



Australian Marist Chapter. March 13 – 15, 2018.

Thank you for the invitation to be with you today at this important moment of your Chapter. A special thanks to Bob Barber and Peter McMurrich who have been so welcoming and inclusive as they have been preparing for these important days of Extraordinary Chapter.

I feel very much at home coming from this part of the world. I have worked with many Marists from Australia over the years – I think of Phil Callaghan, Chris Carlyle, Aliko Langi, Kev Stewart and Gav Foster in Asia. I was with your men in Japan many years ago, giving a retreat. Our missions in Asia have benefitted enormously over the years from Aussie generosity – the Marist Mission Centre most obviously but also the fruit of the hard work of Paul Glynn. In Rome it is a pleasure to be working with Ben McKenna and Tony Corcoran's contribution continues to be outstanding especially most recently as he guides the new General Administration through our first months. More personally many members of my own family live in different cities in Australia and I have often availed of warm Aussie Marist hospitality as I have been passing through. There is a great Marist welcome everywhere in the world but I feel it especially today being here with you in Sydney.

However, you have invited me to be with you in my fairly new role as Superior General. I have come to listen in order to learn and to hear how we can work together as a General Administration and an Australian leadership team for the good of the Work of Mary as Marists in Australia now and into the future. If there is any way that we can work well together in your work of discernment around leadership and Governance we will be only too happy to do whatever we can.

Also, my presence, I hope, is a reminder that you are not on your own in Marist Australia. We are brothers in an international Society. What you do here this week will have an effect in the wider Society of Mary and I am sure you, too, are open to whatever is being undertaken elsewhere. You have bitten the bullet by addressing these issues of leadership and governance and your courage is admirable. Some other units are not far behind you.

Most of all, though, we need to be considering how Marists can be present in the Church in Australia for many decades to come. It is very clear that the older way of our being present is not sustainable. It cannot continue for much longer. That's fine. It's a sign of the times. Now we need to address what Mary is calling us to do into the future – hopefully a long future - and create leadership and governance situations that will enable that to happen.

Recently I met up with the Superior General of the Jesuits in Rome. He is a Venezuelan called Arturo Sosa. I asked him what he would recommend to his confreres if they lived in a unit that believed it couldn't find a leader. He replied: "I'd tell them that they do indeed have a leader. He is Jesus crucified and I'd tell them (he is a Jesuit, after all!) to get on with the business of finding out what that means for them in their circumstances".

Obviously I was thinking of the situation of Marist-Australia when I asked him the question and his response led me to understand that we too do indeed have a leader here in Australia and it is Mary, our first and perpetual Superior. All our Marist superiors have her icon above their doors. This tradition has a profound meaning – that she always was and will be our Superior. Our task over these few days of Chapter is to get on with the business of what that means for us in our circumstances in Australia.

This leads more or less naturally to another question. "Superior of what?" As Fr. Bob Barber has asked – do the Marists have a long term future Australia and if so in what form? Once we know what shape the future is taking – always presuming there is a future - we can discern how to manage the governance so that it can happen.

The challenge is to see how to continue Mary's Work into the future and that future may well be unrecognizable from the past. This is not the time to hang up our boots and bask in the "glory" of past

days. It is a time quietly and humbly to come to the Lord and to Mary and ask for guidance for the way forward into an uncertain future.

I would like to propose that the story of Mary at Cana in John's Gospel can enlighten our discernment work together.

The context of the story is new life. John places the story at the beginning of his Gospel, a beginning that clearly echoes the creation story in Genesis. There's a wedding here, a marriage that will bear sons and daughters, new life, and an echo of the marriage between heaven and earth, the new Covenant. The event takes place "on the third day", hinting at the new life of Easter Sunday morning. There's an abundance of water in those stone jars, life-giving waters, springing up to eternal life. The context is fresh creativity. There is still work to be done. There are six wine-jars, not seven, the number of completion and fullness. The time for rest, the seventh day, is still ahead of us.

Mary is there, just as she is there at the birth of her Son and the birth of the Church. She is there believing in her Son and accompanying him and his new and motley group of disciples. She's encouraging and cajoling and making things happen, unobtrusively, as is her way. She could have stayed at home and minded her own business and watched from a safe distance but she decided to take up the invitation and engage in all that is happening. She feels her way through the tricky situation that develops and brings about new life and hope. At Cana she is present enabling new life, in multifarious forms, to flourish. That is her way of leadership, then and now.

We believe she is just as truly here with us today, responding to our invitation to be among us, bringing new life among us and cajoling us along. She is present among us, enabling new life.

As I understand it, there was some talk of "the death of the Province of Australia" but other confreres objected to that phrase and asked that the word "diminishment" be used instead of "death". You might hear some confreres responding that this is putting our heads in the sand, refusing to face the dire situation head-on. However, I believe the confreres who see diminishment rather than death to be both realistic and hopeful. I would modify the phrase "diminishment of the Province" to include "and nourishment of new life". Of course, the old forms are becoming obsolete, and that is hard to accept, but Mary's Work is always beginning again even though it must take new forms and shapes. "It was the third day and Mary was present with Jesus and the disciples" – in Sydney, in March, 2018.

I hear some reservations expressed against accepting new vocations in the Province. If by “the Province of Australia” we mean what we’ve always meant then you can understand why some confreres are wary of accepting new vocations. Everything is changing around us, both in Australia and internationally, both in the world and in the church and also among us as Marists. One constant is the Gospel call to follow the Lord and for us Marists, the call to do Mary’s Work in her way. It will be expressed differently in the future - if anything, more challenging than ever - but Mary will still be calling young people to take up the Cross and follow her Son. We need to echo her invitation to young people to become Marists, calling them by name and accompanying them in their own exciting and challenging future. It is good Tony Kennedy is among us to help us understand the work of Marist formation in Rome where the present challenge is to find enough rooms for the new intake this year. I met your own Hayden Kennedy in Auckland one week ago. He told me that he considers his “band” are his peers in several different countries all preparing to go to the international novitiate in Davao later in the year. They are in constant communication with social networks. There is new life and we need leadership and good governance to nourish it.

Australia has a proud tradition of rugged individualism and it has produced some wonderful results over the years. In this context there have been some struggles with community life. As one former Australian Provincial told me: “no-one wants to return to the dysfunctional community life of the 1950’s”. Another confrere suggested rugged individualism led to rugged communities where some confreres felt they were outsiders or just couldn’t be bothered being tough enough, day in and day out. Surely the new life that lies ahead includes welcoming and encouraging communities, of four or five, among the poor here in Australia. Clear leadership is required for this.

I remember the 2001 General Chapter which invited the Superior General of the SVD’s to respond to the question we put to him: “why are the SVD’s the only apostolic religious congregation that has grown since Vatican Two?”. His answer was long but one of his essential points was that they are a missionary Congregation and the mission begins at home ... their SVD communities are always multi-cultural, which makes for difficulties but when these challenges are faced then the confreres are living at home the reality of their world around them. Community Life is still essential for Marist Religious Life but it may need to take new forms. It calls for new life. It may well be cross-cultural, not just because we need new life from outside, but because that is the right thing to do. I think of the welcoming Marist community I stayed in in Brisbane a few weeks ago – with an Australian or two, a

Bougainvillian, a Tongan who considered himself a Fijian and a Brazilian. It was a community bursting with life.

I think, too, of the fine group of Australian Marist educators who turned up on our front door step at the seminary in Rome a year or so ago, chaplained by Gerry Hall. After supper they dialogued with our Marist seminarians expressing their expectations for future Marist priests in education. They set high standards and were brimming over with the Marist spirit. Our seminarians also challenged them. They asked them why so few young Australians were coming to join them in their adventure as Marist seminarians. It was a good evening. There was great life and energy generated between the Australian educators on fire with the Marist charism and the seminarians.

I think also of some of my friends among the Australian Augustinians who looked down in the mouth not so long ago but have discovered new life by reaching out to Asia. It hasn't been easy and they have a different face now -mostly an Asian face - but they have found new life.

Mary brings about new life. One example is Cana. Let's hope and pray another example is the cluster of bold but wise decisions made over the next few days at this Chapter as we consider Leadership and Governance. Mary is challenging us at this Chapter to walk the talk...the talk of the Gospels and the talk of our Constitutions and Chapters...and to find leadership and governmental structures that will continue to nourish new life.

Mary calls Jesus aside and says: "they have no wine". The life has gone out of the party. The hosts are embarrassed, ashamed. People are disappointed. They have run out of wine, the symbol of joy and celebration. People are blaming each other, not least the head-steward. But Mary names the problem and addresses it by calling together the workers, the wine-waiters, and encouraging them to be on top of their job, especially when her Son gives the Word. She quietly names the problem and works with people to find a solution and then she takes a back seat herself.

The Australian Marist Province could say something along the same lines. "They have no wine". It used to be fun being a Marist. We were opening schools and parishes and teaching theology and sending fellows off to the missions and fine young fellows were signing up. We may not have had the resources of the Jesuits or the Dominicans, but we weren't too far behind.

Now we are having trouble finding anyone to put up his hand and say, "Here I am. Choose me!", especially for leadership. For most things, actually. A number of our confreres are rightly very happy and proud of their good work, but are not so keen to hear from a Marist Superior who may be inviting them to be available for another ministry outside a certain comfort zone. Many of our men, after lives of remarkably generous service, and with all the good will in the world, are feeling weary and battle-worn.

There is also the shadow of the Royal Commission that puts a cloud over almost everything and certainly saps our energy and makes us very cautious in any optimism. Like the bride and groom at Cana, we are ashamed to hear what our people may be saying about us. Some of our confreres have been involved and it is a heavy weight to bear. We hope and pray that the recommendations and findings of the Commission will help us to develop a more caring and less self-righteous Church. Meantime, it is a very hard grind to face these facts.

We could say with the people at Cana that the Marists in Australia are running out of wine – except that Mary is among us as she has always been. A essential part of leadership is courageously naming the problem.

There have been other moments where it all looked fairly hopeless, other "no wine" moments. When Jean-Claude Colin returned from all his travails in Rome and it seemed that their plans were all discounted, rather peremptorily. He could easily have said "let's just give up".

Or if you had been a Marist from the Pacific meeting here in Hunters Hill towards the end of Fr. Colin's time as Superior General you could easily have believed you'd at least be receiving no further support from home and might even be summoned to abandon your life's work and report into Lyons.

Or if you were a Marist who had given your life to work in the schools in France early in the twentieth century only to find you were to leave all your work behind and vacate your own beloved country for political reasons then you could be forgiven for saying "the game's over" and we just need to kick for touch.

There are many other such examples with our missionaries in the Pacific ... Papua New Guinea, the Northern Solomons, as they were then, and so. They had their share of martyrdoms. It all looked dire. No wine. Yet in each of those examples Mary's Work carried on and even thrived, against the odds.

At Cana Mary saw the problem and named it and saw the way forward. That's great leadership and governance and she is the one who shows us the way.

What was the way forward that Mary showed? It was to tell the wine-stewards: "Do whatever he tells you!". I believe she is saying exactly the same to us today as we move through these days. We are the wine-stewards. We still have work ahead of us. We need to answer the question – "what is the Word, the Son, telling us to do in Australia today?" Let's not be like the head-steward - forgetting the excitement and celebration of the abundance of the best wine while he grizzles and worries about protocols ("most people do serve the wine this way or that...") and misses the point. The point is that if we listen to Mary, our first and perpetual Superior, and do whatever He tells us, then there will be new life as a new generation of Marists undertake Mary's work of bringing back joy and celebration to a party that could have flopped.

This brings us to the challenge of mission and its challenge for good leadership and governance. Our last general Chapter was enlightening in this area.

One of the essential points is that the Marist Mission – also called "the Work of Mary" – is not primarily about age or geography or bright new ideas. Primarily it is an attitude of heart. It is the fruit of the prayer in all its forms, especially contemplative prayer. So, an essential element in the Work of Mary in the future in Australia is a life of dedicated prayer bearing fruit in mission. Elderly confreres whose days of facing the heat of battle are over still have an essential work to do to support the Work of Mary by their own lives of deep prayer, committed community life and open-hearted, generous support of the confreres by interest and encouragement.

The General Chapter asked us to focus especially on youth, the migrants and the poor. "Do whatever he tells you" may involve some challenging decisions being made and implemented. This will certainly involve great leadership and governance. Perhaps new structures of leadership and governance need to be explored. That is the work of these days. But let's hope that the new structures and new leadership team will have the freedom to focus on mission while seeing to it that the other essential

areas of governance – care of elderly and professional standards, for example – are well attended to. This is your work of these days ... to see the big picture, the Work of Mary, and set the Province in a direction that allows a new breath, the breath of the Spirit, the blow new life into her Work in Australia by creating leadership and governmental structures that give new life to the Work of Mary.

The new generation of Marists may look very different. They may be men and women, young and old, religious, priests and lay, of many different races and nations. That will depend on the leadership that personifies Mary, the first and perpetual Superior, and the governance that will have to take new and creative forms to meet the changing world. This special moment of grace that constitutes this Chapter will be making decisions that decide the direction. We must not miss the moment or be daunted or afraid.

Thank you to Bob and Peter and all the Council members over the years who have led the Province so well in all ways. Your dedication and commitment is amazing. So many people have benefitted from your leadership and great governance. Thanks, too, for helping us to meet these days to find a life-giving way forward so that Mary's role as "first and perpetual Superior", a role she exemplified at Cana, may be developed on the ground in the great "the lucky country" for many generations to come.