

Montagne: the dance of mission

Letter of the
Superior
General

25
March
2015

Dear Marists of Champagnat,

On 24th October 2014, we began preparations for the Marist Bicentenary throughout the world; on that occasion I wrote a letter entitled *Just a Tent as the Heart of the Future*, offering a reflection on the overall theme of the Bicentenary: *A New Beginning*.

In that letter, I promised I would write a further three, one for each year of preparation, taking up, in turn, the motivational themes: *Montagne, Fourvière, La Valla*. In this letter, published during the *Montagne Year*, I would like to share with you some of the reflections on the mission that has been entrusted to us within the Church, and that we have inherited, as a specific gift, from the hands of Fr Champagnat and of the thousands of Marists who have gone before us.

During the course of my writing this letter, we are celebrating the second anniversary of the beginning of the pontificate of Pope Francis. In a very short period of time, he has earned the love and trust of believers and non-believers worldwide. In November 2013, as a result of the Synod on the New Evangelisation, he issued an Apostolic Exhortation on *the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*. As is customary, the title *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) was taken from the opening latin words of the Exhortation.

From the very outset, the Pope made it clear that the contents of the text were to be taken as a *programme* that would have *important consequences*. And he issues an explicit invitation:

*I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a **pastoral and missionary conversion**, which **cannot leave things as they presently are**. We are no longer served by "simple administration". In all the regions of the earth let us be in a **"permanent state of mission"**.*

Evangelii Gaudium, 25

Since there could be no better time to reflect on the Pope's invitation than this celebration of the Montagne Year, I will base my reflection on *Evangelii Gaudium*, which I recommend to all Marist missionaries as a bedside book. It can be our small contribution to a renewal of the Church advocated by the Pope himself.

We have to rediscover
the new flavour of the
essential things,
of the truths that we
can no longer see,
because they are so
close to us
as to be almost
invisible.
Luigi Ciotti

Francis, go **repair my Church in ruins**. It was that call which mobilised Francis of Assisi at the end of the 12th century, and it seems to be this same task that the current Pope, Francis of the 21st century, wishes to carry out. In fact, **he uses the word *reform* seven times and the word *renewal* ten times throughout *Evangelii Gaudium*.**

To renew the Church. That was also the vision that inflamed the hearts of the twelve newly-ordained priests who, in 1816, went up to Fourvière to make their pledge at the foot of the Black Madonna, thus giving birth to the Society of Mary. Part of our DNA as Marists, then, is to renew the Church, giving it a Marian face. In a spirit of enthusiasm and deep joy, we want to join Pope Francis in his reform of the Church.

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Mission as a divine dance

What do we mean when we talk about *mission*? Is it relevant to all, or only to some, of us?

These questions, and perhaps many others, are on people's minds, because we often use the same word, but with quite different meanings. For example, there are many people that today still talk about *missionaries* as those who have left their country of origin to go and evangelise in another country. This reduces mission to a limited group of people. In other contexts, it seems to have taken on a broader meaning, since even in the business world one speaks of *mission* with reference to the main task in strategic planning.

Here, we are referring to the theological sense of mission, and, therefore, also speaking about its close relation to our image of God. It is for this reason that we will start by allowing ourselves to be challenged by the image of the God of Jesus, as we understand it today.

Fr Stephen Bevans S.V.D. says that the God revealed by **Jesus of Nazareth is best described not by a noun, but by a verb.** This means that we do not picture God as some kind of static person – a little like us, but rather wiser and more powerful – someone who is *out there* or *up there*, but rather as **a Movement, an Embrace, a Flow** – more personal than we can imagine – always and everywhere present in creation.

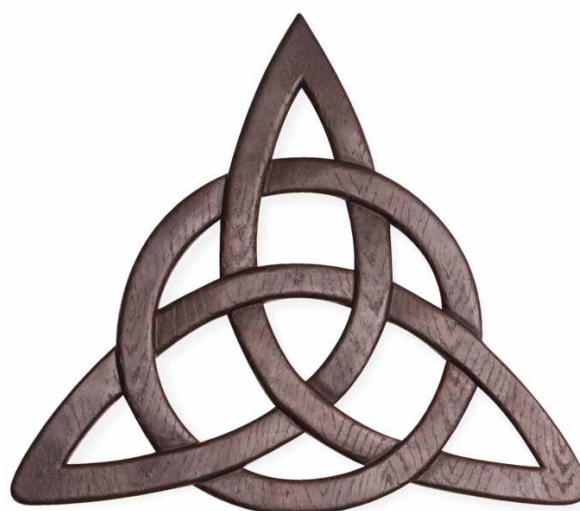
In the depths of God's being, God is **Trinity, namely relationship and communion.**

The medieval mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg, speaks of **restless Divinity**, and an **overflowing stream ... that never stagnates and continues to flow effortlessly and endlessly**. God is not static, not even in God's own inner self. In the depths of God's being, God is Trinity, namely relationship and communion.

A year ago, I had the good fortune to visit the small island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland. It was there that, in the latter part of the sixth century, St Columba founded a monastery which became a sort of *school for missionaries* who spread Christianity throughout Scotland. Monastic life remained on the island for a thousand years, until the time of the Scottish Reformation. Now, after being abandoned for more than four centuries, the island houses an ecumenical Christian community. Today on the island, one can still see a number of Celtic crosses with the *triquetra* or *Celtic trinity knot*.

Celtic Christians adopted an existing symbol and added to it a circle to express a reality which cannot be described adequately in words. As you can see, it is a wonderful way to represent God as Trinity, God who is **relationship** and **communion** in a permanent and dynamic way.

The *triple helix*, used by the theologian Elizabeth Johnson, is another beautiful image similar to this, not taken from the Celtic tradition, but rather from the world of biology. As we know, the double helix of DNA, which contains all genetic information, is present in every cell of every living thing; the strands of the double helix *do not originate from each other, but are simply woven together, not in a static way, but rather constantly moving in a dance, separating and joining up again, creating new individuals...* The image of the triple helix – triple because of the Trinity – intensifies this life-generating movement.



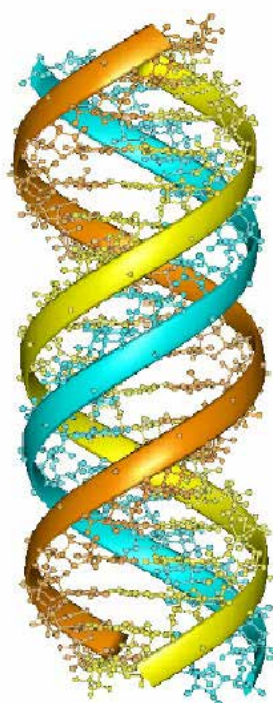
God appears, as a triple helix of life, twisting and turning, a threefold dancing web of relationships that lies at the very heart of all life, as well as in the depths of the world.

God of evolution, Heart of the world, motor of evolution, essence of all energy, focus of ultimate and universal energy... these are some of the written invocations on a small picture of the Heart of Jesus that were found on the work desk of Fr Teilhard de Chardin SJ when he died.

It is as though God's self were a dance of life, of love, of energy, moving throughout the world, inviting each one to join in the dance. And as more people join the dance, even more feel drawn to it.

This reminds me of the *Ciranda*, a dance from the north east of Brazil, where the people form a large circle, and dance to a slow, repetitive rhythm. Even if a small group begins the dance, as many people as wish can join in, without limit.

Krzysztof Kieślowski, film director and screenwriter, produced ten short films under the international title, *The Decalogue*. In the first of these, about the first commandment, we find a wonderfully tender scene about who God is.



The protagonist is a boy, Pavel. His father, a computer engineer, has never spoken about God. One day, the boy asks his aunt:

Do you believe in God?
Yes, she answers.
And who is God?
His aunt comes close to him and gives him a big hug. And after a moment of silence she asks him:
What do you feel right now?
I love you, answered the boy.
*Exactly, Pavel. **That is God.***

Yes, that is God: love that issues forth, that creates freely, that redeems and heals, and that challenges creation. A **movement** that is an **overwhelming flow of life and of love** that cannot be stopped. Love is expansive by nature, and God is love.

*In the book of Revelation, Jesus says that he is at the door, and knocks. Obviously, the text refers to his knocking from the outside in order to enter, but I think of the times in which **Jesus is knocking from within so that we will let him come out.** The self-referential Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out.*

That is how Cardinal Bergoglio spoke in one of the sessions with the Cardinals just before they elected him Pope. And he added: When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelise, she becomes self-referential and then gets sick.

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

**Mission
precedes the
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Mission belongs
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Mission precedes the Church. **Mission belongs to God:** in and out of the world through the Spirit; God who, in the person of Jesus, teaches, heals, welcomes, suffers. And it is extended today through men and women whom God invites to share in his mission, through the Church, called to be a servant of God's mission in the world. That is the reason the Church exists. That is why, **when the Church does not come out of herself to evangelise, she becomes self-referential and then gets sick.**

Do you want to dance? Do you want to join in this immense divine Ciranda that extends and grows by attraction over all the world?

*If we were truly happy with you, Lord,
we would be unable to resist
the urge to dance that is sweeping the world,
and we would be able to discern
how it is you would like us to dance
by following closely the steps of your Providence.*

*To be a good dancer, with you as with others,
we do not need to know where the dance will lead.*

*We need only follow, be lively, be light,
and, above all, not be rigid;
we do not need any explanation of the steps you prefer.*

*We need simply to be an extension of you,
agile and alive,
feeling through you the rhythm of the orchestra.*

*We do not need to set our hearts on always
moving forward, but can accept turning round,
stepping to the side.*

*We need to know when to stop and when to glide,
rather than simply to walk.*

Lord, come, invite us.

*Help us live our lives,
not like some chess match where all is calculated,
nor like a game where all is difficult,
nor a theory that gives us a headache,
but like an endless feast where the encounter with you is renewed...
like a ball,
like a dance
enfolded in the arms of your Grace,
in the universal music of love.*

Lord, come, invite us

Madeleine Delbr l - Taken from *Le bal de l'ob issance*



We sense the challenge of **finding and sharing a "mystique" of living together**, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage... If we were able to take this route, it would be so good, so soothing, so liberating and hope-filled! To go out of ourselves and to join others is healthy for us. To be self-enclosed is to taste the bitter poison of immanence, and humanity will be worse for every selfish choice we make.

Evangelii Gaudium, 87

Marists in prophetic dialogue

St. Gregory of Nyssa (4th century) said that the full communion to which God calls all human beings is the same communion that God experiences in God's inner self. As we said before, God is communion and wants to be *all in all* (1 Cor 15: 28). The very nature of God, therefore, is to be in dialogue.

And if we consider **mission as dialogue**, then we are very far from that image of mission as *conquering the world for Christ*, and the people committed to mission as the marines of the Catholic Church. **It is rather about recognising that mission must be carried out in vulnerability, in humility, open to being evangelised by the very ones we are called to evangelise.** The Korean theologian Hyun Young Hak says: *I do not believe in a disabled God who was brought over on the back of some missionary. God was already present and active in history long before the missionaries came.*

In his Apostolic Exhortation, the Pope dedicates a whole section to **social dialogue as a contribution to peace** (238 to 258). But perhaps his gestures have spoken even louder than his words.

For example, a very significant decision by the Pope was to grant the first interview of his pontificate to a self-proclaimed non-believer, Eugenio Scalfari, director of the openly anticlerical newspaper *La Repubblica*. An authentic dialogue began there, and it has been maintained in subsequent interviews.

That attitude of dialogue impressed the famous philosopher Zygmunt Bauman so much that he published an article entitled, *What if the Pope loves real dialogue more than truth*.

In that article he states:

*Pope Francis not only preaches the need for dialogue, but he puts it into practice. An authentic dialogue, among people with explicitly different points of view, who communicate to better understand one another... For the future of humanity, in an irreversible multicultural and multi-centric world, accepting dialogue is **a matter of life or death**.*

Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God (EG 272). That is why the Pope so strongly promotes the culture of encounter, in a context which promotes a culture of conflict, a culture of fragmentation, a culture of waste. During the celebration of the vigil of Pentecost 2013, he said:

We must go out to meet them, and with our faith we must create a "culture of encounter", a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith... They all have something in common with us: they are images of God, they are children of God. Going out to meet everyone, without losing sight of our own position. There is another important point: encountering the poor. If we step outside ourselves we find poverty.

And if we consider mission as dialogue, then we are very far from the image of mission as conquering the world for Christ, and the people committed to mission as the marines of the Catholic Church.

In a number of places in the world, I have come across wonderful initiatives that connect young people from diverse social backgrounds, building bridges between them, and promoting that culture of encounter. The same is true for many Marists who allow themselves to be challenged by situations that at times are far from their everyday experiences, in such a way that it begins to **wonderfully complicate** their lives. As Pope Francis puts it:



*Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord's wounds at arm's length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, **to touch the suffering flesh of others**. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into **the reality of other people's lives** and know **the power of tenderness**. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people. (EG 270).*

The participants of the 21st General Chapter understood the importance of dialogue for all Marists, and they adopted a methodology that would best ensure it. **The round tables** have now become one of the symbols of that Chapter, a symbol that has been spreading among us, although, obviously, it takes more than round tables to ensure quality dialogue!

I believe the intuition of the General Chapter was a very sound one: we are in great need of dialogue. We have too easily fallen into the temptation of dividing ourselves into factions and raising walls that separate and isolate. At times it has been because we did not have the same style of initial formation; at other times, because we had a different social or political vision; sometimes because we found it hard to agree on different styles of apostolic commitment or community insertion; or again, because of our difficulty in living with cultural and linguistic diversity, etc. **How can we live mission as dialogue if we are incapable of living it among ourselves?**

Dialogue is an art and it requires learning, effort, time, perseverance and patience. We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing.

Fortunately, I can also affirm I have seen wonderful examples of people overcoming conflict (which will always exist, as long as there are human beings) through open, transparent and honest dialogue. Dialogue is an art and it requires learning, effort, time, perseverance and patience. *We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an **openness of heart** which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders* (EG 171).

In a context of violence and misunderstanding, **dialogue among ourselves and with any human being is a prophetic action.** That is why we speak of *prophetic dialogue*.

This is also because we want **dialogue** and **prophecy** always to go together since they complement one another. In 2000, during the General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), the capitulants from Asia insisted, given their background, that mission had to be understood as dialogue; at the same time, those from Latin America, also speaking from their own context, understood mission as **prophecy**. In the end, through the very exercise of dialogue itself, everyone came to understand that both aspects are important since they complement one another, and they adopted the expression **prophetic dialogue**. However, there are times when dialogue is not enough, and what is required is prophetic denunciation and challenge. This is what the South African missiologist David Bosch called **bold humility**.

Zygmunt Bauman, and with him many other people of good will, look at the ecclesial community from the outside, and do not simply admire the prophetic character of true dialogue, but rather recognize it as a common point of encounter. Yes, *for the future of humanity... accepting dialogue is a matter of life or death*.

The walls which divide us can be broken down only if we are prepared to listen and learn from one another. We need to resolve our differences through forms of dialogue which help us grow in understanding and mutual respect. A culture of encounter demands that we be ready not only to give, but also to receive...

To dialogue means to believe that the "other" has something worthwhile to say, and to entertain his or her point of view and perspective. Engaging in dialogue does not mean renouncing our own ideas and traditions, but the claim that they alone are valid or absolute.

Pope Francis

Message for the 48th World Communications Day, 2014

Marists, accomplices of the Spirit

We have already stressed in several ways that mission is not a peripheral reality, but a central one that defines the very being of the Church. It is about the **mission of God**, the **mission of the Spirit** from which the Church and the Marist community are formed and operate.

It is in this context that we must place the project we have called *New Models of Animation, Governance and Management*, the second of the three phases of which will end next July. It is the mission that shapes the Marist Institute, and not vice versa. This has been the case throughout our history in our attentiveness to the signs of the times and the needs of children and youth.

**New Models of
Animation,
Governance
and
Management**

Today, the Marist mission is carried out very differently from the times of Fr Champagnat or the 1950s. That is why we are asking ourselves what type of structures of leadership, governance, management and what new practices we need to adopt at this point in our history, so that the Marist mission can develop and grow in faithfulness to the Spirit of God, to serve the children and youth of today in the best possible way.

As ***accomplices of the Spirit***, according to the expression coined appropriately by the theologian García Paredes, we should not think that everything depends on us. Activism can disconnect us from the Spirit and cause us to fall into what Pope Francis called *spiritual worldliness* (EG 93-97).

Having done everything we need to do, we should not be too anxious because, after all, it is God's work. Fr Champagnat, who loved Psalm 127 so much, teaches us just that: *If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour.* And he would frequently repeat, addressing himself to Mary: *This is your work, because you have gathered us together, but if you do not continue to come to our aid, we will be extinguished like a lamp without oil. And it will not be our work that dies, but yours. We, therefore, trust in your powerful protection, and we will trust in it always.*

This attitude of trust is well described in a text attributed to Archbishop Romero:

*We cannot do everything,
and there is a sense of liberation in realising that.
This enables us to do something and to do it very well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

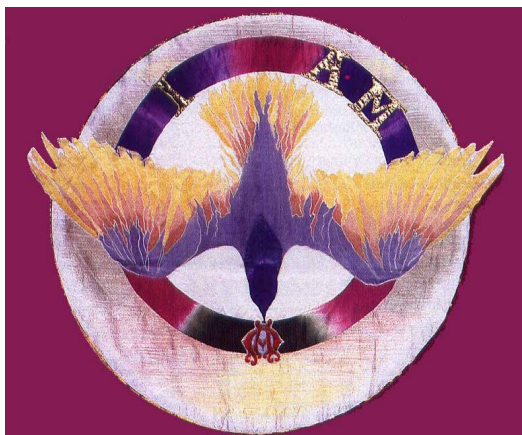
From Mary we learn that evangelisation is not the result of a determined effort on our part, but on our openness and docility to the Spirit of God.

Mary, model of cooperation with the Spirit, teaches us to open ourselves totally, and allow ourselves to be transformed by the action of the Spirit. From Mary we learn that evangelisation is not the result of a determined effort on our part, but on our openness and docility to the Spirit of God.

The question we will be asked at the end of our life will be a simple one. Not "who have you been?" but rather "what did you allow to be done through you?" These words from Christiane Singer, a writer who was very interested in spiritual themes, remind us that evangelising has more to do with an attitude of letting go and transparency rather than with large structures or multiplying activities, completely disconnected from one's own centre.

The personal experience of the writer demonstrates this so eloquently. In September 2006, the doctor who diagnosed her with cancer told her she had six months to live. From that moment onwards, Christiane started to write a diary detailing what she was experiencing throughout those six months. It was

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published after her death in April 2007, entitled *Last Fragments of a Long Journey*. In that diary, she tells of a conversation she had at the end of January 2007 with one of the doctors who was attending her. He told her: *My colleagues and I feel that you are something of an enigma. Seeing the way you cope with your illness and the way you simply live life, we are discovering another way of relating to illness and to life: it is deeply disturbing.*

The Church does not grow by proselytizing; she grows by "attracting" others, affirmed Pope Benedict XVI. Consequently,

an evangeliser must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that "delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ". (EG 10).

Vladimir Solov'ëv reminds us that diamonds and coal are made of the same substance: they have the same chemical composition. The difference lies in the order of the elements that form them. It is this that makes them transparent or opaque to light. Coal absorbs light, while diamonds reflect it. When I look at coal, I see only coal; on the other hand, diamonds reflect the sky.

The call to be **accomplices of the Spirit** emphasises that the process of evangelisation is not simply a matter of methods or strategies, which may be more or less successful; rather it is directly related to people and institutions, and to the capacity or incapacity to make transparent the goodness, peace and strength of the Spirit of God.

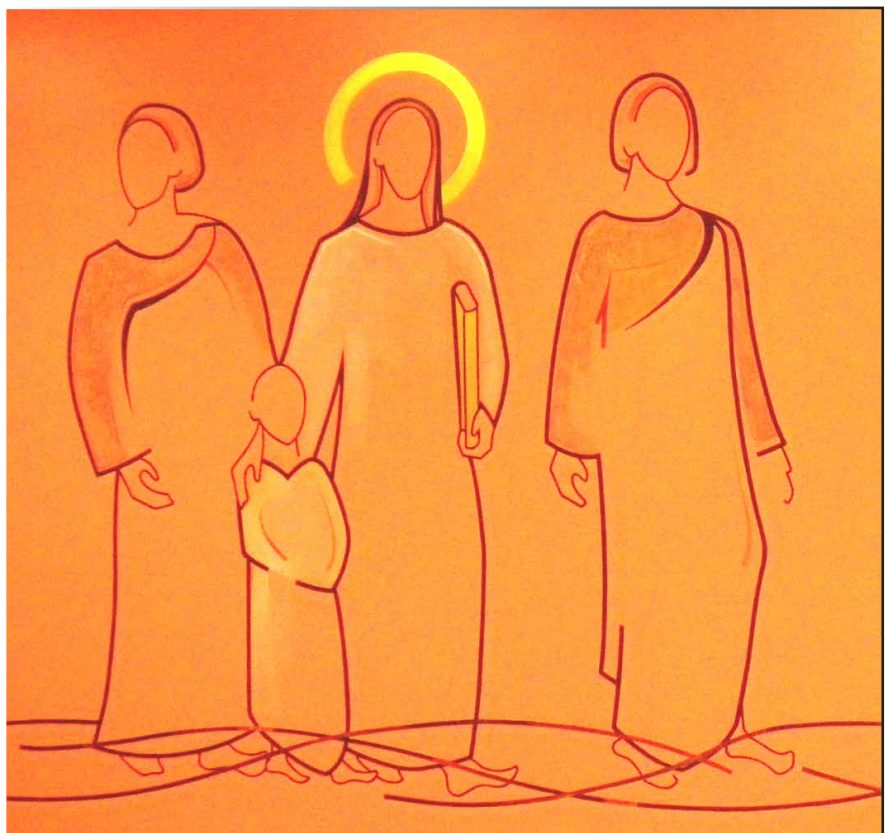
Diamonds and coal are made of the same chemical composition. The difference lies in the order of the elements that form them. It is this that makes them transparent or opaque to light.

Spirit-filled evangelizers are evangelizers who pray and work. Mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach are of no help to evangelization, nor are dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality which can change hearts. These unilateral and incomplete proposals only reach a few groups and prove incapable of radiating beyond them because they curtail the Gospel.

(EG 262)

In a Greek collection of sayings of the Desert Fathers of the fourth century, there is a very challenging story. To a question put to an old man as to why so many were abandoning religious life, he answered by inviting the person to observe how dogs hunt hares; one of them sees a hare and follows it. The others, who have only seen the dog running, follow it for some time, but then turn around when they get tired. Only the dog who has seen the hare follows it until he catches up with it. He does not change direction even when the others turn back. He does not worry about the cliffs, the forests or the brambles. The thorns scratch and prick him, but he does not rest until he has caught his prey. This is how one who seeks the Lord must be, says the old man. **He sets his eyes on Jesus and overcomes all difficulties that come his way until he eventually meets him.**

It is the same experience that two of Jesus' disciples had. They leave Jerusalem for Emmaus sad and discouraged after the troubling experience of the cross. Unable to interpret their experience from a faith perspective, their hearts are not open to the newness of the unexpected. Only when they open themselves up with simplicity to the awe of the mysterious presence of the Risen One do they have a profound experience that marks a before and an after in their lives. *Did not our hearts burn within us?* they ask each other. The very ones who fled Jerusalem, frightened and downcast, immediately make their way back, eager to share with the other disciples the experience of their journey with Jesus. Two *disciples* who become *missionaries* as a result of their personal encounter with the Risen One.



*We have experienced the centrality of Jesus Christ in our lives and have felt how he is sending us out as missionaries and evangelizers. We have welcomed Mary's invitation: "Do whatever He tells you" (John 2: 5). Walking with her, we have heeded God calling us in the depth of our hearts with an invitation to respond as she did, **to proclaim wholeheartedly the prophetic words of her Magnificat.** As Mary, we want to develop a disposition of openness to the new situations emerging in our ever-evolving world.*

II Marist International Mission Assembly

Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary disciples". If we are not convinced, let us look at those first disciples, who, immediately after encountering the gaze of Jesus, went forth to proclaim him joyfully: "We have found the Messiah!" (Jn1:41). The Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus and many Samaritans come to believe in him "because of the woman's testimony" (Jn4:39). So too, Saint Paul, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, "immediately proclaimed Jesus" (Acts9:20; cf. 22:6-21). So what are we waiting for? (EG 120)

Marists who 'go forth'

Starting from the image of God as Trinity, who seeks to make all creation enter into the dynamic of love, it is easy to understand what Pope Francis repeats so often: that the Church does not have its focus on itself, but rather on the God who is Love and who continuously pours himself forth. In his address to the Cardinals before the Conclave, he used an image much-loved by the Fathers of the Church; referring to the ecclesial community, he compared it to the moon, which does not have its own light, but rather reflects the light of the sun: *When the Church is self-referential, inadvertently, she believes she has her own light; she ceases to be the mysterium lunae and gives way to that very serious evil, spiritual worldliness.*

Therefore, according to Pope Francis, the renewal of the Church will not be carried out by the raising of walls to protect herself from external threats, which would be a kind of ecclesial introversion, seeking self-preservation above all (EG 27), but rather by placing the entire Church **permanently in a state of mission** (EG 25).

Similarly, as members of the Church, **we Marists exist solely and exclusively to participate in the mission of God and not to seek our own survival.** For this reason, we are called to participate in this missionary dynamism that calls us to **go forth**. In this sense, I think number 49 of *Evangelii Gaudium* is particularly memorable:

The renewal of the Church will not be carried out by the raising of walls to protect herself from external threats.

Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with

Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37).

Listening to his own heart full of compassion, Marcellin Champagnat knew how to take risks and abandon his comfort and security. That is how he lived his entire life. That too is how the Marist Institute has tried to live throughout the 200 years of its existence. At times, however, we have not always allowed ourselves to be challenged by the reality of the new Montagnes and have closed in on ourselves and become settled.

A number of years ago, the Marist Brothers of the then Province of Sydney (Australia), asked Mr Paul Newton, a former student of Marist College Eastwood, to paint a picture of the Montagne event. Since it was a painting that had been commissioned, he had to follow the instructions he was given: among others, to include several people and symbols around the scene. That painting, known to many, is now in the Provincial House of Australia.

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The artist, however, was not particularly satisfied with the result, and wanted to create his own interpretation of the scene. So he painted a second painting, reproduced here; a much simpler one, focusing solely on the event itself. It depicts Marcellin, in an attitude of quiet suffering and deep meditation, a living image of the Mary presented by Michelangelo in his famous Pietà. In the words of Pope Francis: *We incarnate the duty of hearing the cry of the poor when we are deeply moved by the suffering of others* (EG 193).

The light emanating from above represents the Lord's inspiration to initiate the project that Marcellin already cherished in his heart: *the Little Brothers of Mary*.

Today, when there are still so many young people who *live without strength, light and comfort of the friendship of Jesus Christ, without a community of faith that contains them, without a horizon of meaning and*

life, we cannot remain indifferent. They are the new *Montagnes* of today. The reality of their lives challenges us and invites us to be generous.

Today, Montagne takes on a thousand different faces, and lives, often in very different situations. I believe it is particularly significant that in the life of Fr Champagnat written by Br Jean Baptiste Furet, Montagne is never mentioned. There is only the mention of a dying boy. We do not know if the boy of the story was, in fact, Montagne; there even seem to be historical reasons to doubt that it was. However, that is not important, because it is about the symbol – without face or

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name – of so many other young people who *are dying or are not living their life fully*.

If you are reading this letter, it is probably because you have a Marist commitment of service, of one kind or another, to children and young people. You have the extraordinary privilege of already participating in the *mission of God*. So what does Pope Francis' invitation to the universal Church to **go forth** mean for each one of us today? If we are all called to *a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are* (EG 25), what type of conversion do I feel called to?

In his Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis offers us words of advice and guidance:

*We may not always be able to reflect adequately the beauty of the Gospel, but there is one sign which we should never lack: **the option for those who are least, those whom society discards**. (EG 195).*

Discernment of the General Conference

*Each Christian and every community must **discern** the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to **go forth from our own comfort zone** in order to **reach all the "peripheries"** in need of the light of the Gospel* (EG 20).

In September 2013 at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage, and in accordance with the Pope's request, the participants of our General Conference carried out a collective exercise of discernment about Marist life and mission. Together we built a vision of the Institute that we want for the near future, a vision which the members of the General Council summed up as follows:

MYSTICS AND PROPHETS: A NEW BEGINNING

Invited to build a Church with a Marian face, we heard the call of the 21st General Chapter, With Mary, go in haste to a new land! During the General Conference of 2013, we studied this call more deeply, and discerned the directions for the future. We see all of this as an invitation to commit ourselves to responding with new and daring ways to the changing and urgent situations of our world of today.

As we approach the beginning of the third century of Marist life and mission, and trying to be faithful to our origins, we believe that the time has come for Marists of Champagnat to awaken the dawn of a new beginning through:

- **A SIGNIFICANT EVANGELIZING PRESENCE AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN SITUATIONS OF VULNERABILITY**, where others do not go, giving them prominence and defending their rights.

- **GLOBAL AVAILABILITY:** by creating a new mentality and a new attitude, looking beyond the usual horizons of our administrative units and regions, and opening up to the possibilities of international collaboration for mission.
- **INTERCULTURALITY:** Marist international communities, which promote within themselves a communion of cultures and an appreciation of their diversity, as well as their integration in the context in which they are located.
- **A SIGNIFICANT LIFE:** through its gospel quality and through the fraternal witness of the communities, which can take different forms according to the membership (brothers, laity, other congregations...)
- **AN EMPHASIS ON SPIRITUALITY:** a clear commitment to enter more deeply into our spiritual experience, paying particular attention to the mystical and prophetic dimensions of our Marist life.

We believe that the elements contained in this vision are a call to each and every Marist to make these a reality, in accordance with the particular context. At the same time, we are aware that **interculturality**, an important aspect of this vision, is still very new in our Institute. For this reason, following the proposals made during the General Conference, we believe that we must continue to build international communities on the five continents, so that this vision of the future may take a concrete shape and be visible.

The Marist International Mission Assembly (Nairobi 2014) also emphasised that direction for the future:

We believe that we must continue to build international communities on the five continents.

Like a new Pentecost, the Spirit set our hearts on fire, and prompted us to dream of new horizons of greater vitality of the Marist charism, prompting us to dance to the rhythm of drums, and directing our steps towards the Montagne of our day. In a context of paradigm-shift and global change, we have strongly felt the need to have a new perspective, to see through the eyes of poor children, and with the tenderness and mercy of God. The Spirit has also sparked an attitude of deep communion among us, reflected in two African proverbs: "If you want to go fast, walk alone. If you want to go far, walk together" and "I am because we are" (UBUNTU).

To the communities of the current District of Asia (MDA), a result of the initiative of the previous General Council, and which was formerly known as *Asia Mission Ad Gentes*, we wish to add a number of new communities. This time, however, they will be distributed throughout the world, and will be set up and accompanied in close collaboration with each of the Marist regions.

Detailed below are some key elements of this project, which we intend to call **International Communities for a New Beginning**:

The creation of a minimum of 2 international communities in each of the 7 regions

of the Institute, with the exception of Asia, where the current communities of the MDA will be reinforced. The 6 remaining regions are: Africa, Arco Norte, Brazil, Cono Sur, Europe, and Oceania.

Each community will have a minimum of 4 members, at least 3 of whom will be brothers. Each region will determine the best way of shaping these communities, with brothers, lay men and women, and volunteers. The duration of the commitment will be adapted to the life circumstances of the members, especially in the case of the lay people, while always seeking to assure continuity of the community.

The vision, *Mystics and Prophets: A New Beginning*, which was presented above, will form the basis and framework for the development of projects in each of these communities.

It is our hope that by **2017** there will be at least one of these international communities in each of the regions. To this end, a programme of formation will be offered in February 2016 to those joining the new communities.

Today, then, I would like to renew the invitation I extended in my letter *To the Ends of the Earth*, in January 2013, to discern, before God, whether you feel **called to leave your home country to form part of an international community in another region of the world**.

If you wish to offer some years of your life to the service of the Marist mission beyond the borders of your province or your country, I encourage you to **step forward and make known your availability**, whether that be for a long period of time, or for a shorter stay (a minimum of three months).

You can do this by talking or writing to your Brother Provincial, who will indicate how to proceed. If for some particular reason you want to communicate directly with me, please feel free to do so.

If you wish to offer some years of your life to the service of the Marist mission beyond the borders of your province or your country, I encourage you to **step forward and make known your availability**, whether that be for a long period of time, or for a shorter stay.

This new project, which is linked to the *Marist District of Asia*, is a very concrete way of responding collectively, as an international community, to the invitation of putting oneself in a *permanent state of mission*, of discerning where in the world *the least, those whom society discards* are to be found, and seeing how we can be a presence among them.



Provincial, Local and Personal Discernment

Pope Francis tells us: *Each Christian and every community **must discern** the path that the Lord points out.* It is not enough, however, to undertake a process of discernment about our future as an international community. This urgent invitation should also extend to each province, each community or local work, and to each individual.

Each Christian and every community **must discern** the path that the Lord points out.

To distinguish good from bad, common sense is usually sufficient. The **exercise of discernment**, on the other hand, is always rather more delicate, because it is about choosing the best option among many options, all of them good. Collectively and individually, **we need to be highly attentive not to allow our selfishness and tendency towards comfort to interfere with the discernment process.**

In any case, the criteria for discernment offered by Pope Francis are quite clear (EG 195 and 20):

- *there is one sign which we should never lack: **the option for those who are least, those whom society discards** (EG 195);*
- *all of us are asked to obey his call to **go forth from our own comfort zone** in order **to reach all the "peripheries"** in need of the light of the Gospel (EG 20).*

On our journey **towards 2017**, many Provinces will hold Provincial Chapters. This is a privileged opportunity to discern, and to set priorities for the coming years. Local communities should also allow themselves to be challenged by the invitation to a *pastoral and missionary conversion*, perhaps by means of the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

And, at a personal level: Will I be able to not only allow myself to be challenged by the calls of today's Montagnes, but also to offer some concrete response?

*I feel tremendous gratitude to all those who are committed to working in and for the Church... The pain and the shame we feel at the sins of some members of the Church, and at our own, must never make us forget how many Christians are giving their lives in love. They help so many people to be healed or to die in peace in makeshift hospitals. They are present to those enslaved by different addictions in the poorest places on earth. They devote themselves to the education of children and young people. They take care of the elderly who have been forgotten by everyone else. They look for ways to communicate values in hostile environments. They are dedicated in many other ways to showing an immense love for humanity inspired by the God who became man. **I am grateful for the beautiful example given to me by so many Christians who joyfully sacrifice their lives and their time.** This witness comforts and sustains me in my own effort to overcome selfishness and to give more fully of myself. (Evangelii Gaudium, 76)*

What would you do if you were not afraid?

We are all invited to participate in the divine dance of mission. There is a place for everyone, regardless of age, competence, skills, health... We all have the possibility of making transparent some of God's beauty and goodness, regardless of what we do or fail to do.

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. **It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.** We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. **We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.** It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. (Marianne Williamson)*

What would we
do as **Marists**
if we were **not**
afraid?

What would you do if you were not afraid? I can still remember the impact that question had on me, the first time I read it several years ago in the book *Who Moved my Cheese?* It is a question that has stayed with me, especially when I have had to take important decisions. *What would you do if you were not afraid? What would we do as Marists if we were not afraid?*

In all probability, many of us have had the experience of being able to overcome our fears and take bold decisions in the face of an uncertain future. At that time, a series of capabilities that we were not even aware we had, surfaced within us. In the end, our life has been enriched in ways that we would never have imagined.

The Marist International Mission Assembly, in its final message, invited us to overcome our fears and our comforts:

*Our dream is that people will recognise that we Marists of Champagnat are **PROPHETS** because:*

- *We have moved out of our comfort zones, and are ready to go to the peripheries of our world, impelled to proclaim and build the reign of God.*
- *We are purposefully reaching out to the Montagne of our day, to be a significant presence among and with them.*

As we look to the 3rd century of Marist life, this first year of preparation provides us with an excellent opportunity to carry out what the Pope is inviting us to: *Each Christian and every community **must discern** the path that the Lord points out (EG 20).* We cannot pass up this moment of grace. It is about allowing ourselves to be challenged by what is essential to our mission as Marists, and to revise our attitudes to it. As Luigi Ciotti writes, *We have to rediscover the new flavour of the essential things, of the truths that we can no longer see, because they are so close to us as to be almost invisible.* We talk about Montagne, about being mystics and prophets, of opting for the least-favoured, and of going to the peripheries ... What can we do to ground these beautiful words in us, and so bear fruit in abundance?

The Gospel of Luke presents **Mary** as the prototype of the person who **is able to respond to the Lord's invitation**, with confidence, beyond fear: *"Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour...For nothing is impossible to God. I am the Lord's servant, said Mary; let it happen to me as you have said."* (Luke 1: 30, 37-38)

It is my hope that Mary's fortitude will be an inspiration to us. Let us entrust one another to her care:

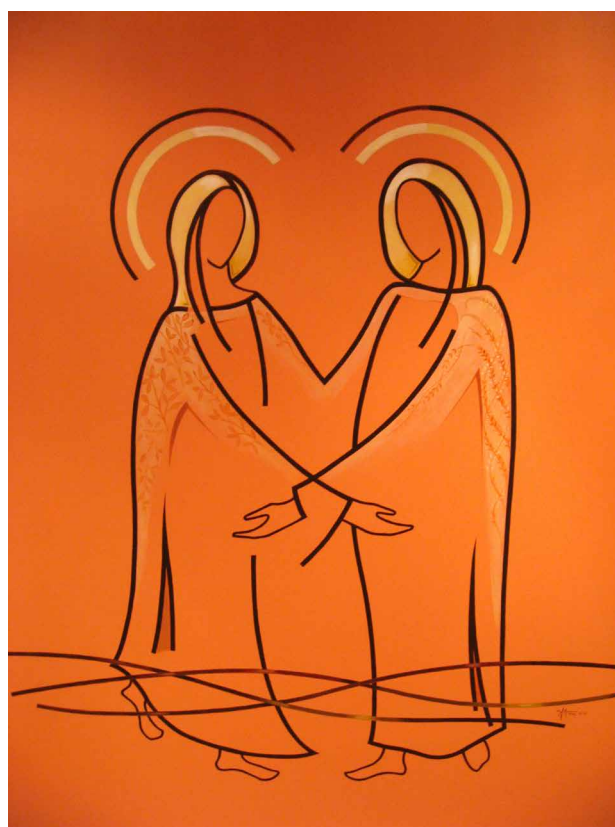
We cannot pass up this moment of grace. It is about allowing ourselves to be challenged by what is essential to our mission as Marists, and to revise our attitudes to it.

Mary, **woman of listening**,
open our ears;
grant us to know how to listen
to the word of your Son Jesus
among the thousands of words of this world;
grant that we may listen
to the reality in which we live,
to every person we encounter,
especially those who are poor,
in need, in hardship.

Mary, **woman of decision**,
illuminate our mind and our heart,
so that we may obey, unhesitating,
the word of your Son Jesus;
give us the courage to decide,
not to let ourselves be dragged along,
letting others direct our life.

Mary, **woman of action**,
obtain that our hands and feet
move "with haste" toward others,
to bring them the charity and love of your Son Jesus,
to bring the light of the Gospel to the world,
as you did. Amen.

(Pope Francis, 31/05/2013)



Faternally,

Luigi Ciotti



marists **2017**
a new beginning



2014|2015
Montagne