

## Selecting a Council for the Marist Association of Saint Marcellin

SOME POINTERS FROM OUR MARIAN INTUITIONS AND OUR MARIST EXPERIENCE

---

The question of whom to choose to be the Councillors of the Marist Association prompts consideration of the nature and function of the Council itself, both from the perspective of its Marian identity, and also from its emerging in and from the lived experience of Marists. Such consideration quickly leads to a realisation that the shaping of this Council, while it may be usefully informed by the considerable body of research and practice concerning boards of governance and management, and concerning leadership of NGOs and not-for-profit entities, should not be solely or even principally influenced by that. The Council of the Marist Association is to be different. It will be different because of its several concomitant functions, because of its being from and of its stakeholders, and because of its Marian context. The Council will be at once an advisory committee to the Leader of the Association, a leadership group for an ecclesial community as it shapes its distinctive way of Christian discipleship and brings its own characteristic approach to sharing in God's mission in the Church, a governing body and the trustees in civil law for an extensive set of institutions and works, and, most significantly, a group of Marists. Each of these functions will impinge on the others. The Council will have both canonical and civil responsibilities, and others that pertain to its own Association as it guides its life and oversees its ministries. Can it be reasonably expected to do all this? Certainly; our experience with Provincial Councils of the past affirms that. For it to happen, however, it will be necessary to have clarity around the different responsibilities of the Council, a preferred *modus operandi* for it, and the qualities that Councillors would ideally bring to their places at the table.

### A Marian identity

A defining feature of any Marist ecclesial community is that it draws identity from Mary. In the words of *Water from the Rock*, Marists share in Mary's work of bringing Christ-life to birth and nurturing its growth. But more: they try to do this in Mary's way. In so doing, they aspire to live out the Marian principle of the Church – its fundamental principle, as they see it – where authority in the Church emanates primarily from the authenticity of discipleship.



It is most telling that the Association has chosen an icon of the Ascension as its *leitmotif*. In this icon of the Church, Mary is centred on the Risen Christ, and it is because of this that she can take her place at the centre of the Apostles. The horizontal axis of the icon has her at the heart of the Apostles, and the vertical axis has her aligned with Jesus Christ as First Disciple. She is both Christocentric and apostolic; Disciple and

Apostle. There is no hierarchy among the Apostles in the icon. The Petrine dimension of the Church's reality is personified in Peter at her right, and the apostolic Pauline at her left. The more mystical Johannine is on her far left, and the Jacobean is captured with James's holding the Scriptures. Mary gathers all of this, unifies it, not in a hierarchical way, but one that is quite flat. The key things are Christian *discipleship*, *Christian community*, and *God incarnate* as heaven has come to earth and earth has gone to heaven.

What are the implications of this ecclesiology for the leadership group of a Marist ecclesial community? Essentially, that (a) it needs to be constituted by Christ-centred disciples who understand themselves as Marian leaders, and (b) that they gather and work in ways that are not dominated by lines of top-down or bottom-up accountability, not using hierarchical authority as a reference point but their relationship with one another and with Christ. It is a community of charismatic giftedness that they coalesce around them, where what matters above all else in Christ and his Gospel. Position and role are subordinate to this.

### **Marist intuitions about being Marian**

The second set of implications for leadership comes from the Marist interpretation of Mary's way. To do "Mary's work" as the Marist founders called it, yes, but to do it in Mary's way. This is the fullness of what is understood by a Marist as "being Mary". It is not just Mary's function as *Theokotos* (God-bearer) but also her characteristic style as mother and as sister. A good mother nurtures growth, is grounded but resilient, is protective without being possessive, is merciful and forgiving; a good mother loves. A faithful sister stands in solidarity, is ready to go out to bring hope and sustenance, to work in and through relationship, is close; a good sister loves.

### **A Council of and for the Association**

Third, the Council of the Association is made up of Marists. This is key. It is not a board of third-party or fellow-traveller directors that is appointed by the Association's members to act expertly on their behalf, such as might be the case for CARE Australia or the Red Cross, or a Catholic health agency. The Council is chosen wholly and exclusively from among the members themselves. It is of them and for them. A central aspect of its remit is to lead the spiritual and apostolic life of the Association, to be a leadership group for Marist life in Australia, and then from the vitality of that life to guide and oversee its way of sharing in God's mission in the Church. So, importantly, this is a group whose members would understand themselves to be engaged members of the Church. Their language would be always the language of "we" and "our" rather than "them" and "their" when they are speaking about the Marists in particular, and the Catholic Church more generally. There are other boards, councils and commissions that provide the Council, and its individual ministries and agencies, with expert advice and, in some cases, a formal fiduciary responsibility. For example, there is the Board of Marist Youth Care, that of Australian Marist Solidarity, the three Regional Councils of Marist Schools Australia, the Finance Commission.

It is this point which suggests the biggest difference for the Marist Council from the conventional wisdom that informs many of the governance-and-management principles and practices of not-for-profit organisations. One influential writer in this field has been John Carver; the Carver model of governance and management, or variations on it, has provided a strong element of the conceptual basis for the arrangements in many organisations, including Catholic agencies, public juridic persons (PJPs), and dioceses. This has been the case when the main focus has been on governance and/or stewardship of works. For the Council of the Marist Association, however, there is an additional and prior responsibility: the leadership of the Association. Canonically, the Association is an "aggregation of people", not an "aggregation of things". That is to say, its primary *raison d'être* does not come from its works but from its people. It is, in this regard, much closer in concept to a religious order than a typical not-for-profit organisation. It would be well advised, therefore, to study the methods of leadership of religious orders have found to serve them well over the centuries to see how they may suit the Marist Association.

### **The Marist Brothers' experience of leadership and governance**

A ready and helpful source of reference for the Marist Association is, of course, the Marist Brothers – given both the Institute's two-century experience as a religious institute and also its Marian/Marist intuitions. The Marist Institute, like the Marist Association, is an ecclesial community. Like the Association it has both canonical and civil identity and structure. Like the Association its Province-level leadership group (the

Provincial Council) has been chosen exclusively from the membership, and has several simultaneous responsibilities as advisers to the Provincial, as leaders of life and mission, and as civil trustees and members of corporate entities. Let us consider some typical characteristics of a Provincial Council, at least in the Australian experience:

- Councillors are chosen by their confreres first for their authenticity as Marist Brothers.
- There is a concern that they be people of pastoral sensitivity and wisdom.
- The range of expertise required is weighed in, knowing that they will be advising on the lives and welfare of people, on matters to do with formation, on strategic planning and vision, and on overseeing a complex and large enterprise worth hundreds of millions of dollars
- Although no-one is has a place *ex officio*, other than the Provincial, usually there is a mix of Brothers who have full-time executive responsibility for the life and mission of the Province and others who have other full-time ministry not at Province level (e.g. school principals; other ministries). This mix of people who, on the one hand, can bring up-to-date knowledge of Province matters and be charged with executing decisions of Council, while on the other hand, come from the perspective local communities and ministries, has been helpful. This differs from the commonly accepted principle used in many not-for-profit groups which precludes both people in management and people who work within the organisation at the local level to be on a board of governance.
- Often there is an eye both to carry-over knowledge and to succession planning, so that each new Council has some ongoing members who have the corporate memory and one or two younger members who will be leaders in the future. Another aspect of this turnover of Councillors (and Provincials) is that people lead for a time and then take on another role according to the needs of the group; there is no sense of personal entitlement to status such as reflected in the term “emeritus” once someone has moved out of leadership.

The Council works with the help of special-interest and expert advisory committees and councils.

#### **Some key criteria**

From the above discussion, several criteria suggest themselves for the selection of Councillors for the Marist Association:

- The first criterion is that all Councillors would be Marists – people for whom Marist spirituality and the Marist way of evangelising are quite significant in their living out of their Baptismal call in the Church. It is hoped that this would be guaranteed adequately by their formal membership of the Association.
- There is advantage in having a mix of experience and wisdom among the Marists on the Council: some who have a pastoral background; some who have successful experience of leadership of ministries and institutions; people from a range of ministries; some known for their ideas and vision; some known for their practical expertise and learned prudence; some who carry the story and have accumulated longitudinal knowledge of Marist works; at least one or two possible future leaders.
- There is merit in including some Marists who have full-time appointments at the level of the Association and/or the Province, and others who are involved in Marist life and mission in other ways.

*Michael Green FMS*