contrast to the majority of paintings, this icon has a reverse perspective: instead of giving depth to the image, it seems to be coming out towards the viewer, towards you ... inviting you to be the fourth person in the scene.

The icon expresses in images what theologians, of both Eastern and Western Churches, have tried to explain for centuries using the language of each epoch. One Word used to refer to this profound **unity in diversity** of the three divine persons is the Greek word *perichoresis*, first used by John Damascene (8th Century).

According to theologian Denis Edwards, the idea behind that word is something like an **enveloping embrace, a mutually-loving presence**. The word *perichoresis* refers to a communion in which diversity and unity are not opposed, but are rather a condition for their mutual existence. In this type of union, the individual Person flourishes specifically through his communion with the other.

Taking up the analogy of *perichoresis* with a similar word meaning to dance around another person, some theologians reflect on the fact that the Trinitarian *perichoresis* evokes the beautiful image of the inner life of God as **a circular dance, in which the whole cosmos is invited to participate**. As we already have seen in the letter *Montagne; the Dance of Mission*, God does not show Godself to be a static being, but rather a fullness of love who constantly gives of self, overflowing into all of creation. The dance of life, then, is simply an extension of the divine dance of love and communion.

The icon of the Trinity, therefore, reveals to us that to be a person, divine or human, means to be **radically relational**, gifted with the capacity to go beyond oneself in love towards other persons. But this does not simply apply to human beings. All reality is ontologically relational and interdependent. The orthodox theologian J. Zizioulas explains it thus: *it is communion that gives 'being' to things; nothing can exist without it, not even God.*

A communion in which diversity and unity are not opposed, but are rather a condition for their mutual existence

*For Christians, believing in one God who is trinitarian communion suggests that the **Trinity has left its mark** on all creation...*

*The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a **web of relationships**. Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships.*

*This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfilment. **The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships**, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. **Everything is interconnected**, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.*

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* 239 and 240

And so, the human race is called to live what the three divine persons live: **the communion of difference.** Don Tonino Bello said that if we wish Christian communities to be generative and not sterile, Christian groups must become icons of the Trinity, *peripheral agents of the Trinity, who follow the interests of the "Company"*. He went on to say:

One of the most beautiful things that theology of recent years has brought to light is that the Holy Trinity is not only the principal mystery of our faith, it is also the greatest principle on which our moral code is built. That is: Trinitarian doctrine is not simply a doctrine that we contemplate; it is a code of ethics for us to live by. It is not simply a truth that nourishes our desire for the transcendent; it is a normative source for the daily choices we make.

The words we use to define the principal mystery of our faith are the very ones we use to define the greatest longing of the human heart. That is why we said earlier that the dream of communion is written into the genetic make-up of every person. The dream of humanity is a reflection of God's dream. God, who is community, dreams of a vast community that includes the whole of creation.



The Dream of Jesus: a New Human Community

Jesus feels strongly that what God wants is a society, which is both fraternal and egalitarian

Jesus carries in his heart **the divine dream of a society in which each person can develop fully as a son or daughter of God,** an experience which is in stark contrast to the social and religious reality of his time. His personal experience is of a God who is mercy and tenderness (this is why he calls God *Abba*, an aramaic term used by children to refer to their father, somewhat like *daddy*). Jesus feels strongly that what God wants is a society, which is both fraternal and egalitarian. He is angry with, and rebels against, a social system that is structurally unjust, and a certain type of religion which strengthens the injustice and distorts the image of God.

Using the language of his time, Jesus announced the nearness of *the reign* or *the kingdom of God* (Mt. 4:17). Both expressions describe a new reality, **the alternative**

human society; the first, the *reign of God*, looks at it from the point of view of God's action on the human person; the second, *the kingdom of God*, points to the result of that divine action, a society worthy of human beings.

The kingdom of God, then, represents the alternative to the unjust society: it proclaims hope of a new life, affirms the possibility of change, gives shape to the ideal. For this reason, it constitutes the best news that can be announced to humanity, and, from Jesus on, God's ongoing plan for humanity, to which he waits for a response. The fulfilment of that ideal is always a possibility.

The communitarian dimension is not just a "frame", an "outline", but an integral part of Christian life, of witness and of evangelization.

Pope Francis

But for Jesus this is not simply a utopian theory. That is why the first thing he does after announcing the nearness of *the kingdom of God*, is **to establish a community**, to gather a group of men, simple people, fishermen from Lake Galilee (Mt. 4:18-22). He does not call them to live for themselves, nor to dedicate themselves to virtue separated from the world; rather, he calls them to a mission, and he takes it upon himself to prepare them for this: it is about forming **a human group that makes visible and believable relationships in this new society.** Jesus does not form a closed group, then, but an open group which continues to grow, attracting new people to the new way of living he is going to teach to these first disciples. His community must become the seed of a new humanity.

The normal way of living Christian faith, then, is to do so in community. *The communitarian dimension is not just a "frame", an "outline", but an integral part of Christian life, of witness and of evangelization.* (Pope Francis, audience of 15-01-2014). In one of his tweets, Pope Francis expressed this even more succinctly:



Pope Francis ✓
@Pontifex

No one saves oneself. The community is essential.

The best way to demonstrate that Jesus' plan to transform the world and create a new human community was not just a pipe dream, is by means of a group – a Christian community – that shows that it is already possible to make the dream a reality: *See how they love one another.*

If we wish to follow Jesus, we are invited to do so in community. The Lord says to us, as he did to the first disciples: *Come, follow me* (Mark 1:17). More than a demand of our faith or a heavy burden, **it is a wonderful gift that is given to us** and one for which we should be extremely grateful.

It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship

of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living in common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace...

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

What, according to the gospels, are the **characteristics of the Christian community**?

Firstly, the foundation of the new human community is **adhering to Jesus as Messiah, the Son of the living God** (Mt. 16:16). Mark defines this adhesion to Jesus as *being with him* (Mk. 3:14), that is, adhering unconditionally to his person and programme. It implies taking on his values and his way of life. A metaphor used by the four evangelists to express this attachment and its consequence, action, is that of **following** (Mk 1:18; 2:14 par.). This does not simply consist in accepting a doctrine, a plan, a set of values, but in making one's own the inner life of Jesus, adopting his Spirit, and his very attitudes.

In addition, in the *Sermon on the Mount* (Mt. 5-8) and in other passages in the gospels (Mt. 18), Jesus highlights the values that make a **community blessed** because it is already making the *kingdom* or the new human community into a reality:

The foundation of the new human community is adhering to Jesus as Messiah, the Son of the living God

- *Poverty and detachment in place of wealth and accumulation.*
- *Forgiveness and reconciliation in place of hatred and vengeance.*
- *Self-giving as opposed to the interests of egoism.*
- *Quiet service in place of pretentiousness and control.*
- *Affective and effective solidarity as opposed to a concern for safety and domination.*
- *The quest for peace that rejects all forms of violence.*
- *Justice that eliminates oppression.*
- *The acceptance of persecution as against a life of comfort.*
- *Purity of heart that shies away from duplicity and unjust submission.*
- *Fraternity taking precedence over all forms of discrimination.*
- *Equality, against all dominance over brothers.*
- *A preference for the poor and the lost for the sake of the Kingdom.*
- *Man is above the sabbath.*
- *Love is the supreme law.*
- *Mercy is the most significant sign of closeness.*

José Luiz Pérez Álvarez

Another characteristic, which we saw in the letter for the *Montagne* year, is that **mission** is an essential part of the life of the Christian community, both individually and collectively. In that letter I said:

God is mission. Not that God has a mission, but that he is mission. And that is why we do not say that the Church or the Marist Institute has a mission, but rather that the mission has a Church, that the mission has the Marist Institute, that the mission has me and has you. The Church is its most authentic self when it realises that **its mission is God's mission: to walk in this world as salvation, as healing, and as the stimulating presence of God.**

Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (120) tells us that *every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus; we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that **we are always "missionary disciples"**.*

Marist Community, a Charismatic Family

We began this letter at the feet of the *Black Virgin of Fourvière*, calling to mind the dream and promise of the first Marists. We then took time to reflect on God's dream, given expression in Jesus, and for which he gave his life.

Let us return to *Fourvière*, led by the hand of Marcellin Champagnat. On the 24th July 1816, the day after he and his companions made the promise and placed it on the altar, Marcellin entrusted himself personally to Mary and consecrated himself to her: *Most Holy Virgin, I place my trust in you. To you, I offer, give and consecrate my work, my whole life and myself.*

Within the larger dream of the Society of Mary, Marcellin had his own dream: **We need brothers**, he would frequently repeat to his companions, who gave him the responsibility of carrying it out. As we know, barely five months after his consecration to Mary in *Fourvière*, he gathered together the first candidates, giving rise to the Little Brothers of Mary.

Champagnat's project was clearly a missionary one: *to make Jesus Christ known and loved* for the children and young people that no one cared for. That would be done through small **communities of brothers**. **From our very origins, then, fraternity has been an essential element.**



Father Champagnat formed the community of the first Brothers into a real family ⁽¹⁾. He shared their life at La Valla ⁽²⁾ and at the Hermitage, and he spent himself on their behalf. "You know," he told them, "that I live only for you, that every day I ask God to give you everything that is genuinely good for you, and that I would give anything, even at the cost of the greatest sacrifices, to procure that for you." ⁽³⁾

In their turn, the Brothers loved him as their father ⁽⁴⁾. Living with him, living close to our Good Mother, they grew steadily in the sense of brotherhood, of devotedness, and of self-renunciation in the service of one another.

Constitutions, 49

Moreover, the Constitutions remind us that the **very existence of the community is already an evangelising force**, through the witness of its members to brotherly love (58).

Exaggerating fraternity

*At the end of the journey,
they will say to me:
Have you lived? Have you loved?
And I, without saying a word,
will open my heart filled with names.*

Pedro Casaldàliga

In a Church which has become so clerical and where many assume that *the norm* is that religious men are ordained ministers, the vocation of the **religious brother** is difficult to understand. This, of course, is nothing new. There are many humorous anecdotes on this topic in the biographies of the first brothers.

Some months ago, after the publication of the Vatican document *The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*, I was invited to speak on Vatican Radio. While we were preparing for the interview offline, I realised that the journalist had no idea whatsoever that there were congregations of *only brothers*... If a journalist who works for Vatican Radio knows so little, imagine how little others in the Church must know!

Despite that, I believe that we are living through a moment **of rediscovery and revaluation of our vocation**, beginning with each one of us. Some years ago, it was common enough to hear that we religious brothers had an identity problem. This has always left me rather surprised, because I believe that our Constitutions are quite clear about our identity. Today, in my meetings with other Superiors General, I hear the same complaint, but from clerical Institutes where, according to them, many religious have become so caught up with parish ministry that they are at risk of losing their identity.

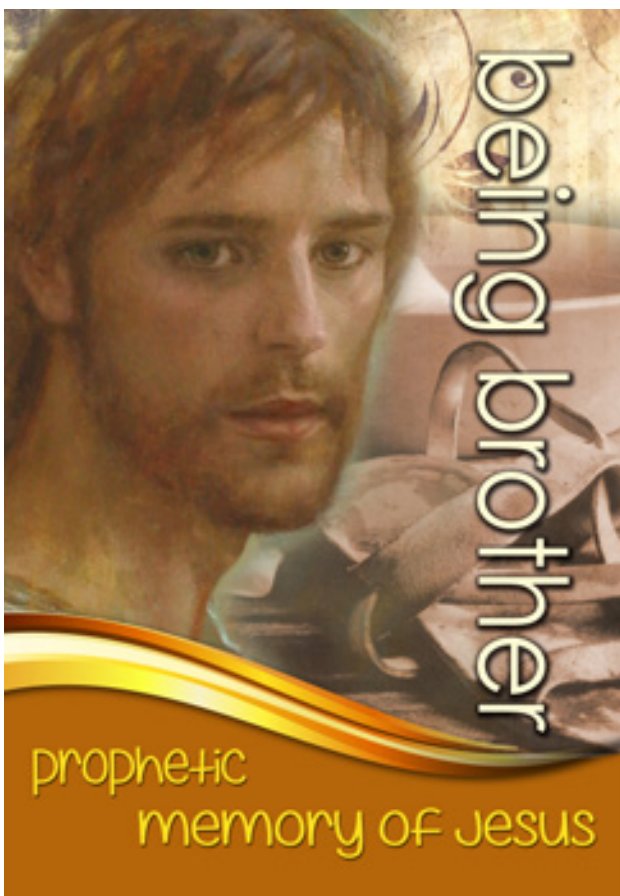
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In the interview to Vatican Radio I mentioned to earlier, I said that one of the distinctive tasks of brothers in the Church is to **exaggerate fraternity**. This caught the attention of the journalist, always on the lookout for a good headline, and I was asked if I could say more about the expression. Of course, I too wanted to catch the attention of the listeners with a good headline ... Essentially, **it is about recognising that community is at the heart of our life**, and that the experience of fraternity is one of the greatest gifts we can bring to the wider community of the Church and the world. The Vatican document recognises this when it speaks of the identity of the Brother and it does so under three sections in the central part of the document: *The Mystery: Brotherhood, the Gift We Receive; Communion: Brotherhood, the Gift We Share; Mission: Brotherhood, the Gift We Give Away.*

One of the distinctive tasks of brothers in the Church is to exaggerate fraternity

The fraternity of Religious Brothers is an encouragement for the whole Church, because it makes present the Gospel value of fraternal relationships of equality in the face of the temptation to dominate, to search for the best place or to exercise authority as power.

CICLSAL, The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church, 7



Community is a **gift** for us, but, it is also a **task**. This was expressed clearly at the *Marist International Colloquium on Initial Formation* at ND de l'Hermitage in October 2015. There, we referred to community as a distinctive *ecosystem*, essential to our life and growth. At that meeting, we underlined the call to be *weavers of fraternity*, as a way of expressing the need for an active commitment on our part towards the growth of community.

Perhaps one aspect which has led some to talk about a *crisis of identity* has been the **emergence, particularly over the last 30 to 40 years, of Marist laity**. Not so long ago, when speaking with a group of novices, I was asked about Marist laity. I shared with them the many positive experiences of thousands of Marist lay men and women all over the world, and how I envisioned the future. They then asked me: *In that case, if it's all so wonderful... what's the point of becoming a brother?*

Of course, the question is a perfectly valid one, and more so coming as it did from young—and not so young—people, from novices. In turn, I stressed the fact that we do not choose a vocation using a list of pros and cons. Rather, it is a **response to a call from the**

Lord. I feel that the Lord is calling me to live my Christian life either as a religious or as a lay person, and I respond to that call. And that's it!

Given a tradition stretching over more than 150 years that considered the brothers to be the only members of the Marist family, I suppose it is only normal for them to be surprised, often without knowing quite how to react, when faced with others who equally think of themselves to be members of the family.

The Marist laity is an extraordinary gift of the Spirit

I believe that today the vast majority of brothers understand in our minds – and, I hope, in our hearts too – that **the Marist laity is an extraordinary gift of the Spirit** to our religious family. What has helped us discover this has been the renewed theology of the Second Vatican Council, a theology in which we have recovered the idea of a *Church of communion*. Added to this, is *a providential crisis of vocations* among us (an expression I first heard used by the theologian García Paredes addressing nothing less than the Plenary of the Vatican Congregation for Consecrated Life!). And, of course, what has been of greatest help in this respect are the experiences of living with lay men and women who feel called to live out their vocation as Marists. The witness and quality of life of so many of them reveals the presence of the Spirit to us, and encourages us in our own vocation.

Speaking of the *providential crisis of vocations*, I remember being with Marists in Colombia during the celebration of 125 years of Marist presence there. We travelled to Popayán, where the first brothers had arrived, and visited one of those very large and very old Marist houses. It had six cloisters, having housed different stages of formation, an infirmary, the Provincial house, as well as a house for religious Sisters. By the end of the 1950's there were around 220 people living there. No doubt, many other Provinces in our Marist world could tell a similar story. **How could we have even considered laity in circumstances such as these?**

This does not mean, of course, that we do not have to do anything to promote vocations for future brothers. It is simply a question of humbly acknowledging that it is the Lord who calls, and that it is up to us to help provide the necessary conditions for people to hear that call and respond with generosity.

I am totally convinced that **the vocation to be a Marist Brother has as much meaning, and is as relevant today, as it was in the time of Fr. Champagnat.** I am equally convinced that the Holy Spirit is teaching us, through the historic circumstances we are living as a global Institute, to live our vocation today in ways that are different from the past. There are very strong signs of life pointing to our future, signs such as the vitality of our Marist mission, or the growing emergence of Marist laity. But we also need to learn from our own sins and mistakes.

Recently, I was in touch with a number of Provincials concerning complicated situations in their Provinces, principally due to poor economic management or cases of sexual abuse. At the time, I came across a book in Italian by a Benedictine monk called Michael Davide Semeraro. The title of the book has much to say about the contents: *Not Perfect, But Happy: Towards a Sustainable Prophetic Consecrated Life*. I would like to share with you one paragraph I found particularly inspiring:

There are very strong signs of life pointing to our future, signs such as the vitality of our Marist mission, or the growing emergence of Marist laity.

*Without in any way wishing to diminish the horror of the suffering people endured or caused, what if all the scandals and abuse were a sign that seeks to be embraced and discerned with **a humility that is so radical that it enables us to find our way back home... and to find that way together.** At times such as these, we are specifically called not to be part of life at the centre, but rather on the peripheries, not simply the geographical ones, but the existential peripheries, which are no less painful. From wounded hearts and minds, above all our own, we are called to begin again. We cannot and should not ever forget that only after healing ourselves of the illusion that we are healthy, will we be able to pour the oil of compassion and the wine of enthusiasm onto others.*

All this has quite important consequences. The first is to renounce being models of anything, so that we might learn to feel deeply that we are companions on the journey with nothing to teach, unless it is how to share from the very depths of the human condition, so dark and yet so full of light, in a way that leaves us more concerned about not causing scandal than about edifying.

A New Chapter in Our Marist History



Some years ago, at a meeting of new Provincials, one of the Provincials explained that a college in the Province would have to adapt to the new legislation, particularly in relation to security. This would involve huge renovation of a very large, old building. They had requested estimates from a number of firms. Eventually, they came to the conclusion that it would be cheaper to demolish the old building and construct a new one, rather than carry out all the renovation required.

That college was directly in front of a residence for elderly and infirm brothers in the Province. The Provincial told us he was visiting the community on the very day the old building was being demolished. Many of the brothers were standing at the windows watching as that old building, where many had spent a great part of their lives, was being pulled down. It was, the Provincial told us, **symbolic of an era that was passing, never to return.** That is what he spoke to them about.

Quite probably, a good number of brothers, especially those who are elderly, have lived through similar experiences, leaving them with a feeling that the world they have known up to the present is disappearing. This brings with it a sense of insecurity and fear, an inability to discern clearly between the old that is passing and the new that is unfolding.

In 1993, Bro. Charles Howard took a very bold and prophetic decision to invite, for the first time, a group of lay men and women to the General Chapter. I can still recall the emotion I felt the moment the doors of the Chapter Hall were solemnly opened, and the group of lay men and women was welcomed in, to a standing ovation, by the assembled Chapter. Those open doors are symbolic, in my opinion, of the opening of a new chapter in our Marist history.

Let us remember that in the General Chapter of 1985, mention was made in our Constitutions of the *Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family*, referring to it as *an extension of our Institute*. Some years later, in 1991, Bro. Charles published a Circular about the Movement. The General Chapter of 1993 was, therefore, the moment to take another step forward, and it did.

There was a very clear sense, then, that an important change was taking place both in the Church and in the Institute. In the words of Bro. Charles:

*We are at a very important moment in the history of the Church - a moment of rebirth, a return to the practice of the early Church when lay people played a full role in the mission of the Church. One of our most urgent calls now is to **promote that re-birth, with sensitivity, courage and vision**. If we do not do this then we will have diminished the Church of the future, the Church, the people of God, the body of Christ, that we all love.*

Circular: The Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family,
A Grace For Us All.

Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996), published after the Synod on the Consecrated Life, also spoke of a new period:

In recent years, one of the fruits of the teaching on the Church as communion has been the growing awareness that her members can and must unite their efforts, with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church's mission.

*Today, often as a result of new situations, many Institutes **have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity**. The laity are, therefore, invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes. We may say that, in the light of certain historical experiences such as those of the Secular or Third Orders, **a new chapter, rich in hope, has begun in the history of relations between consecrated persons and the laity.** (54)*

If in 1996 Pope John Paul II was speaking of the beginning of a new chapter in *relations between consecrated people and the laity*, the present Pope, some 20 years later, is now speaking about facts. We have moved from *the conviction that the charism can be shared with the laity* to a recognition that we form **the same charismatic family**. Clearly, significant advances have been made.

*In this letter, I wish to speak not only to consecrated persons, but also to **the laity, who share with them the same ideals, spirit and mission**. Some Religious Institutes have a long tradition in this regard, while the experience of others is more recent. Indeed, around each religious family, every Society of Apostolic Life and every Secular Institute, there is a larger family, a "charismatic family", which includes a number of Institutes, which identify with the same charism, and especially lay faithful who feel called, precisely as lay persons, to share in the same charismatic reality.*

Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis to All Consecrated People, III, 1

The recent document on the *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother* affirms that **Religious Brothers today often live their vocation integrated into charismatic families**, with the aim of reviving, together with others (lay men and women) the charism that has given rise to this family, to incarnate together the Gospel face that the charism reveals and to serve together in the same Church mission, which is no longer just the mission of a particular Institute (38).

We must acknowledge, with gratitude, how far we have come as an Institute in this area. I believe that, at a global level, some important factors are: lay participation in the General Chapters since 1993; the Marist International Mission Assemblies of 2007 and 2014; the publication of *Gathered Around the Same Table* (2009), which has become a very important reference document for all of us. For its part, the Secretariat for Laity too has encouraged reflection, and has accompanied a variety of initiatives in different parts of our Marist world.

While it is true that this development has not been uniform, given the differing historical, social and ecclesial circumstances in each of our Marist regions, when we look back, it is clear that, overall, there has been considerable development.

One of the aspects that has characterised this journey in communion is that brothers and lay people have done so *together*. A number of years ago, I participated in a Province gathering of brothers and lay people to explore how to promote the growth and organisation of the laity: the brothers, cautious not to impose anything, insisted on lay autonomy; the lay people, for their part, stated that they could not imagine journeying alone, and that the call they felt was for brothers and lay people to journey *together*. I believe this is what we are gradually beginning to understand as a call of the Spirit.

One of the aspects that has characterised this journey in communion is that brothers and lay people have done so together.

What, then, is expected of the brothers in this new ecclesial context?

First and foremost, **that we live intensely our own religious vocation as a call to be prophetic**. The present Pope has introduced this new concept of prophecy, causing us to re-think our way of understanding consecrated life. Moreover, the Assembly of Superiors General at the end of May 2016 took as its topic for study, **the radical nature of prophecy**.

I am counting on you "to wake up the world", since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. As I told the Superiors General: "Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way." This is the priority that is needed right now: "to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth... a religious must never abandon prophecy"

Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis to All Consecrated People, II, 2

It is not about a prophecy of putting oneself forward as a model of something in the Church. It is more about emphasising **the prophetic nature of smallness and weakness**, as witnesses to the mercy of God. Prophecy- according to Bro. Michael Davide Semeraro- *is the capacity to encompass death, failure, non-visibility, marginalisation and to make it a permanent option for life.*

If we ask those around who know and love us, the majority will certainly tell us what they expect of us - that we be exactly what we are called to be: brothers. That's all. They expect us to be prophets, humbly struggling to be coherent with what we promised to be, even although we may not always live up to that. Essentially this is what we need to offer, which, clearly, goes way beyond being good administrators or excellent educators.

If we ask those around who know and love us, the majority will certainly tell us what they expect of us - that we be exactly what we are called to be: brothers.

We take the initiative, in all simplicity, to go out to encounter lay men and women so that we may be mutually enriched

In the context of a charismatic family, on the other hand, *the Brother becomes aware of the wealth contained in his own foundational charism, and he shares it with other lay believers who could live it from other ways of life. He accepts being an instrument of the Holy Spirit in the transmission of the charism and takes responsibility for being **a living memory of the founder*** (The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother, 10). For this reason, we take the initiative, in all simplicity, to go out to encounter lay men and women so that we may be mutually enriched.

Pope Francis, somewhat provocatively, reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium* (102) that *lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority – ordained ministers – are at their service.* Why does the Pope remind us of something so obvious? Specifically to combat clericalism, which subverts the terms, placing the laity at the service of the ordained ministers, or at the mercy of their whims. I believe it is good to remind ourselves of it here, in case we brothers have the temptation at times towards a certain clericalism: we are called to serve the vast majority of the People of God, promoting their vocation and encouraging them to take up their responsibility in Marist mission.

The current review process of the Constitutions, in which so many brothers are participating, offers an excellent opportunity to assess and express how this new charismatic family affects our own identity within the Church.

Finally, it is worth noting not only what is expected of the brother, but also how much he has to gain:

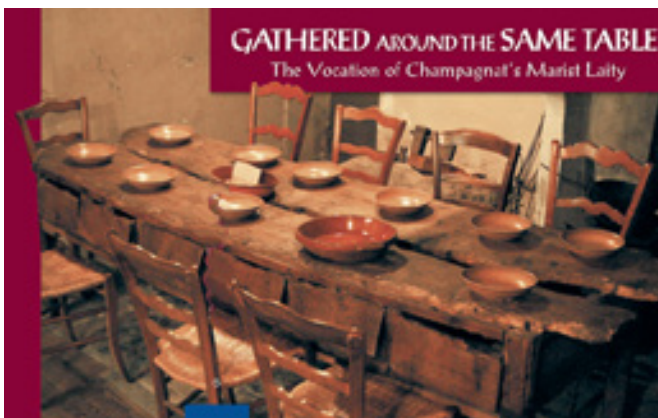
The Religious Brother finds in his charismatic family an **environment conducive to the development of his identity**. In such an environment, the Brothers share the experience of communion and promote a spirituality of communion, being the true blood which gives life to the family members and which extends to the whole Church from them. In the charismatic family, Religious Brothers place themselves together with other Christians and in accord with them. It is **with them** that the Brothers build a fraternity for the mission, motivated by the foundational charism; **for them** they are signs of that same brotherhood that they are called to live in consecrated life.

The Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother, 38

What is expected of lay men and women?

The following of Jesus –himself a lay person, as were his parents, Mary and Joseph- is what distinguishes those of us who call ourselves Christians. A following, as we have already seen, that takes place **in community**.

To speak of a *charismatic family* allows us to include a wide variety of situations, just as in any family. There, people are not expected to be carbon copies of a blueprint, but are expected to be themselves, holding onto, of course, those fundamental links that bind them to other members of the family.



The world of the laity relates with what is Marist through a **variety of expressions**. Many people come into contact, in different ways, with the life and mission of the Marist Brothers. Students, educators, catechists, administrative and service personnel, former students, parents and friends, all know the Brothers and have heard of their charism.

Gathered Around the Same Table, 8

As we know, the document *Gathered Around the Same Table* was prepared by a group of lay men and women and brothers. At its base, however, it gathers together a large number of personal testimonies from lay people. From those shared experiences of life, the authors of the document have identified three principal groups:

Those who have an **identity distinct from Marist**: some of them, because they have made different life choices from the Christian one; others, because they have already found their own place in the Church. We welcome and respect these different choices and paths; we share with all of them certain human and Christian values, we work together in building a better world, and we thank to God for everything we receive from other people.

Other lay people have felt attracted by the witness of the Brothers: they admire their life and **wish to be associated in some way** with their spirituality or mission, without thinking of this as a shared vocation. It is possible that some have not sufficiently reflected on the significance of this association, and need space and accompaniment to help them discover what God wants of them.

*There is a third group of people who, after a personal journey of discernment, **have decided to live their Christian spirituality and mission in the way of Mary, following the insight of Marcellin Champagnat.** This is us, lay Marists.*

The beauty of staying with the image of the family is that everyone has a place; no one need feel excluded. Each person responds according to their particular circumstances. There is no best or worst, no special status; nor is there any sense of anyone having more or less dignity. They are simply different ways of living and expressing faith.

In his Circular on *The Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family* (1991), Bro. Charles Howard dedicated a section to the role of *women in the Church*. In it, he affirmed that *Full involvement of women in the mission of the Church in all its dimensions "including decision-making" is one of the most important tasks facing the Church*. Unfortunately, it would seem that the Church has made little progress in this regard since that time, a fact that Pope Francis has publicly acknowledged on a number of occasions. Our day-to-day experience of working closely with women, who are, after all, in the majority in our institutions, leads us to an awareness of the richness of their unique contribution to Marist mission. This must surely give us a greater sense of commitment to standing with them, and promoting their role and a more equal treatment in the Church and in society.

There are among us different experiences of belonging among us, beginning with the *Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family*, in operation now for over 30 years. Whatever the form we adopt, I believe that it is important to stress **the call to Christian community**, as described in the preceding pages. It seems to me that the present times are calling for **vibrant Marist Christian communities, committed to social transformation**, rather than groups of pious advocates of our Marist work.

Some of these groups are completely lay in nature; others include brothers, or perhaps other religious or priests. We also have a number of 'communities of life', consisting of brothers and lay men and women living in the same house; in addition to those that are already present in a number of Provinces, I would like to highlight the community of welcome of Notre Dame de L'Hermitage, the communities in the Marist District of Asia, as well as the launching of the **La Valla 200> project**.

In my letter for the Montagne year, I sent out an invitation to participate in this latter Project. I wish to express my gratitude for the impressive response: more than 90 persons (brothers, lay men and women) expressed their availability to participate in these communities. At the present time, a first international group of 13 brothers and 8 lay men and women is being prepared. I would like you to know that the possibility of offering yourself for these communities remains open. You can do this by contacting your Provincial.

Within the variety of forms of association, a good number of people have shown their willingness to express in concrete and public ways their connection to the Marist charism or to the Institute. In fact, in a number Provinces, people are making promises, or other forms of commitment, such as was encouraged by the last General Chapter.

The General Council listened carefully to Province representatives about this

Our day-to-day experience of working closely with women, who are, after all, in the majority in our institutions, leads us to an awareness of the richness of their unique contribution to Marist mission.

issue, and, in 2014, established a process for drawing up **a global framework that will help define a Marist vocational process for lay men and women.** The overall aim is to provide common criteria both for helping to deepen vocational discernment, as well as for lay association and belonging to the charism and/or the Institute. An international commission is currently working on this, in consultation with a good number of people around the world. They hope to present the results of their work to the next General Chapter in 2017.

An ancient legend has it that human beings are angels with only one wing: in order to fly, each person needs to embrace another. We need one another, because **the Spirit is not in the I but between I and You** (Martin Buber).

We are called to become icons of the Trinity, where, as we have already seen, diversity and unity are not opposed, but are rather a condition for its very existence. There is a real need for our societies to see that unity in diversity is possible, and that it is a source of joy and personal enrichment.

To paraphrase Marguerite Yourcenar, who in *Memoirs of Hadrian* speaks about the importance of founding libraries, we might say of creating communities, to be persons of communion is *like constructing more public granaries, amassing reserves against a spiritual winter which by certain signs, in spite of myself, I see ahead...*"

Each person
needs to
embrace
another

Between the flood and the rainbow

Mgr. Tonino Bello said that we stand somewhere between the flood and the rainbow. The flood, representing the situation of injustice in our world, expressed through violence, racism, segregation ... and the rainbow, which according to the story of Noah in the Bible, represents the covenant with God and the promise of an end to all floods.

The signs of the flood are, sadly, far too many; we only have to turn on the television or open the newspaper. Faced with these signs, we can curse our luck, look for people to blame, or perhaps even sink into depression. But we can also do something **to increase the signs of the rainbow.** And, thank God, these are equally many, even although they may not be broadcast or make headlines in the newspapers. God's dream, the dream of Jesus, the dream of Fourvière is the dream of **a new human community** reconciled at last. It is my dream too; and, I am sure, yours.

*We don't have to see our dreams come true
(perhaps not all of them, and right away!),
It's enough that we don't, foolishly,
extinguish them:
should they come true right away,
you will, in fact,
lose the only, bittersweet delight in life.*

Davide Maria Montagna

Since the resurrection of Jesus, we know that evil does not have the last word. We believe in the strength of the seed and in the power of love, however weak they may seem. We believe, as Jesus did, in the **transforming power of small communities.**

Like the apostles, gathered with Mary on the day of Pentecost, we find ourselves between the flood and the rainbow. Weighed down and sad because we do not always like the world we live in, and because at times we have the impression that the Lord is absent from this world. **But, in the power of the Spirit, we leap into the unknown.** And in the midst of the most desperate situations, we manage to glimpse signs of the rainbow.

The Pentecost story in the Acts of the Apostles tells us that what looked like small tongues of fire came to rest on the members of that community, symbolising the Spirit which filled them. It also tells us that everyone was able to understand them because they spoke a language which required no translation: the language of love.

According to an ancient *midrash*, each person comes into the world with a small flame burning on their brow. Each time one person meets another, the two flames merge, and each person walks away from the encounter more alive and glowing. When a person, however, encounters few people, the small flame splutters and fades. And if a person no longer encounters the other, that flame gradually goes out.

Can you not see the many signs of the rainbow already around you? And, what are you going to do with your little flame? **Can we count on you to help bring about this wonderful revolution of tenderness?**



As I come to the end of this letter, I would like to invite you, brother or lay person, and in a very personal way, to ask yourself seriously within the context of the charismatic family we form: In what way are you contributing to *a new Marist beginning*? I believe that this could be a wonderful opportunity to evaluate in a very real way your attitudes and behaviour in this area, and, at the same time, to make a commitment to going beyond your comfort zone. To dare to leave the security of your nest and allow yourself to be surprised by the newness of the Spirit.

The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us? When we begin to take the lowest place, to wash the feet of others, to love our brothers with that burning love, that passion, which led to the cross, then we can truly say, 'Now I have begun.'"

Dorothy Day

Like those first Marists, we can draw inspiration from the *early Church* to follow Jesus in community. They were convinced that Mary, who was a support for the early Church, will be a support for us too in these present times. As Marists of the 21st century, happy to bear her name, we entrust ourselves to her tender care.

Mary,

*first disciple of the Lord,
we thank you for the group of priests,*

*Champagnat and Colin among them,
who consecrated themselves to you
in Fourvière 200 years ago,
committing themselves to renew the Church,
inspired by you and under your protection.*

*Thank you for the Marist Family,
at present extending to all parts of the world,
heir of that dream of the first Marists.
It desires, today like yesterday,
to place itself at the service of our brothers and sisters,
especially those who live
in situations of greater vulnerability.*

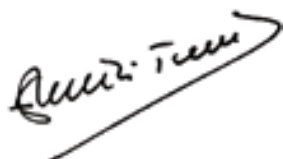
*Thank you in a special way,
for the Charism received
through Marcellin Champagnat,
who, on so many occasions, travelled to Fourvière
to entrust his projects to you
and abandon himself into your hands.*

*Aware that
You always do everything among us,
we thank you for so many generations
of Marist Brothers who, on the five continents,
gave their lives
to the evangelization of children and young people.
Thank you for the growth of the Marist Laity,
women and men called by the Holy Spirit
to live their Christian vocation as Marists,
in communion with the Brothers,
and sharing one same mission.*

*All of us,
Marists of Champagnat,
entrust ourselves to you, our good Mother of Fourvière,
pilgrim of faith.
With daring and generosity,
may we be signs of your tenderness and mercy
among the Montagne of today,
and may we be faithful to our mission
to make Jesus Christ known and loved.*

Amen.

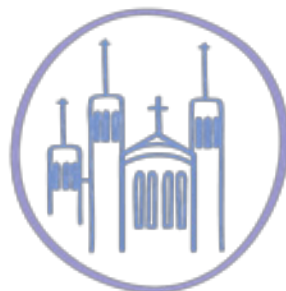
Fraternally,



Mary, who was a support for the early Church, will be a support for us too in these present times.



marists **2017**
a new beginning



2015|2016
Fourvière