

Marist Spirituality in the Context of Leadership Today

Charles Howard FMS

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One of my favourite Gospel scenes has always been Jesus' return to Nazareth and his reading in the Synagogue. You remember the context in Luke's account - Jesus was at prayer after being baptised and the Holy Spirit descended on him and a voice came from Heaven: "This is my beloved Son". Then he was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days - days of prayer, reflection, fasting and temptation. Then "with the power of the Spirit in him" he returned to Galilee, teaching in the synagogues. Then he came to Nazareth "where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read, and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written:

The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.

He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them: "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen."

This always moves me. Originally I think that it was because it was so dramatic, it had a certain 'High Noon' drama to it - Jesus taking his stand, declaring his mission and knowing that inevitably this would pit him against the powers in the land. And, as we know, it was only a short time after this scene in the synagogue that he was hustled out of town with a view to throwing him down a cliff!

A very powerful scene. Sometimes I would imagine the scene in the synagogue and observe it all - Jesus taking the scroll, the eyes of everyone on him and then his dramatic words announcing the beginning of his mission. But I was an observer and only later realised that Jesus was also looking at me and, with his eyes, he was asking the question: "Are you with me in my mission?"

One of the reasons why my response has not always been wholehearted is that I was missing something critically important which we talked about yesterday. "Are you with me in my mission?" The words "with me" are fundamentally important. It is Jesus' mission and he is always there through the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This is so fundamental for us all. We are not alone and we can do all things in Him who strengthens us.

Four of our Brothers were murdered in the Congo in 1996. I knew them all. They were generous, hardworking, friendly, good men and they would have smiled at the idea of being heroes. They volunteered to work in a refugee camp of about thirty thousand people who had fled from Rwanda after the genocide. There was a Red Cross presence in the camp also, but the real power in the camp rested with the thugs with the guns, remnants of those who had perpetrated the killings in Rwanda. Eventually, the Brothers were to die at the hands of these men and it is a very powerful, ugly, beautiful story but this is not the time for all the detail. One of these Brothers was Br Miguel Angel Ilsa, a Spaniard who had worked in the Ivory Coast for many years before responding to the appeal for volunteers to work in this refugee camp. Some years before he had written to another Brother after a retreat and I would like to read an extract for you.

"Christ has risen and is alive in you and in me, and has pledged to build up love in us and for us, and I am witness to what he is doing progressively and surely! I would like to shout out this joyful reality so that you could shout it out with me, in order to share with me in this living and active presence of Christ in us.

I become ill just thinking that I can progressively kill this presence in my life, this action which is God working in me today. I am horrified at the thought of becoming blasé about this commitment."

Yet, for all of us, it is so easy to become rather blasé about the Lord's presence in our lives. We talked about this yesterday and I come back to it because I think it is fundamental to our topic this morning, fundamental to our lives, to our vocations as Christian educators, and obviously, our vocation as parents, spouses, single people, religious, priests.

In speaking of the vocation of all Christians, Pope John Paul said a couple of years ago: "*... the Holy Spirit of God writes in the heart and life of every baptised person, a project of love and grace, which is the only way to give full meaning to existence ... and enabling the offering of one's personal and irreplaceable contribution to the progress of humanity on the path of justice and truth ... all men and women have their own place in God's heart and in the history of humanity.*"

It seems to me that many people have always had a sense of this. How could a parent not have it? Likewise, I believe that there is a special sense of vocation in the hearts of most teachers and school administrators as they follow what is a noble profession. Obviously, you are not doing it just for the money! Surely all of us here believe that, despite all the difficulties in our society today, you can make a difference in the lives of those young people to whom you commit yourself. But it is not an easy profession - it has probably never been more complex. All the more reason to be conscious of, and grateful for, the presence of the Holy Spirit in ourselves, our staff, and our students.

Our topic this morning is "**Marist Spirituality in the Context of Leadership Today**". There is a sense in which I am ill at ease with this talk which, by its very nature, has to be challenging. I am sure many of you feel that you have enough challenges already! But I hope that you will be encouraged also.

Let me now make some introductory remarks.

Spirituality

Our spirituality embraces all that we are, all the elements that go to make up our living - our joys and our sorrows, our dreams and our moods, our struggles and our failures - everything. It obviously includes our relationships with God, with others - including our students, with ourselves, and with creation.

The ultimate source of our spirituality is God, but its formative agents are our parents and family, our friends, our teachers, and a multitude of other influences.

In an earlier time it was often assumed that the "church" had the answers when it came to spirituality. Now, we all know better! I have found great depths of spirituality with some Brothers and, although they may not have used the same vocabulary, I have found great depths of spirituality with some lay people. The Church would be enriched enormously if, at all levels, from Rome to Canberra, there was significant sharing and reflection together on spirituality and on Gospel living among all members of the Church - bishops, parents, teachers, priests, farmers, religious ... everyone. There is progress but, as usual, slow progress.

There are many reasons why I stress this but one is the fact that much that is spoken about spirituality today still ignores the messiness of life of many of us - the family responsibilities, the irregular hours, conflicting demands on time, and so on. You all know what I am talking about.

Leadership

Patrick Palmer, author of "*Leading From Within: Reflections on Leadership and Spirituality*", stresses the need for leaders to be willing to make the journey into the inner life. He suggests that if leaders are not aware of their own weaknesses and fears, much of their attempts to lead will be a projection of these fears in order to maintain their own positions or to secure a way of operating with which they feel safe. Leadership then becomes authoritative and stifling rather than freeing and creative. Risk and innovation are avoided because of the fear of failure. (Taken from "*Lost Soul?*" by Daniel O'Leary)

Marist Tradition

I start with the assumption that most, if not all here, are Christians and are heirs, in some way, to a special Marist tradition coming from those young priests mounting the hill of Fourvière to make their pledge. The full richness of their vision, their dream, has only become clear to us in recent decades thanks, in particular, to the very important research of our historians - priests, sisters, brothers and lay people but, particularly, the work of the Marist Fathers.

Creative Fidelity

Although this is not the time for us to become immersed in a discussion of Marian theology over the centuries, nevertheless, I believe that it is necessary to say a few words on recent developments, because fidelity to the dream of these young men at Fourvière and the gradual unfolding of that dream require us to be creative in our fidelity to this vision, creative in the sense of being aware of new historical and cultural circumstances, and of new theological and scriptural understandings.

All of us are aware that the Second Vatican Council came with new insights and attitudes, some of which had been developing for many years. These were exposed more fully, debated, discerned, and confirmed or left aside for further study. The Council was quite an extraordinary period of continuing education and formation for those who attended it and for all of us in different ways. It posed an enormous challenge for the Catholic Church, a challenge that we are still struggling with in many respects. The Council was also seen as a significant step in the whole ecumenical journey.

Initially, Mary proved to be quite a problem for the Council Fathers! There were those who strongly urged a separate document on Mary but the majority vote was for integrating the doctrine on Mary as a chapter in the document on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*). Since the Council there has been continuing thoughtful reflection on Mary and her role by leaders and theologians, special letters by Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, and continuing study in the Catholic Church and also by theologians from other Christian traditions, some of whom recognised that there had been a tendency to neglect Mary and her role.

All this is by way of saying that there have been theological and scriptural advances in our understanding of Mary and her life which were not current in the time of Jean-Claude Colin, Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn and Marcellin Champagnat and the early Marists. In fact, most of these fruits of scholarship and discernment would not be readily available until almost a century later. So the spirituality we inherited from them and their successors has been enriched by the Church's development in her understanding of Mary and her role. Fidelity to their vision demands that we build on the foundations they gave us, and that we be creative in our fidelity.

The founders all wished their followers to live Mary's spirit and to be imbued with her attitudes in our following of Jesus. So, what does Mary have to say to us as leaders, what can we learn from her life, from her spirituality? I shall confine myself to six main reflections, very basic to Mary's spirituality, all of which, I believe, have relevance in the context of leadership today.

Mary the favoured one

Essential to Mary's spirituality is the conviction of being loved by God. This is proclaimed powerfully with the words Luke uses: *"Hail, O favoured one. The Lord is with you ... Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God."*

We all have our favourite phrases and texts that touch us deeply, words that echo in our hearts. Two of mine come from French hymns. One line reads: *"Who is this God that loves us so much?"* And the other: *"The only offering we can make is to be open to your love."*

There is a wealth of wisdom in these two sentences and they bring us back to the heart of Mary's spirituality - the knowledge, the understanding, the wonder of being loved by God. We endeavour to imitate Mary in being open to God in His love, to His presence and transforming power in our own lives and in the lives of all men and women, and this obviously includes the young people committed to our care.

This is one of the great challenges of life - to recognise and accept the free gift of God's love in our own lives and in the lives of others. I suspect that there are times when most of us wonder whether this love of God is real. We can probably accept the general statement - "God loves us all", more readily than the personal statement - "God loves me". The temptation to think that we have to make ourselves worthy of such a love is very strong. The origin of this may be rooted in many sources - negative attitudes to God, lack of self-esteem because of the attitude of a teacher or parent perhaps, awareness of our own sinfulness, and so on.

We can experience God and relate to this loving God in and through all our relationships. We can be aware of a loving God in a new born child, in the love of a spouse, in the compassionate words of a Governor-General, in the grieving parents of a dying child and, please God, in the rebellious teenager sent to our office with a note from an indignant teacher. That's when you need the fella!

In his excellent book: "Lost Soul? The Catholic Church Today", Father Daniel O'Leary says: "True leadership is love in action. When you lead by loving, your every gesture, word and decision will help to create a new world."

Raimond Gaita, lecturer in Philosophy at the Australian Catholic University, and author of the prize-winning "Romulus, My Father" tells a very powerful story in his book "A Common Humanity". It illustrates the power of love very well. At the age of 17 in the early 1960's he worked as a ward-assistant in a psychiatric hospital. Some of the patients had been there for thirty years and friends, wives, children and even parents, if they were alive, had long ceased to visit them. They were often treated brutally by the psychiatrists and nurses. But not all. Some treated them with dignity. When patients soiled themselves they were ordered to undress and to step under a shower where the attendants would mop them down as zoo keepers washed down elephants. These people had lost everything. Seemingly, they had no grounds for self-respect.

Then one day a woman came to the ward and everything in her demeanour towards them - the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflections of her body - contrasted with the behaviour of most of the attendants and doctors. Unconsciously she showed that even those who were well disposed were, despite their best efforts, condescending. Gaita went on to say that this person "thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them. But she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this." Her unconditional love, as he described it, had "the power to reveal the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible."

Father Champagnat would often say to his brothers: "To educate children properly, we need to love them." We all know that this is not easy at times but we also know the power of this love and how perceptive the human heart is in recognising genuine love and respect. I was visiting a school in France a few years ago and talking with some of the senior students in the yard. One mentioned a Brother Andre who had died a few months earlier. I said to them: "What did he mean for you?" A girl of about 17 or 18 replied, to the approving nods of the others: "It's very simple, Brother. He loved us. We all knew it, even though we may not always have appreciated it."

We started this reflection with the Annunciation and the revelation to Mary of God's love. There is a sense in which God comes to each of us in an annunciation and says: "You too are loved and I ask you to be a messenger of love to others". This is what teachers are asked to be every day - to be messengers of love. We may not say it in words, we may not even like some of our students but our respect, our concern, our willingness to listen to them should be clear and all this carries a message of love.

Jesus came to give us life by his love, and that took him to the Cross. There is a very real sense in which teachers are called to be life-givers also. It may not mean a crucifixion but, as you well know, there will often be Crosses.

Let us ask Mary to help us to grow in our understanding of God's love and its implication in our own lives, especially in helping others to have a clearer awareness of how God may be present to them and may be

touching their lives. I was not always very good at this, but that's our challenge, isn't it, and I believe it is a vital part of our spirituality.

Reflection Questions:

"True leadership is love in action. When you lead by loving, your every gesture, word and decision will help to create a new world." (Father Daniel O'Leary)

Would this be true for a school situation or is this too "soft"?

Occasionally God sends people special messengers. But, usually, he reaches people through other people. When have you had a sense of being a special messenger of God's love for young people?

Mary - woman, and mother of Jesus, of John, of all of us

There have been periods in history when a lot of emphasis has been placed on exalting Mary, on elaborating her privileges, her titles. This is not really the Marist way. Ours is a Mary with 'dust on her feet', and a Mary who is close to us. Athanasius of Alexandria wrote: *"Mary was a pure Virgin, with a harmonious disposition ... She remained continually at home, living a retired life and imitating a honeybee ... She generously distributed to the poor what was left over from the work of her hands ... She prayed to God, intent on two things: not to let a bad thought take root in her heart and to grow neither bold nor hard of heart ... Her speech was recollected and her voice low." I don't think that this is our Mary!*

Just as certain types of statues and spiritual writings can perhaps seem to give a rather unreal impression of Mary, so cartoons can sometimes capture reality very well. Two that we have seen in recent years included Mary sitting at the kitchen table laughing while St Joseph was standing beside her, burping the baby. Another showed Mary going to the door to find the Magi there with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. She says to them: *"This had better be good because I've just got him off to sleep!"*

Mary gave birth to Jesus, Son of God. This is at the heart of her identity as a person. She must have been awakened at night by his cries to be fed. She bathed him, cleaned him and clothed him. She helped him to walk and to speak. She would have told him stories, taught him to pray, took him to visit Elizabeth and his cousin John, watched him grow in his understanding and knowledge, answered his questions, talked with him about life and about their society and its difficulties and injustices, introduced him to the sacred Jewish scriptures, and, no doubt, reflected with him on the Rabbis' teachings in the synagogue. She would have gone to wedding feasts with him and, no doubt, they both would have danced.

Mary was a real mother for Jesus, and she was real for the first Marists. They had a vibrant sense of Mary inspiring and encouraging them, walking with them, listening to them, praying with and for them, and asking their help in her project.

So too for us, she is our mother in the order of grace, she is united with us, she prays with us and for us, and she can be a model for us in those qualities of motherliness which go beyond one's own family, which embrace other children, other people, qualities which include a capacity for community building, for reaching out to others in a spirit of communion. Such people, men and women, will always be vitally important for any community or society.

Mary's motherly presence among the first Christians was often celebrated by the early Fathers of the Church and I sometimes reflect on her influence on Peter - listening to him, encouraging him, praying with and for him, sometimes reminding him of what Jesus had said and done. It could well be that she helped Peter to become more conscious of the "anima" aspect of his nature, as I believe she can for us, helping us to grow in compassion and understanding, inspiring us to work towards a Marian Church that we spoke about yesterday.

I have been fortunate to visit the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City and to see something of the impact of Mary, the compassionate and understanding mother, on a whole people, and indeed, on a whole continent. These people, especially, but not only, the women, know that Mary understands them and their struggles. She too has been a refugee, victimised and misunderstood. This knowledge and this understanding of Mary as their mother, empowers them and gives them confidence in their own strength and creativity.

Concerning the visit to Elizabeth, Luke puts on Mary's lips the words of the famous prayer - "The Magnificat" and this has sometimes been the battle-cry for those struggling for justice. So much so, that public recital or singing of these lines was forbidden in some Latin-American countries in the 70's and 80's. Mary the revolutionary! It seemed to some rulers that this prayer of Mary was seditious because it proclaims a God who has preference for the poor and the oppressed. Mary challenges us to take the side of the poor and the marginalised, and to struggle against unjust structures.

In one of his homilies in Mexico, Pope John Paul II said:

"In her Magnificat, Mary proclaims that God's salvation has to do with justice for the poor. From her, too, stems authentic commitment to other human beings, our brothers and sisters, especially to the poorest and neediest, and to the necessary transformation of society."

We notice that it was Mary, the compassionate mother, who noticed that the wine was running out, probably because the family was poor, and she gently nudged Jesus into his public ministry. I wonder if she would have something to say to us about our concern for the poor.

Reflection Questions:

Mary's Magnificat is a hymn of liberation. How do I help liberate people, especially young people? Can I help liberate staff and parents?

"We are all meant to be mothers of God because God is always needing to be born." (Meister Eckhart) What is this to me and to my role as a Christian leader?

"The mother in all of us reaches out to people, especially those in need." Can I identify with this in my school? How do I ensure that children who come from genuinely poor families have access to my school?

Mary, the first believer and disciple

Mary was called by God to an extraordinary vocation. After questioning the angel, **she believed** and then put herself completely in God's hands. This would lead her to being a refugee, to misunderstanding, to loneliness and, eventually, to the foot of the Cross, where Jesus suffered a bloody and cruel execution.

You remember that, one day when Jesus was speaking, a woman in the crowd who was obviously very impressed with all that she had heard, said: "Happy the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked" - a beautiful tribute to both Jesus and Mary. But we remember the reply of Jesus: "Still happier are those who hear the word of God and keep it." (Luke 11: 27-28) Some have seen this as a downgrading of Mary's importance, but, as so often, Jesus wants to make us think. He wants us to go beyond the obvious. He is not at all diminishing the role of Mary as mother. What he is doing is announcing a new family, the family of believers and disciples, those who will join him in seeking and in doing the will of his Father. We recall those words of Jesus: "My very food is to do the will of the one who sent me." (John 4: 34) If there is any sentence in the Gospel which sums up the life of Jesus, this is it. Doing the will of his Father was the passion of his life. We know the story of Mary's own "fiat" and, at the very core of her life, was obedience to the Father's will. And so, using the expression of Pope Paul VI, we see Mary as **"the first and most perfect of Christ's disciples"**.

Much of the Marian devotion in the past involved prayers to Mary for favours, and also prayers to honour and praise her. This is fine but what we are being called to do, in a very special way, is to imitate Mary as believer and disciple. Paul VI also used the title "Star of Evangelisation". This title is very appropriate,

because Mary was the first to be evangelised, to receive the good news of the coming of Jesus. But she was also the first evangeliser, the first to carry that Good News, as she did to Elizabeth. We remember also, Mary's words to the stewards at the wedding feast: "Do whatever he tells you." These words are obviously very important for ourselves, and as we saw yesterday, listening to what the Lord is telling us, is vital for our spirituality.

St Teresa of Avila was a wonderful woman, full of wisdom and great human qualities - some of her letters to her sisters are hilarious. She was a mystic also and she had a vision in which it seems that the devil was there in the guise of Christ. She confronted the devil and when he asked her how she knew that it was not Christ, she said: "You didn't have any wounds. Christ has wounds." Christ has wounds and so must his disciples. Jesus was very clear about this and he frequently insisted on it. "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his Cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, will find it." (Matthew 16: 24-25)

Choosing and living discipleship will inevitably bring the Cross because it implies a willingness to try to live the Gospel and to work with Jesus in building his Kingdom and its values of truth, compassion, justice and love. This is obviously an invitation to conversion, to sacrifice, to the Cross. Jesus invites us to join our lives with his, to be the branches of the vine, to journey with him, to continue his mission. As disciples who are educators you would have absolutely no difficulty in listing some of the sacrifices, some of the costs, and you might like to reflect on that later. Whatever way the cross appears in our lives, Mary will be there with us as she was with Jesus.

Let me conclude with these well-known words of St Teresa of Avila after one of her visions: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands now but yours; no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which Christ shines his compassion to the world; yours are the feet through which he is to go about doing good; yours are the hands through which he is to bless people now."

This is a powerful description of discipleship and it brings home to us just how important our personal contribution is and also, how demanding true discipleship is. If we take it seriously we may be tempted to run away and it might be wise to recall those words of a distinguished Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich: "If you have never run away from God, I wonder about your God".

Reflection Questions:

Are there times when I am particularly conscious of being a disciple of Jesus?

The vocation of being a leader in a Catholic school ... what does it mean for me?

When does being a disciple cost me the most?

How do I keep the fire of discipleship burning in my life?

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The listening virgin

We talked about this yesterday and how Mary's pilgrimage of faith was a journey of listening, and we ask her to help us to have listening hearts. All I want to do today is to insist on its importance. How do I listen to the Holy Spirit in my life? How do I discern where the Lord is leading me? Pat O'Sullivan may be known to some of you. He is an Australian Jesuit - with a great sense of humour and much wisdom. He once wrote this:

To discern is nothing more than to read the presence of the Lord in my life, to recognise His invitations at any particular moment. We can compare it to the intuitive awareness of partners in marriage, their sensitivity to the feelings, desires and needs of each other which can only be the fruit of selflessness and love. It is the same in our relationship with Christ. I will never be able to discern the Lord's voice unless there is love and selflessness in my heart; for, without this love and selflessness, the voices I am most likely to hear will be the voices of my own needs and desires.

A very important phrase for the pioneer Marists, especially Colin and Chavoïn, was "hidden and unknown" and this referred to their Marist way of being and doing - acting with simplicity and without fuss, serving the church and the people unostentatiously. This contrasts with some other groups of the time who, willingly or otherwise, had a rather high profile. Colin and Chavoïn used the expression and linked it with Mary's hidden presence at Nazareth living the life of a simple village woman and mother. Chavoïn said to her Sisters: "Let us love to be hidden and unknown as Mary was, since we wish to be her daughters."

They were living at a time of great turmoil politically - with the French Revolution, the Reign of Terror, Napoleon's rise to power and then defeat. Much of the church was identified with the monarchy and the well-to-do. The clergy were divided in their loyalties. For the Marists the way to help people was to model themselves on Mary, to manifest a gentle, understanding, compassionate presence, by contrast to the often dogmatic and rigid approach of many of the church authorities.

Marcellin's approach was slightly different but based on the same values. In his Spiritual Testament he wrote: "May humility and simplicity always be characteristic of the Little Brothers of Mary." Unfortunately we are bedevilled by different interpretations of the meanings both of humility and of simplicity. The sense of humility that we are using here is that of knowing and accepting the truth of oneself - being loved by God and being dependent on God. Because she knows that she is loved, Mary is free to know and accept herself fully. Because we are loved, then we are able to accept our truth before God and have an understanding and a healthy acceptance of who we are, with our strengths and limits. We can accept that, like Mary, there is a loving plan in God's heart for each of us and that we have a role in helping to bring about the Kingdom or the Reign of God.

The second truth that flows from this awareness of God's love for us and the acceptance of ourselves with our strengths and limits is, of course, that we recognise that others are loved by God and we accept them with their strengths and limits. This does not mean that we are blind to their faults and problems but there is a fundamental respect for, and acceptance of, others. If these are just theoretical beliefs, then they will probably mean very little to us. But they are obviously key elements for building the Kingdom of God and, I believe, they are particularly important for parents and teachers.

Flowing on from humility is the freedom to be faithful to one's real self, to one's true self, and to the call to live with simplicity and truthfulness, so that our relationships are characterised by transparency, authenticity and honesty. This in turn strengthens our confidence to help others - students, staff, families, everyone.

As for the third element, modesty, it simply means no fanfares, no fuss - doing good quietly, very much part of being "hidden and unknown".

We all know the difficulty that some young people have in accepting their own self-worth and in establishing an authentic lifestyle. Some take refuge in false idols - drink, drugs, sex, "success". They are often encouraged in this by society, the media, and other commercial interests. All of us have been saddened by the number of suicides of young people still at school, of all suicides, of course. I know of some of the commendable efforts of schools to help young people to have a real sense of their own self-worth. It is a complex challenge. A very recent article by Richard Eckersley looks at much of the research work on young people - their happiness, depression, self-destructive behaviour, and so on. There are no very clear pictures emerging as to cause and effect. Some research seems to indicate that suicide is higher in happier societies, the happiness of the most, increasing the misery of the few.

Without being simplistic, and recognising that your knowledge and understanding of the young people of today is much greater than my own, I wonder if these two Marian virtues of humility and simplicity are not very important for the spiritual and mental health of young people.

Reflection Questions:

Do you think that the notion of "hidden and unknown", the virtues of simplicity, humility, and modesty, have any relevance in the educational world of today? Are we, in fact, using other words to describe these same qualities?

It is all very well to say that our relationships should be characterised by transparency, authenticity and honesty. But does that create problems in managing a school?

Are there any conflicts in giving an account of our schools to the public, and, at the same time, being faithful to truth and these Marian virtues of, simplicity, humility, and modesty?

Mary mother of hope

The present Pope uses the traditional title - "Mary, Mother of Hope", but I don't know that he would ever use the title, "Our Lady of Risk". However, on a high cliff overlooking the pounding waves on the coast of France, there is a Marian shrine with this title. An unusual title, as was the title of a talk given by a distinguished Irishman in Sydney earlier this year. His subject was "The Wildness of God". Whatever one might say about "the wildness of God", those who believe in Him have to have a streak of wildness in them! It's rather like bungee jumping or parachuting. You can test all the equipment, and smell the breath of the instructor, but finally you have to take the risk, to trust, to have confidence and then to jump - with hope!

The title of the Marian shrine is unusual but it is so appropriate - Mary's yes was a leap into a void, into a future which would include doubts, fears, sufferings, mockery, and a place at the foot of the cross. Our discipleship will inevitably involve risks, doubts, and sufferings, committing ourselves to actions and policies which, to some observers, may make little or no sense.

As Enda McDonagh, a well-known Irish theologian, wrote recently: "Risk is an inherent quality of Christian discipleship. Leaving all these things they followed him. Risk is intrinsic to life itself. All important stages in life involve risk, from birth, to choice of profession, to choice of partner. The risk of Faith has additionally, less comprehensible or controllable dimensions as one enters into engagement with the supreme mystery of life without that openness to adventure and risk, Faith becomes the lukewarm consolation of the cautious, neither hot nor cold; the salt losing its savour."

We can risk if we are men and women of hope, a hope rooted in God's love. As Peter expressed it, almost 2000 years ago: "Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to give an account of the hope you have within you. There is no other answer than the fidelity, the love of God." (1 Pet 3: 15)

Christian hope nurtures courage, the courage of martyrs but also the courage of living truthfully and with passion, and I recall for you the words of that great leader, Cardinal Suenens, whose courage led him to speak the truth fearlessly at the Second Vatican Council. Among other comments he said: "It is time to change our vocabulary and stop calling 'prudence' what is fear, and 'wisdom', what is timidity when faced with implementing the Gospel."

This reminds me of a Bishop from El Salvador visiting our General House in Rome just after the murder of Bishop Romero. His comment was: "Well, Bishop Romero wasn't a very prudent man." One thing we can say about Mary's son - he was certainly lacking in that kind of prudence! The same would apply to the first Marists. Father Timothy Radcliffe is the Master General of the Dominicans and a great leader. Writing recently he suggested that there is a crisis of hope in every part of the world. He went on to say: "But there is also the rising tide of fundamentalism which derives from a profound fear of thinking, and which offers the false hope of a faith without ambiguity." These are important words for today, I believe.

I am going to Rome for a General Chapter in a couple of weeks and on the way back I plan to stopover in Beijing to visit some elderly Brothers who were all imprisoned during the Communist Revolution and who

had no contact with the rest of the Institute during thirty years. One of them has a Marist record - the only Marist Brother who has been in jail three times!

What keeps the fires of hope burning in a person like this? More significantly for us, what keeps the fires of hope and courage burning, what keeps our passion alive, in everyday fidelity, in the ordinary circumstances of life, in living and spreading the Gospel in our homes, in our schools, in our relationships, in making difficult Gospel choices?

What keeps our hope passionate when we look at the faces in a school assembly and realise that almost certainly a number of these young people that we dearly want to help will be dead by their own will before they are 30, some perhaps before they finish their schooling. We all suffer from the anguish of this and we recognise that there are no easy solutions. But disciples are always called to be messengers of hope and it is a very special challenge for us in our society today.

To be messengers of hope for the young people for whom we have given our lives, and to be people alert to the signs of hope, signs of the action of the Spirit at work all around us - in the goodness of many people, in the generous sacrifice of many teachers, in parents and so on - this is an important challenge for us all. Each of us in his or her own way is called to be a prophetic witness to hope, to the fact that Jesus is risen, the Kingdom is real, and that we are intent on making our contribution.

At the foot of the Cross, Mary is truly the mother of Hope, and represents the hope of all who continue to believe in a loving God, despite the sadness, the evil, the injustice that we see so often around us. We ask her to pray for us that we may be men and women of hope, of courage, and of passion.

Reflection Questions:

How do I try to be a messenger of hope to those whose lives I touch - my family or community, my fellow teachers, my students?

"Our Lady of Risk" - does that ring any bells with me?