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# Resting Fully with God – Marist Mission and Life

*Practice these low and humble virtues which grow like flowers at the foot of the Cross*

**St Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, p209**

## INTRODUCTION

**M**arcellin Champagnat, a French priest, founded the Marist Brothers in 1817<sup>1</sup>. His preferred title for this budding expression of consecrated life in the Church was 'The Little Brothers of Mary'. By the time this new religious order eventually gained formal recognition, well after Marcellin's death in 1840, the name given by Church authorities of the day was 'Marist Brothers of the Schools'. In its brief statement on the origins of the Institute, the Constitution of the Marist Brothers notes that whilst Marcellin founded it "under the name of the Little Brothers of Mary, in 1863 the Holy See approved us and, whilst respecting our original name, gave us the title of Marist Brothers of the Schools."<sup>2</sup>

This paper will demonstrate why this shift in name was significant in influencing the balance between contemplation and action in a way that perhaps prioritised the workforce dimension of a Brother's life, more so than that of the faith community. It placed the emphasis more on the 'doing' of religious life, rather than the 'being' of religious life. Schools were now the explicit focus

in the name, rather than *Mary*. Although teaching and evangelising young people was indeed Marcellin's focus and primary intention, the formal title of *Marist Brothers of the Schools* pointed to the structure for how the mission would be lived, replacing a name that had emphasised humility – and being led by Mary to do her work – whatever form that may take. In his contribution to the history of the Institute, Br Michael Green cautions against the distortion that can occur if we try to understand any spiritual family in the life of the Church by simply looking at what they do, or focus too heavily on their works

It is a misunderstanding of the Church's spiritual families – including those associated with the so-called "apostolic" religious institutes such as the Marist Brothers – to try to understand them and their members by looking at what they *do*, or to focus on their works as their *raison d'être*.<sup>3</sup>

Rather, Green draws attention to the spiritual families as "schools of Christian spirituality."<sup>4</sup> Community and mission come second to the primary place of people growing in Christian discipleship and experiencing "conversion of heart."<sup>5</sup> That is, *who we are* is the most defining

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1 The context for Marcellin doing this was as a member of the 'Society of Mary'. This new Society, yet to be formally integrated into the hierarchical church, was initiated by a group of 12 priests in Lyon, France, on July 23, 1816. Marcellin was one of these priests, being newly ordained one day prior. The dream was for the Church to be renewed by placing Mary at the centre. Those leading this vision, imagined a variety of vocational expressions for people contributing to this new renewal – priests, sisters, laity. This is the broad context for Marcellin's move to have 'Brothers' who would primarily serve young, rural people as teachers of the faith.

2 Constitution and Statutes of the Marist Brothers, 1986 Edition.

3 Michael Green, *A History of the Marist Brothers Institute Volume III – Dawn's Uncertain Light*, (Rome: Marist Brothers General House, 2017), 192

4 Green, *Dawn's Uncertain Light*, 192

5 Green, *Dawn's Uncertain Light*, 192

element of any spiritual family. The distinctive style and approach for being attentive to God in life, and responsive to the challenge of participating in God's mission.

This paper will expose that at the very heart of Marcellin, and therefore the Marist charism, is mysticism: the dynamic, repeating experience of God leading to mission, and mission being the experience of God. In the introduction to *Water From The Rock*, a spirituality document for the Marist Institute, there is the claim that "Marcellin's Marist Apostolic Spirituality is a living and dynamic experience of God, contemplative and action oriented at the same time".<sup>6</sup> Such a mystical disposition is the very essence of what it is to be Marist. A case will be made to suggest that if action and doing are given too great a place at the table, we can easily neglect an essential element of who we are as Marists – that of contemplation. Finding the right balance is a very real dilemma and challenge for people living in the twenty first Century. By looking at two people who significantly influenced Marcellin's spiritual journey, namely Br Lawrence and St Francis de Sales, evidence will be provided to support the case that Marcellin's primary lens into his faith life was that of a mystic, balancing the contemplative and active dimensions of Christian discipleship. The extent to which Marists can explore and grow as mystics in the context of their apostolic spirituality, will determine the capacity for them to continue to have a meaningful and vital presence across the Australian Catholic landscape.

The importance of Mary in Marcellin's faith journey will be revealed, as will Marcellin's position that being one with the presence of God is what both pushes us towards, and pulls us to, mission and community. He witnessed the belief that what you do and how you do it, is the fruit of being attentive to God. Everything else hinges on the extent to which individual and collective attentiveness to God is nurtured. Or, put differently, the extent to which we are willing to be led by the Spirit. With this emphasis, what we actually do because of our oneness with God will

be shown to be less about a specific mission, as long as it is responding to those people who are most in need, most marginalised, most on the peripheries of life. Green puts this succinctly

All founders of the great spiritual traditions of the Church acted out of a prior and intense God-encounter in Christ. This was indisputably the case with Marcellin; those who seek to follow him are called to the same.<sup>7</sup>

The assertion in this paper will be that the Marist contribution to the life of the Catholic Church in Australia, would do well to recover this guiding principle of 'God-encounter in Christ'. Placing God's mission, Jesus's life and message, and the work of the Spirit at the heart of who Marists are as a faith community, in turn will lead them to new missionary endeavours addressing the needs of the poorest and most distressed young people in our world today. This also impacts our understanding of and relationship with the hierarchical and institutional face of the Church, whichever way we look at it. We are being challenged to be creative, agile and flexible – individually and collectively – in how we go about witnessing our faith and living out our vocation. It brings with it new expressions of ecclesiology, the need for on-going spiritual formation, and new modes of ministry. Essentially, then, it is about rediscovering the very heart of Marist charism, which is described by Br Sean Sammon

At the core of our Marist charism lie these three elements: one, the experience of the love of Jesus and Mary for each of us; two, an openness and sensitivity to the signs of our times; and, three, a practical love for children and young people, especially those most in need.<sup>8</sup>

The suggestion in this paper will be that it is timely for a cultural realignment to happen which brings into focus once again the primary place of 'God encounter' for all else that happens in the name of Marists. In doing so, Marists will be in a position to understand and embrace a renewed ecclesiological mindset, giving witness to and

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6 Br AMEStaun, *Water From The Rock – Marist Spirituality Flowing In The Tradition Of Marcellin Champagnat* (Rome: Institute of the Marist Brothers, 2007), 10

7 Green, *Dawn's Uncertain Light*, 192

8 Sean Sammon, *Making Jesus Known and Loved – Marist Apostolic Life Today* (Rome: Institute of the Marist Brothers, 2006), 23

celebrating a diverse understanding of vocation in the modern world. In the context of the wider Church, it forecasts a paradigm shift. The hierarchical, clerical face of the Church, is being invited to fully embrace laity in a way that enables shared responsibility for God's mission in the contemporary world. At the same time, laity are being invited to fully embrace the challenges that come with not being overly reliant on consecrated religious to lead and inspire service to the poorest and most marginalised. Sammon predicts the roots of this shift ten years ago

The challenge we face during a time of renewal or paradigmatic shift is different: re-imagining our charism anew in light of the signs of the times...the charism of our Institute needs to be lived and preserved not only by those of us who are members; it must also be developed and deepened in union with the People of God... today we realize that the charism that came into our world through Marcellin Champagnat is touching the hearts and capturing the imagination of both brothers and laity alike.<sup>9</sup>

#### MARCELLIN'S SPIRITUAL INFLUENCES

For the purposes of this paper, focus will be given to the works of two major influences on the shaping of Marcellin's inner, spiritual life. One, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1614 – 1691), a discalced Carmelite. The second being that of Francis de Sales (1567 – 1622), canonized in the Catholic Church in 1665. Both lived over one hundred years before Marcellin was born, but their ideas had greatly influenced the theology and spiritual life in the seminaries by the time Marcellin was training to become a priest. To appreciate their influence, we will glance back to some of the spiritual insights of St Bonaventure. There were other influences on the growth and development of Marcellin's contemplative life that are not included in this paper, notably Saint Jure, Jean Baptiste (1588 – 1657), a Jesuit spiritual

director and writer who enjoyed extensive success as a writer, and had a significant influence on the Christian practices of 17th Century France<sup>10</sup>. Another Jesuit, Alphonsus Rodriguez, whose writings included *Practice of Perfection* and *Christian Virtues*, was also a significant contributor to this body of work.

Most significant for Marcellin, it must be said, was the profound influence of Mary. Having described inspiring women in Marcellin's life, including his mother, Marie Therese Chirat, and his aunt, Louise Champagnat, Sammon emphasises

Finally, there was Mary, the mother of Jesus. While a late arrival in Marcellin's life, in the end, she would make all the difference. Devotion to her was part of the rich texture of faith in the local dioceses of Lyons and Le Puy. Marcellin would, in time, place Mary at the center of the community of Brothers he founded...she became eventually for him a "Good Mother," his "Ordinary Resource".<sup>11</sup>

In his seminary years, Marcellin would be swept up into the plans to establish a new religious congregation, one that would place Mary at the centre of the Church's life and mission. The day after his ordination on July 22nd 1816, Marcellin, along with seven other men ordained with him, along with four other seminarians, "renewed their pledge and dedicated their lives to Mary."<sup>12</sup> This was the beginning of the Marists, or Mary-ists. Of that day, now referred to as the Pledge of Fourviere, Green says of the twelve men involved

They felt called by Mary that morning to do her work. The intuition that impelled them that morning was that it would be as Mary-ists that they could most effectively heal, reconcile, encourage, teach, and bring the Good News of Jesus to the people of their time.<sup>13</sup>

9 Sammon, *Making Jesus Known and Loved*, 31.

§2. Lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power according to the norm of law.

10 Andre Lanfrey, *Essay on the Origins of Marist Spirituality*. Trans. by Jeff Crowe. Unpublished study. Marist Brothers: Lyon 1991, Chapter III

11 Sammon, *Making Jesus Known and Loved*, 12

12 Sammon, *Making Jesus Known and Loved*, 24

13 Green, *Dawn's Uncertain Light*, 442

The foundation to Marcellin's faith journey and interior life was profoundly shaped by Mary. All was to be done in *Mary's way*.

The contribution of Br Lawrence can be largely gleaned from a short book he wrote, *The Practice Of The Presence Of God*<sup>14</sup>. Known as Nicholas Herman before religious life, it was clear that the fundamental underpinnings to his theological stance and spiritual intuitions were being played out even when he took up the profession of arms, and conducted himself "with simplicity and honesty."<sup>15</sup> He was not afraid of death when taken prisoner by German troops and threatened with hanging<sup>16</sup>, which was an early sign of his faithful disposition. He was inspired to join the discalced Carmelites by virtue of his uncle being one, and spent most of his life in a Carmelite monastery in Paris.

Central to Br Lawrence's spirituality was the passion of Jesus Christ, "which he never thought about without being sensibly moved". He was particularly drawn to "the humility of the cross"<sup>17</sup>. Some of the insights and language of Br Lawrence seem to have been picked up in a very direct and literal way by Marcellin Champagnat. For example, we read that right from the beginning of Lawrence's novitiate

His devotion to the Blessed Virgin was extraordinary, tenderly devoted to her, he had a confidence in her protection, she was his refuge. He called her his 'good Mother' and gave himself particularly to the practice of prayer. He focused on the presence of God and the love which are its effects, and the grace of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

As we saw above, the very same could be said about Marcellin. Sammon comments about Marcellin that

His belief in the continual presence of God

helped him bear experiences and events in life that would have crushed others. He also trusted completely in Mary's protection and intercession; she was truly a fellow pilgrim and sister in faith for him.<sup>19</sup>

Among the qualities listed in Br Lawrence's eulogy were "patience, gentleness, firmness and humility"<sup>20</sup> and in his own words his "usual practice is to remain in the presence of God with all the humility of a useless but faithful servant."<sup>21</sup> Marcellin, in one of the first letters that he wrote to the Brothers, used similar language in saying "let us pray that God will show us His holy will, and let us always say that we are His useless servants."<sup>22</sup>

Marcellin was remembered by his early followers as someone who lived these qualities

His first disciples remembered with affection the Marcellin they knew: open, frank, resolute, courageous, enthusiastic, constant and equable. His whole life gave witness of a person with a practical disposition, a man of action, and of humility.

This enabled him to draw together from various sources a simple and down-to-earth spirituality.<sup>23</sup>

The unmistakable parallels and influence on the Marcellin Champagnat we have come to know through those who have written about him continue as Br Lawrence's gentle disposition is noted. Also, his gracious and affable air and simple and modest manner. It allowed Lawrence to have a very egalitarian disposition, not looking to be separate from others through his religious position, and able to move kindly among his brothers and his friends, without trying to be distinguished from them. It has been said about him that "he tried assiduously to lead a hidden and unknown life."<sup>24</sup> The parallels with Marcellin's ability to write

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14 Br Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New York: J.J Little & Ives Company, 1945)

15 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 10

16 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 10

17 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 12

18 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 14

19 Sammon, *Making Jesus Known and Loved*, 29

20 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 18

21 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 20

21 Writings of Marcellin found at: [www.champagnat.org](http://www.champagnat.org), Letter 001

23 Br AMEStaun, *Water From The Rock*, 23

24 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 24

pastorally and simply to his Brothers is captured in the comment that Br Lawrence was able to communicate his ideas, and showed a particular interest in the “little ones and the simplest.”<sup>25</sup>

Br Lawrence deliberately grew both his desire and ability to be attentive to God, being described as having “a profound conception of the power and the wisdom of God, which he carefully cultivated by a great fidelity in dismissing every other thought.”<sup>26</sup> This is a fundamental dimension to the life of a mystic. All is God. He went about the task of “cultivating in his heart this deep presence of God, considered by faith”<sup>27</sup> and believed that “God is everywhere: in every place one can address Him, can make one’s heart speak to Him in a thousand ways.”<sup>28</sup> Br Lawrence saw God as much in his domestic duties and when repairing a pair of boots, as he did when praying with his community or leading a retreat. Marcellin shared this sense of God being the constant, no matter what the changing circumstances of life. Whilst in Paris in 1838, he remarked in a letter to Br Hilarion that he could experience the presence of God as much in the streets of Paris as what he was able to at the Hermitage – the home of the Brothers.<sup>29</sup>

Francis de Sales also significantly influenced and shaped the interior life, or spirituality, of Marcellin. It is believed that his book *Treatise on the Love of God*<sup>30</sup> was one that Marcellin personally had and read. He would have been exposed to works such as *Introduction to the Devout Life*<sup>31</sup> in the Seminaries he attended as part of his formal training to become a priest. The significance of the former text is captured in a story that Lanfrey tells. Marcellin, in response to a Brother asking if he knew a good book on the love of God, pulled *Treatise on the Love of God* from his bookshelf saying, ‘here’s an excellent one’.<sup>32</sup> The Brother

asking the question, Brother Louis, was entrusted at one point by Marcellin with the role of Novice Master. As we have done above with ‘The Practice Of The Presence Of God’, it is instructive to look closely at the content of these two books written by Francis de Sales to shed light on their formative influence with regard to how Marcellin’s life and sense of mission grew.

The direct impact that theologians and Church thinkers had on each other’s lives around the time of Marcellin, and on generations to come, is captured in Francis de Sales comment that “I have said nothing which I have not learned from others.”<sup>33</sup> It is in this spirit of influence that we explore some of the thinking and reflections of Francis de Sales and the impression he made on Marcellin. Francis emphasised the relationship we build with God; that this encounter is all about a conscious and deliberate relationship. He sees perseverance as “the most desirable gift we can hope for in this life” fuelled by “prayer, fasting, alms-deeds, the sacraments and the hearing and reading of the holy words.”<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note the place of humility and modesty that shaped Francis’ life. He, in turn, attributes this to one of his main influences, where he tells that “I have always considered that the learned modesty and most wise humility of the seraphic Doctor S. Bonaventure were greatly to be admired and loved.”<sup>35</sup>

It is worth, briefly tracing back to the life and influence of Bonaventure, a thirteenth century Friar and mystic, who is considered the second Founder of the Franciscan Order, and the chief architect of its spirituality.<sup>36</sup> It provides a further thread to Marcellin’s own mystic nature, and the foundations of his prayer, simplicity and humility. Bonaventure’s sense of God in all things is captured succinctly in his claim that “God can be thought of

25 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 25

26 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 45

27 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 47

28 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 61

29 Writings of Marcellin found at: [www.champagnat.org](http://www.champagnat.org), Letter 181

30 Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God* (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1953)

31 Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (New York: Doubleday Company Inc, 1955)

32 Lanfrey, *Origins of Marist Spirituality*, 18

33 Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the love of God*, 10

34 Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the love of God*, 139

35 Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the love of God*, 185

36 Ewert Cousins, ed., *The Souls Journey into God; The Tree of Life; The Life of St Francis* (New York: Paulist Press), 1

as an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere.”<sup>37</sup> It was in Bonaventure’s time that the learning of the monastic orders had found new homes outside the monasteries. Influenced greatly by St Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure

took the concerns of a rich tradition of spirituality and theology together with the claims of a spiritual vision grounded in the religious experience of St Francis of Assisi and brought these into a creative engagement with some of the dominant categories of the increasingly critical and secular culture of his time.<sup>38</sup>

The critical role of humility permeates all of Bonaventure’s thinking, as he understands it as the central component to the life and faith of Francis of Assisi. He says of Francis of Assisi “not only does humility define his relation to God; it comes to shape his relation to other people as well as to the entire created world.”<sup>39</sup> He adds that “from the roots of humility, the human spirit grows in active love of God and neighbor which expresses itself in the virtues of the Gospel.”<sup>40</sup> It is no coincidence that the small and hidden flowers of the three violets have become a lasting symbol for what is at the heart of Marist spirituality: Modesty, humility and simplicity.

Martignetti<sup>41</sup> writes of the significance of Bonaventure turning to prayer when he was given the responsibility of leading the Franciscans. He argues that it illustrated the priority that prayer had taken in Bonaventure’s life

Here was a person, newly burdened with the responsibility of leading a Religious Order at a sensitive time<sup>42</sup> in its development, who took time out of this new era of his life by withdrawing to the solitude of a mountain to

pray and see the peace of the Lord.... Bonaventure had entered into a mystical journey to God and had made prayer a priority in his life.<sup>43</sup>

The theme of simplicity is interconnected with that of humility for Bonaventure, where the alignment of what a person desires in their heart with what God desires for them, leads them to a more simple and loving life. For Bonaventure, as we make prayer a common practice to grow our relationship with Christ and experience unity with God, the fruits are humility, simplicity and a loving attitude.<sup>44</sup> The journey into Christ, into mystical consciousness, draws us into a place of contemplation and unknowing. It is also noteworthy that Bonaventure was interested in the monastic tradition of theology, which placed the opening of a vision, a way of life, above purely theoretical knowledge.<sup>45</sup>

Returning to Francis de Sales, the living out of your prayer life in the world around you, as your way of being, was a deep conviction. He distinguished between two dimensions for the task of tuning in to God. One is affective, which encourages us to “practice the sacred infusions and minglings of our spirit with God’s.”<sup>46</sup> The other is effective, or active, a willingness to do God’s work. Put another way “by one we conceive, by the other we bring forth...by one we place God upon our heart, as a standard of love; by the other we place him upon our arm.”<sup>47</sup>

In his book, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, there is further evidence of the lasting influence that St Francis de Sales had on the spiritual life of Marcellin Champagnat, providing something of a bloodline, or rich source, for what would develop as Marist spirituality. All was about the experience of God in our heart, and our loving response. There is a message of inclusivity in the editor’s note that

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37 Zachary Hayes, *Bonaventure – Mystical Writings* (USA: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1999), 15

38 Hayes, *Bonaventure*, 26

39 Hayes, *Bonaventure*, 28

40 Hayes, *Bonaventure*, 29

41 Richard Martignetti, *St Bonaventure’s Tree of Life: Theology of the Mystical Journey* (Fрати Editori di Quaracchi, 2004)

42 Cousins, Ed., *The Soul’s Journey into God*, 13

43 Martignetti, *St Bonaventure’s Tree of Life*, 38

44 Martignetti, *St Bonaventure’s Tree of Life*, discussed on page 46-48

45 Hayes, *Bonaventure*, 37

46 Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, 231

47 Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, 231

“this life of devotion is as open to the soldier, the shopkeeper, the courtier, the man of affairs, and the woman in the home as it is to the desert solitary and the nun in her cell.”<sup>48</sup> Francis distinguishes his work for spiritual enrichment to be for the common folk

Almost all those who have hitherto treated of devotion have had in view the instruction of persons wholly withdrawn from the world, or they have taught a kind of devotion that leads to this absolute retirement. My intention is to instruct those who live in towns, in families, or at court.<sup>49</sup>

This is a crucial concept if we are to create a culture whereby our ecclesial understanding is renewed today. It is with this vision in mind and heart that Marcellin went about calling young men to become Brothers. It is with this vision in mind and heart that Marcellin dared to imagine the extent to which the ministry and work of the Brothers would reach. Marcellin himself, in 1816, the year he was ordained a priest, had pledged his commitment to a new movement in the Church which at the time was called the Society of Mary, which we will hear a little more of later. At the heart of this movement, generating out of France, was the belief that people would contribute it to it, and belong to it, equally, coming from a variety of vocational choices and circumstances. There would be priests, religious sisters, brothers and lay people, all part of the same institutional body.

The revolutionary and radical aspect of this movement was not the actual doing, or the *what* was being done. Other religious congregations and institutes were doing much in the fields of education and evangelisation. The revolutionary and radical aspect of this movement was in the *how* and the *who*. The how was captured by the fact that a loving relationship was the defining influence on the Marian teaching style, and the motivating principle for learning. This encouraged attitudes and practices centred on persistence, tolerance, inclusiveness and welcome. The *who* provided a

framework for a renewed sense of ecclesiology whereby it was the commonality of being a baptised Christian that united the group. Diversity in vocation was celebrated as a dynamism and gift, rather than being seen as a reason to create division or hierarchy.

It is reasonable to assume that St Francis de Sales influenced Marcellin’s belief in the value and potential of everyone to contribute to God’s mission, whatever their vocation be. St Francis emphasised that God is asking Christians to “bring forth the fruits of devotion, each according to his character and vocation.”<sup>50</sup> Again, though, there is an emphasis put on the importance of prayer and attentiveness to God as the core ingredient that will have us leading faithful lives and contributing to mission

Every vocation becomes more agreeable when united with devotion. The care of the family is rendered more peaceable, the love of the husband and wife more sincere, the service of the prince more faithful, and every type of employment more pleasant and agreeable.<sup>51</sup>

So, what did Marcellin possibly glean from Francis’ influence about what such a prayer life looks like? Francis suggests devoting an hour to prayer each day, preferably early in the morning “when your mind will be less distracted” and to always begin “in the presence of God.”<sup>52</sup> He distinguishes between mental prayer and vocal prayer, whereby mental prayer is essentially about placing yourself in the presence of God. To achieve this, four principles are provided as a scaffold. First, God is in all things and in every place. Second, God is not only in the place you are, but God is also in your heart and in the very centre of your spirit. Third, consider the humanity of Jesus and his presence in the sense of looking over us. Fourth, drawing on our imagination, tap into the presence of God as friend.<sup>53</sup>

We see the nurturance of humility being connected to prayer life when Francis also

48 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life – St Francis de Sales* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1955), 11

49 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 29

50 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 39

51 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 40

52 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 78

53 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, discussed on 80-81

encourages brief morning prayer as a way of preparing the events of the day carefully, and in doing so, to humble yourself in the presence of God, acknowledging that you will not be able to achieve your hopes without God.<sup>54</sup> This is further emphasised using the analogy of the purist of balm resting on the bottom when it is poured into water. St Francis tests whether people are “truly wise, learned, generous, and noble” by seeing if they “tend to humility, modesty, and submission, for then they shall be good indeed.”<sup>55</sup>

He also encourages an examination of conscience, which includes “rekindling in your heart the fire of your morning meditation”<sup>56</sup> where we give thanks to God, examine our behaviour and efforts, and acknowledge that any achievements are God’s doing. The mystic influence of God being in all things emerges with Francis when he writes that aspirations to God are about noticing and vocalizing God in beauty, giving thanks for God’s assistance, knowing God’s goodness and opening ourselves up to God. He captures it with the statement that we are moving towards this space when we “make a thousand different motions of our heart, to give you a love of God and to arouse yourself to a passionate and tender affection for this divine Spouse.”<sup>57</sup>

There is language and imagery used by Francis that relates something of the interior dynamic of God’s work in our life. It describes God as ‘proposing’ something to us by inspiration, and that we consider it and are drawn to it, or ‘delighted’ in it. Then we give our full consent to it. This is an encounter, an experience, that requires attentiveness, faith, discernment, and practice. There is an intimacy and closeness for how Francis talks about this, drawing on the image of God as the ‘Spouse’. Francis is drawing on the language of another great mystic of the Catholic tradition, Saint Catherine of Siena, who talked about her “interior closet, where she comforted herself with her heavenly Spouse.”<sup>58</sup>

In describing some of the fruits of prayer, we get glimpses into some features of the foundational spirituality to flow from Marcellin and the Brothers

Let us endeavor sincerely, humbly and devoutly to acquire those little virtues which our Savior has set forth for our care and labor. These are patience, meekness, mortification of heart, humility, obedience, poverty, chastity, tenderness toward our neighbors, bearing with their imperfections, diligence, and holy fervor.<sup>59</sup>

Francis highlights the place of hospitality, inspired by love for people. There is a clear teaching that actions and witness, whereby time is spent with people, is a necessary component of serving the poor. He states that “if you love the poor, be often in their company, be glad to see them in your house, and to visit them in theirs.”<sup>60</sup> Marcellin, and the Marist tradition that has developed since his time, has strongly nurtured the place of hospitality and presence. Francis provides reason for this to deepen, to become not only about relationships with people, but at the same time an experience with God

Should your mutual and reciprocal communications relate to charity, devotion, and Christian perfection, O God, how precious will this friendship be! It will be excellent, because it comes from God; excellent, because it tends to God; excellent, because its very bond is God... I speak here of spiritual friendship<sup>61</sup>

All of this is to be understood as doing the work of God, as experiencing our relationship with God. The approach of Francis is that it is through our attentiveness to smaller, everyday moments of life and work, that we in fact build our attentiveness to God. In his words

Practice these low and humble virtues which grow like flowers at the foot of the Cross: care

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54 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 90  
55 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 129  
56 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 91  
57 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 94  
58 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 93  
59 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 123  
60 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 160  
61 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 170



of the poor, visiting the sick, taking care of your family...great occasions of serving God seldom present themselves, but little ones are frequent.<sup>62</sup>

A final point of synergy between the beliefs and teachings of Francis de Sales and the life and work of Marcellin Champagnat resides in the place of persistence and grit, along with an unwavering faith in God. Francis promotes an openness to the total experience that comes with serving God's mission. He encourages people of faith to not be afraid of turmoil, confusion or contradiction, along the journey, but to ultimately turn to the source of one's love for God for direction and comfort. It is captured beautifully in the comment

let everything be in confusion, I say, not only around us but even within us. Let our soul be overwhelmed with sorrow or joy, with sweetness or bitterness, with peace or trouble, with light or darkness, with temptation or repose, with pleasure or disgust, with dryness of tenderness. Let it be scorched by the sun or refreshed by the dew. For all that, ever and always the point of our heart, our spirit, and our higher will, which is our compass, must look unceasingly and tend always toward the love of God.<sup>63</sup>

### MYSTICISM TODAY

Father Bede Griffiths has said "if Christianity cannot recover its mystical tradition and teach it, it should just fold up and go out of business. It has nothing to offer."<sup>64</sup> This may be a little drastic, but it serves its purpose – the Church cannot continue in a *business as usual* way in the contemporary world. The Marists, in Australia, are no different. Based on the most recent census, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has reported that 30% of people are now choosing 'none' when asked which religious tradition they are connected to. For the first time, this response, 'none' is greater than those who nominate their religious affiliation as Christian, and has become the highest single response. Admittedly,

statistics need to be broken down carefully to be understood, and consideration given to the various social, political, cultural and historical factors at play. However, at the surface level, gone are the days where a hierarchical, institutional Church unquestioningly authors the narrative and asserts sizeable influence on the lives of the vast majority of people that make up the body of the Church.

Alongside this development, perceived by some as something of a paradox, there is a thirst for meaning and a hunger for connection in Australian culture today. There is a reaching out to spirituality, an increasing desire for mindfulness, and an expressed need for 'retreat' in life, whether it be 'tree-change', 'sea-change', interest in Eastern practices, or other manifestations. This suggests that there is a healthy yearning and searching, perhaps even an instinctual want for 'otherness' or what many would call 'God', that is not being reached or satisfied by what we might call traditional Church structures.

In the introduction to his book *Christian Mystics*, writer and former Dominican, Matthew Fox, draws on the anecdote about Albert Einstein when he was asked at the end of his life if he had any regrets. He answered: "I wish I had read more of the mystics earlier in my life."<sup>65</sup> Fox goes on to warn against the 'antimystical' nature of fundamentalism, and the predominantly 'left-brain' attraction to much of theology and religion which, he says, "ignores the right brain, which is our mystical brain."<sup>66</sup> He laments the lack of adventure and inner exploration, suspects that this is the reason that religion has become boring for so many, and encourages the spirit of St John of the Cross to "launch into the deep."<sup>67</sup> Fox goes on, "this launching into the depths often gets stymied by Western religious dogma, guilt trips, and institutional churchiness. The mystic gets starved."<sup>68</sup> He provides us with a sound basis for looking at the role of the mystic today

I believe that there is a great wisdom in our

62 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 209

63 John Ryan, ed. & trans., *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 251

64 Matthew Fox, *Christian Mystics – 365 Readings and Meditations* (California: New World Library, 2011)

65 Fox, *Christian Mystics*, introduction

66 Fox, *Christian Mystics*, 1

67 Fox, *Christian Mystics*, 1

68 Fox, *Christian Mystics*, 2

species and in Western spiritual traditions, but that this needs a new birth and a fresh beginning. We in the West must take these insights into our hearts on a regular basis, allow them to play in the heart, and then take them into our work and citizenship and family and community. This is how all healthy and deep awakenings happen; they begin with the heart and flow out from there. Deep down, each one of us is a mystic. When we tap into that energy we become alive and we give birth. From the creativity that we release is born the prophetic vision and work that we all...getting in touch with the mystic inside is the beginning of our deep service.<sup>69</sup>

David Tacey, writing in the Australian context, reveals his comfort in the 'mystic' space, echoing from Bonaventure that he likes "the mystical description of God as a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere."<sup>70</sup> Siding with the above challenges named by Matthew Fox, Tacey emphasises the creative element to our faith life and spiritual journey if it is to evolve in contemporary life saying that "the poetic imagination is a central organ of theology and the perceptual mechanism of the spirit."<sup>71</sup> Tacey warns, however, that this requires a daring spirit and humility in Church leaders today, to move away from a safe conservative and controlling mindset, to accepting that the creative Spirit leads us to new and unknown places

"Making new" calls for connection with the deep roots of creativity. But we do not have control over the deep roots or over what they produce for us...the hope for the future is that we can overcome our obsession with imitation, standards, substitutes and copies, and face the nature of the real. Not just the surface real, but the deep real, from which surprising, alarming and transforming things emerge.<sup>72</sup>

It is the disposition of the mystic that will encourage, cultivate and embrace the necessary changes and challenges that come with such transformation.

#### RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO MYSTICISM

Thomas Merton (1915 – 1968), a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, has made a significant mark on the field of mysticism. Using the language of contemplation, Merton has provided a rich groundwork for encountering God in the everyday. He is quick to establish the right order of events for this, reminding us that "it is not we who choose to awaken ourselves, but God who chooses to awaken us."<sup>73</sup> Merton claims that it is through contemplation that awakening is experienced, whereby "our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God."<sup>74</sup> This is an intentional 'set' for mind and heart, and runs counter to the ever increasing search for contentment, and fullness of life, in the economy of possessions and achievement. For Merton, this represents a lack of creativity and newness, as people "hurry to magnify themselves by imitating what is popular – and are too lazy to think of anything better."<sup>75</sup> It is in contemplation and mystic experience of God that we will find our true self, which in turn is an experience of being called to humble service to the needs of life around us. For as Tacey reminds us, "once spirit is contacted it brings with it an imperative to go outside ourselves and serve others and the world."<sup>76</sup>

This is the same spirit that stirred Marcellin's life and mission, and inspired him to found the *Little Brothers of Mary*<sup>77</sup>. It is the same spirit that will provide for the Church of the future. Pope Francis, at the beginning of the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in which he wishes to "point out new paths for the Church's journey in years to

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69 Fox, *Christian Mystics*, 2-3

70 David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution – the emergence of contemporary spirituality* (Australia: Harper Collins, 2003), 165

71 Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 166

72 Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 226

73 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1972), 10

74 Merton, *New Seeds*, 9

75 Merton, *New Seeds*, 98

76 Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 147

77 As noted earlier in this paper, the name given by the Church after Marcellin's death was *Marist Brothers of the Schools*

come”<sup>78</sup> highlights that God, and the call to service, will not be found in the world of ego and self-interest

Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.<sup>79</sup>

Pope Francis goes on to provide a context for reaching beyond ourselves and experiencing fullness of life, in encountering God, and that it is “thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love” that we are “liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption.”<sup>80</sup> Tacey understands faith as having a role to play in “letting go and knowing that something greater than ourselves is present.”<sup>81</sup> Spirituality, flowing from the mystic understanding of encountering God in the everyday, stirs within us our humility and ‘deepest’ self, by-passing the realm of the ego. Tacey explains that

The fact is that true spirituality is not something that makes itself available to our egotistical designs, but rather something that draws us into a larger world and makes us subordinate to a greater will that transcends us on all sides.<sup>82</sup>

We have here a critical part of the puzzle for anyone wishing to grow the Marian Church – Marcellin’s sense of coming to know and love Jesus in Mary’s way. One must take the journey away from self-interest, impressing others, being in control, certainty and knowing; and towards God. The necessary itinerary of this journey includes not knowing, humble service, a handing over of control, and transcending the impulses of the ego for the greater good. The good news is that this journey has already begun in us – it is not foreign country or unfamiliar. Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and

Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, reminds us that “the gift is objectively already within, and yet it has to be desired and awakened” and that “the core task to all good spirituality is to teach us to *cooperate* with what God already wants to do and has already begun to do.”<sup>83</sup>

How do we cultivate this in ourselves and in others? What enables people to “cooperate” with that which God has already begun in them? Clearly it is a question that points to our interiority, our inner being. In a world that is increasingly busy, with more distractions and interventions on our time at our finger tips than ever before, part of the response to this question is to do with being able to be present to the moment that we are in. Present to ourselves. Present to others. Present to the environment. Present to God. Now. Rohr captures it when he says that “true spirituality is a search for divine union *now*.”<sup>84</sup> He points out that such presence journeys us toward humility and service, as mentioned above. For him presence is when

our heart space, our mind space and our body awareness are all simultaneously open and nonresistant. It is experienced as a moment of deep inner connection, and it always pulls you, intensely satisfied, into the naked and undefended now.<sup>85</sup>

To explore the question of how to cultivate this, and what methods foster this in people, let us turn to Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk and priest known as one of the architects of Centering Prayer, a contemporary method of contemplative prayer. He claims that “centering prayer brings us into the presence of God and thus fosters the contemplative attitudes of listening and receptivity.”<sup>86</sup> It echoes back to Br Lawrence’s book *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Taking the time, making the effort, and nurturing the intentionality of knowing God in our everyday experiences and encounters. This includes the necessary intelligence to be attuned to

78 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2013)

79 Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 2

80 Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 8

81 Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 143

82 Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 146

83 Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now – learning to see as the mystics see* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 22,23

84 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 16

85 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 28

86 Thomas Keating, *Intimacy With God – an introduction to centering prayer* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 11

the interior motivations that drive us. Religion will survive and flourish if it is led by such principles. Rohr goes as far as to suggest that it is the source of the next reformation saying that “tossing into the soul (mysticism) could be the next reformation. Our age, I believe, is destined to discover the divine as a dimension of the human.”<sup>87</sup>

One of the key practices to improve being present to God is being able to think about and approach things in a non-dualistic way. Keating emphasises that before the Second Vatican Council, the Western Model of Spirituality which dominated Western thinking was that of dualistic thinking, which places higher value on external acts such as fasting at the expense of internal acts, or motives. It also places the human seemingly in control – initiating good works, based on the premise that God will reward them. This encourages a narrow mindset, with too great a concern on getting to heaven, rather than the here and now.<sup>88</sup> In relation to this last point, Keating says

Excessive concern about future rewards or punishment tended to take ordinary people’s attention away from their primary duty of manifesting here and now the love of Christ toward their neighbours, and led Christian people to underestimate the duty of social action.<sup>89</sup>

Thomas Merton connects such dualistic thinking to the image of God that people carry with them, pointing out that it is unhelpful to imagine God being as an “external dictate of impersonal law”. Rather, Merton suggests, we are better to experience God as an “interior invitation of personal love” and that we must “learn to realise that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good.”<sup>90</sup> Rohr concurs, placing a caution on the outer life, full of action and works that are seen to be ‘good’, if there is not a God-centeredness: “without an inner life, our outer prayer will soon become superficial, ego-centred, and

even counter-productive on the spiritual path.”<sup>91</sup> He extends this to include the style of prayer we practice, suggesting that we need to balance spoken prayer, full of words – ‘saying prayers’, with what he calls “unsaying prayers” which is the quiet, contemplative style of prayer.<sup>92</sup>

Thomas Keating provides a further insight for the ‘how to’ question in highlighting the discipline and practice that goes with Centering Prayer. Ultimately, it leads us towards living life from the center, which carries with it the challenge of tempering the dominant practice of thinking our way into life. This task revolves around to letting life itself increasingly impact our consciousness and thinking. Keating points out that this shift is integral to any pathway towards contemplation, suggesting that “all methods that lead to contemplation are more or less aimed at bypassing the thinking process...to cultivate spiritual awareness.”<sup>93</sup> He goes on to highlight that such practices have the potential to impact our whole understanding of God and sense of responsibility to life around us

Centering prayer is an exercise in *intention*. It is our will, our faculty of choice, that we are cultivating. The will is also our faculty of spiritual love, which is primarily a choice. Divine love is not a feeling. It is a disposition or attitude of ongoing self-surrender and concern for others similar to the concern God has for us and every living thing.<sup>94</sup>

The final sentence of the above quote is important to this paper – contemplation as the source of action and outreach. This is of interest to the type of apostolic spirituality that has grown in the Marist tradition. Importantly, it dismisses the myth that contemplation is about non-action, or distancing oneself somehow from the encounters of everyday life. Quite the contrary. Keating highlights that the spiritual journey, in fact,

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87 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 129

88 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, discussed on page 25

89 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 25

90 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 15

91 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 74

92 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 73

93 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 68

94 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 57

transforms our struggles and failures as we grow into our full expression of self, saying that it is “the transformation of our pain, woundedness, and unconscious motivation into the person that God intended us to be.”<sup>95</sup> Similarly, Rohr suggests that the two main portals are, “love and suffering, that open up the mind space and the heart space, breaking us into breadth and depth and communion.”<sup>96</sup>

Contemplation, then, leads us toward *right action* and encourages *right living*. It entices us to understand the experiences of human existence through the lens of our conviction of one-ness with God, rather than life experiences shaping our understanding of the one God. Keating emphasises that “our focus on God is not just for the time of the prayer but for the whole day. The presence of God is going to accompany us into daily life.”<sup>97</sup> Tacey situates this in the context of the renewal of spirituality today, noting an inextricable relationship between following the will of the sacred other, and serving the needs of other people, commenting that “in our new call for spirituality... we experience not just a human craving for the sacred, but also a sacred craving for the human.”<sup>98</sup> For Marists to continue to participate in God’s mission, in the style that Marcellin Champagnat dreamed of, this understanding is key. The dynamic between prayer and action is continuous. Keating sees action emerging from contemplative prayer, otherwise it stagnates and turns in on itself. Equally, action without contemplative prayer “leads to burn-out or running around in circles.”<sup>99</sup> The Marist spirituality document, *Water From the Rock*, suggests that Mary provided a sound guide for Marcellin working towards this balance

Mary inspired Marcellin’s style of being on mission. She received the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation and responded immediately to Elizabeth’s need. In so doing, she shows us that

contemplation and action are both indispensable elements of spirituality.<sup>100</sup>

For Marists, and all other expressions of Christian discipleship, the action component of God’s love causes us to be in solidarity with, and to reach out to, the poorest and most distressed in our community – those most on the margins. Thomas Merton makes this very clear

The contemplative needs to share something of the hardship of the poor. He needs to be able to identify himself honestly and sincerely with the poor, to be able to look at life through their eyes, and to do this because he is really one of them.<sup>101</sup>

David Tacey sees the spiritual revolution as an uncontrollable spilling out of the spirit; the same spirit that is fundamental to human creation, and all of life, compelling us to respond to the needs around us

Spirit is the fount of human creation and the core of the natural world...once released from its hiding place in the self, it rushes out to the wider world, and we need to move beyond ourselves with it.<sup>102</sup>

Holding firm to this dynamic – that contemplation and action are two aspects of the same love of God, and that action impels us to make a difference in the lives of the poor – sheds light on the formative dimension that befits people who yearn to share in an apostolic spirituality. It places the emphasis on the extent to which we can “help others uncover or release the divine potential in themselves.”<sup>103</sup> To do this, we need to have first done the same work – uncovering and releasing the divine potential in ourselves.

Rohr believes we need to be giving people experiences of their own inner aliveness, and not simply using “public, verbal and social prayer forms and group rituals”, otherwise we are promoting

95 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 22

96 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 123

97 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 159

98 Tacey, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 221

99 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 159

100 Br AMEStaun, *Water From the Rock*, 72

101 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 251

102 Tacey, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 147

103 Tacey, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 147

religion “on the level of social contract...cultural Christianity or civil religion.”<sup>104</sup> This, he says, holds people together but it does not necessarily transform people at any deep level. If there were to be a way to measure the effectiveness of formation programs and experiences, it would be the extent to which another person has been helped to see that God is present and active in their life, enabling them to wake up and be the best version of themselves. Rohr’s way of putting this is that “we need transformed people today, and not just people with answers.”<sup>105</sup>

Writers on mysticism and contemplation are unified on the fact that the human ego presents significant challenges, some of which were mentioned above. Merton uses language such as the “false self”, “external self” or “superficial self”.<sup>106</sup> This is the ‘self’ that competes, controls, owns and accomplishes. It is the desire in us to only think our way through things, and interpret achievements as our own. Rohr believes that it is our ego, and how we tend to think about the world and our place in it, that builds resistance to change as we move through life. That is why “most people hunker down into mere survival. Ego is just another word for blindness.”<sup>107</sup> Yet, “change is God’s clear pattern.”<sup>108</sup> Merton attributes part of this blindness to what he observes to be an obsession with busyness in our life. He squarely challenges any notion that a sense of importance and worthiness is tied up with the extent to which someone is busy

Some never get as far as contemplation because they are attached to activities and enterprises that seem to be important. Blinded by their desire for ceaseless motion, for a constant sense of achievement, famished with a crude hunger for results, for visible and tangible success, they work themselves into a state in which they cannot believe that they are pleasing to God

unless they are busy with a dozen jobs at the same time.<sup>109</sup>

This is a challenge for today’s Church in Australia. As Religious Congregations transfer the responsibility of their works to non-consecrated people, commonly referred to as the laity,<sup>110</sup> there is a distinct vulnerability of the works remaining truly that of the Church, let alone the continuation of a charismatic tradition. This vulnerability comes in the form of a corporate mindset and heartset permeating the work culture, focused on *getting the job done!* The irony is not lost to the mystic, who is conscious that because of the interplay between who I am, what God is doing with me, and what I am doing with God, then the job is never *done*. What we do as people of faith, should never be separated from who we are as people of faith, and why we are people of faith. The fundamental premise that we are opening ourselves to God in our life, knowing ourselves more deeply, and in turn being drawn to participate in the work and activities that bring about unity, emphasises internal transformation as much as it does on outward results. Rohr names it as

When so many become professional church workers without going through spiritual transformation at any deep level, religious work becomes a career, and church becomes something one “attends”.<sup>111</sup>

However, he suggests that this is not necessarily a recent phenomenon, describing how in the Catholic tradition, monks, nuns and friars have over the years become workers for the institution, accepting how things are done, often at the expense of their own deeper traditions of transformation. “We morphed” he claims “into ‘Churchianity’ more than any genuine, transformative Christianity”.<sup>112</sup> Rediscovering our contemplative tradition can lead

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104 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 72

105 Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden – Scripture as Spirituality* (USA: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2008) 11

106 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 7,25

107 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 90

108 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 96

109 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 206

110 The reluctance to use the word ‘lay people’ in this context is because men and women of religious orders are strictly understood as ‘lay people’ in Church language when talking of clerical and other responsibilities.

111 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 37

112 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 108

us back to a more transformative Christianity, starting with practicing our attentiveness to God, and a greater consciousness of God's active presence in our life.

The development of our 'true-self' is connected to the extent to which we can expand our level of consciousness to the present moment, and become more aware of the presence of God in all things – including in us. Merton says it like this

There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular. Our external, superficial self is not eternal, not spiritual. Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this "I" is really "not I".<sup>113</sup>

For Merton, this escape from what he calls the "prison of our own false self"<sup>114</sup> will bring with it an unrivalled sense of joy as we enter into union with God, with ourselves, and with all of life. The summary phrase he uses for when we reach this state of life is "loving God perfectly."<sup>115</sup> As we overcome our false self, and embark on this journey towards fullness, our authentic self, it taps into the notion of *vocation* in the truest sense of collaborating with God – of hearing God from within. We cooperate with what God is already doing in us. In Merton's words, "our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life",<sup>116</sup> or perhaps even more succinctly, "the contemplative enters into God in order to be created."<sup>117</sup>

In our exploration of the 'how question' in relation to cultivating a contemplative attitude or mystical stance in life, the role of humility deserves particular mention. As was highlighted earlier in the paper, those who contributed to what is often

referred to as the French school of spiritual writers,<sup>118</sup> emphasised humility. The same can be said of writers on the mystic tradition from the twentieth century onwards. Humility is a non-negotiable for living contemplatively. Merton describes humility as the ultimate freedom, where a person ceases paying attention to their own deeds, reputation and need for achievement, such that they "are at last completely free to serve God."<sup>119</sup> He describes it as the very thing that will liberate a person from their "external and egoistic self",<sup>120</sup> and it being integral to the journey to authenticity

humility brings with it a deep refinement of spirit, a peacefulness, a tact, a common sense... and it takes heroic humility to be yourself and to be nobody but the man, or the artist, that God intended you to be.<sup>121</sup>

Humility has something to do with resting fully in God, and knowing that all in our life flows from there. Rohr describes the role of contemplative prayer for cultivating humility as "the awareness of God's presence supplants the awareness of our own presence."<sup>122</sup> Merton concludes that

It is almost impossible to overestimate the value of true humility and its power in the spiritual life...for faith and humility are inseparable. In perfect humility all selfishness disappears and your soul no longer lives for itself – it is lost and submerged in Him and transformed into Him.<sup>123</sup>

A final point on the 'how' of living contemplatively today, drawing on the mystic tradition, is the role of the imagination. Returning to the pivotal thinking of Bonaventure, it is said about him that he engaged his imagination to illuminate his faith journey, and encouraged others to do the same

113 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 7

114 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 25

115 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 25

116 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 32

117 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 111

118 When listing key influences and practitioners of contemplative prayer, among the French school of spiritual writers, Thomas Keating includes St Francis de Sales.

119 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 58

120 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 66

121 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 100

122 Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 40

123 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 181

Bonaventure is not hesitant to let his inspired imagination serve him on his journey into God...he will encourage the reader to reflect on the biblical scene he is referencing and enter into it in his/her mind in order to tend to the tree of life and prayerfully feast of its fruits.<sup>124</sup>

Further, Bonaventure was aware of the essential role of the imagination in all aspects of prayer life, seeing it as “one of the six faculties or powers of the soul which help us draw closer to God.”<sup>125</sup> Merton picks up the role of creativity and imagination in believing that in every moment and every event of a person’s life, seeds are planted into their soul, hinting towards something of the role of leaders in the future Church saying that “for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.”<sup>126</sup> In responding to these moments and events

We will learn to take the risks implied by faith, to make the choices that deliver us from our routine self and open to us the door of a new being, a new reality.<sup>127</sup>

The creative and imaginative dimension is also reflected in the way Merton talks about the experience of our inner self awakening, “with a momentary flash, in the instant of recognition when we say ‘Yes!’ to the indwelling Divine Persons”.<sup>128</sup> He captures the journey and dynamism of becoming more conscious and being at one with God, describing that “what is really *new* is what was there all the time. The really “new” is that which, at every moment, springs freshly into existence.”<sup>129</sup> Tacey believes that religion today needs to draw from the “poetic imagination and the contemporary arts”<sup>130</sup> if it is to remain relevant to the times. The art of poetry and metaphor illuminate God’s presence, “so that we can see things in a new light.”<sup>131</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This year, 2017, The Marist Brothers celebrate two hundred years of life and mission in the Catholic church. Having started in a rural setting in France, Marcellin’s desire to extend his vision abroad was made clear in a letter he wrote to Bishop de Bruillard in 1837 where he stated that “our plans include all the dioceses of the world.”<sup>132</sup> Today, the Marist Brothers have a presence in over eighty countries. For the Marist spiritual tradition in Australia to remain a genuine and authentic expression of what began in the small hamlet of Lavalla, a significant indicator will be the extent to which tomorrow’s Marists can cultivate practicing the presence of God. This was at the heart of it for Marcellin. Being at one with God aligns, and gives ultimate meaning to, all that flows from this experience. We have learnt from some of Marcellin’s influences, that this practice is not easy and takes “application and courage”, and in a world that is increasingly busy and distracting, it provides a way to keep one’s spirit “recollected in God”.<sup>133</sup> Along with the many schools, solidarity projects and other ministries that are carried out today in the name of Marist mission, it is this gift, growing the capacity in people to be attentive to God and the inclination to rest fully in God, that will define Marist life and mission in the future. After all, this is the root spirit of Mary’s way, and therefore the foundation to the Marian face of the Church. Mary was attentive to God and made the choice to rest her life in God. This provides assurance that any activity and action that emerges is of God. Marcellin was particularly fond of Psalm 126 – *if the Lord does not build the house!*

Contemporary writers on this contemplative disposition, have clearly reinforced the point that *resting in God* compels us to reach out, to serve others, to engage in God’s work of responding to

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124 Martignetti, *St Bonaventure’s Tree of Life*, 48

125 Martignetti, *St Bonaventure’s Tree of Life*, 66

126 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 14

127 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 16

128 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 42

129 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 107

130 Tacey, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 161

131 Tacey, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 166

132 Writings of Marcellin found at: [www.champagnat.org](http://www.champagnat.org), Letter 93

133 Br Lawrence, *Presence of God*, 23



the needs of the most vulnerable in our world. Mary's experience sets this pattern of contemplation and action, and Marists today are encouraged to embrace this same dynamic, having the potential and capacity to break into each moment of our life and our being. Our journey in life becomes an ever-increasing fabric of one with God. In Merton's words

Contemplation is awakening, enlightenment and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God's creative, dynamic intervention in our daily life.<sup>134</sup>

Lanfrey warns against confusing passivity with inactivity in these moments. The former relates to the initiative being with God as the "transcendent breaks into one's human existence"<sup>135</sup>, which changes the way we see and know things.

Marists of the future will be people who are practicing and promoting contemplation in the life of the Church. They will do this knowing that it is Mary's way, the Marian Church, faithfully nurturing the seed that Marcellin wanted to grow – the *Little Brothers of Mary*. Today, our world, therefore our Church, needs more leaders who operate out of this contemplative space more so than the space of competition, popularity and ego. Pope Francis is seen by many to be doing this. Merton reminds us that it is counter-cultural, inevitably leads to change, and involves offering something new. It prevents what Merton describes as the great temptation of people today to immerse themselves in the mass of others, providing an "escape into the great formless sea of irresponsibility which is the crowd."<sup>136</sup> The mystic experience of life draws us, through love, to stand up and be a participant in God's mission, and a voice for those who are voiceless. That is, to *be* Church.

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134 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 5

135 Lanfrey, *Origins of Marist Spirituality*, 9

136 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 54