

AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM
ET DEI GENETRICIS HONOREM

**TO EMBRACE WHOLEHEARTEDLY
OUR MARIST IDENTITY**

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SUPERIOR GENERAL

which I believe we do, then an overwhelming responsibility rests on our shoulders.

May the Lord watch over us as we pave the way for future generations of Marists.

We turn to you for protection, holy Mother of God. Listen to our prayers and help us in our needs. Save us from every danger, glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen

Rome, 25 March 2010.

In collaboration with the general council: Larry Duffy, Kevin Duffy, Lote Raiwalui and Alejandro Muñoz.

John Hannan sm
Superior General

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“to embrace wholeheartedly our Marist identity”
(Foreword to General Chapter 2009, *Statements & Decisions*)

Dear Confreres,

Taking our directions from the General Chapter *Statements and Decisions* (SD), the general council has been reflecting on the key tasks before us between now and the Council of the Society in 2013.

We wish to be in contact with all of you and, through this letter, to convey the importance of our building a more solid future for the Society of Mary. We will do this in close collaboration with the major superiors, with whom we will be meeting from September 27 to October 4, 2010. Developing policies and making decisions will give us the best chance of fulfilling the Lord’s plan for our Society in the world in which we live. This letter is a first step in a work of collaboration and co-operation.

Sources of hope

The general chapter spoke of some of the real sources of hope for the Society of Mary in the contemporary world:

- Our Marist charism is an authentic way to holiness as we live and bear witness to our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. We are called to be at His service, like Mary was throughout her life, and to serve our brothers and sisters in her manner.
- The quality of the work of so many Marists in different cultures and age-groups throughout the Society of Mary is truly remarkable.

- The Marist spirit, though difficult to define, has often been remarked on as the defining quality of Marist ministry.
- The Marist way of ministering in our world is most appropriate for the times we live-in.

From your own experience, each Marist can offer other such examples of hope. In line with Fr Colin's refrain, we seek God's help in bringing all of this forward. To be effective instruments of divine mercy we rely on Mary, who has a special role in our world and its salvation. We are her partners and collaborators in the achievement of her work.

Fr Colin believed greatly in the power of intercession for the Society, particularly when difficult decisions had to be made. In the general administration, in approaching major questions, we are appreciating the importance of a process of prayerful discernment to find the will of God and Mary. I invite all confreres, at this crucial time in our history, to take special care to make intercession for the Society: superiors could organise moments of community prayer; we could also ask lay Marists and contemplative communities to pray for us.

Our numerical strength

The starting point of our hope is the presence of God active in our lives, coupled with an honest acceptance of the reality in which find ourselves. Jan Hulshof, in the superior general's report to the general chapter, used the word "alarming" to describe our current situation. On June 1, 2009, there were 1012 professed members (of whom about 990 were finally professed) within the Society of Mary.

- Some provinces and districts have important mission developments but limited resources. The more traditional provinces may be called upon to provide extra financial resources. In this way all of us can be truly "*a community of believers with one mind and one heart*" (SD 43).

CONCLUSION

I have raised here some of the issues that the general council discussed during our plenary session in January and February. We were helped greatly by the various provincial and district reports available to us, as well as the work of previous general administrations. The joint meeting between the major superiors and the general administration next September will work more deeply on these issues and prepare the ground for some life-enhancing decisions for the future of our congregation.

Perhaps, having read this letter you feel that it is unduly pessimistic. It is a sobering report but it describes the situation as we see it. The Society of Mary is in a time of critical change. It has to weave its way through a rapidly changing world proclaiming the message of Christ in a contemporary way. All of us are on a fast track, journeying as individuals and as a body. We are going to encounter situations and circumstances which will demand that we change our thinking and our way of doing things. Such action will demand wisdom and sometimes great courage. Change at this level will not happen without pain.

If, it is the will of God that we don't have a future then we need not worry unduly. However, if we do have a future,

- a) to “*review and prioritise ministries*” (SD 12);
- b) to “*name the important works that the Society wants to see continuing*” (SD 55);
- c) to develop “*a network of city-centre churches*” where the focus will be on “*city-centre evangelisation*” (SD 21).

We will do this aware that other important general chapter decisions will not be forgotten, even if they have to be left for another time.

We are invited to develop the ‘prioritised’ ministries within a community context, where the “*first contribution to evangelisation is to live out in our own community the communion that is the heart of the Gospel we announce to others*” (SD 23).

To achieve the preferred options enormous changes, both personal and communal, will be required and hard choices will have to be made in all provinces and districts of the Society of Mary.

What changes?

- We may have to let go of long-treasured communities and ministries.
- Some of us will be required to ask ourselves: “*Am I prepared to work in another province/district, to learn another language, or even to change my ministry*” for the sake of the shared mission of the Society of Mary?
- Priority may need to be given to working together rather than in individual undertakings.

There were 367 Marists aged 60 and below. Following the present rate, we can assume that for the foreseeable future each year we can expect no more than about 12 first professions and about 5 final professions.

Looking towards 2017, we can reasonably predict that with losses through death (an average of 30 annually) and leakage through departures, the Society will have about 780 finally professed members. Being optimistic, about 27% will be under the age of 60, half of whom will be from Oceania. There will be about the same percentage of finally professed between the ages of 60 to 70, and almost half of the members of the Society will be over 80 years old.

We are living through profound and dramatic changes in our civilisation and the causes for our diminishment are clearly not simply a lack of fidelity on our part. At the same time, the secularised culture penetrates many minds and hearts. We need God’s help in a special way to be convinced that the work we do is Mary’s work, that we are called to be imbued with her spirit, and are chosen to communicate it to others. The more we can present ourselves as living a Marian alternative to a consumerist culture, the more likely it is that that the Society of Mary will bear fruit into the future.

In purely human terms, some might say that any future changes capable of being implemented can only be organisational in nature, forced on us by decline and diminishment. This captures only some of the reality and, indeed, not the most important. Reading the signs of the times with the eyes of faith, perhaps we can begin to see the Holy Spirit at work, leading us to a new future where the Society of Mary will do more for the women and men of our time than we can ask or imagine. As the prophet proclaims of

God "See, I am doing a new deed...yes, I am making a road in the wilderness, paths in the wilds?" (Isaiah 43:19).

What does the general chapter invite us to do?

About twenty-two tasks were confided by the general chapter to the general administration in order to bring about the change required within the Society of Mary over the next eight years. Those tasks are clearly presented in the *Statements and Decisions* of the general chapter. The general council wishes to begin a conversation leading to a programme for action between now and 2013, in order to re-start a new growth of the Society. We have grouped these proposed actions under the following headings:

- A. Deepening our Marist identity
- B. Recruitment and formation
- C. Governance and the re-alignment of our ministries.

A. DEEPENING OUR MARIST IDENTITY

We want more and more Marists to be convinced of the real value of Marist life through a deepening of our commitment, identifying more and more with it in our community living and work. How can this be done?

There is no bright new idea or original theory that will, for the first time in a very long while, shed light on what it is to be Marist, though continuing study and research is, of course, always necessary. A diocesan bishop, staying with us recently in Monteverde, who has had few Marist contacts in his life or ministry, was given the opportunity to read for the

If our present structures continue, and if we are to govern the Society well, run the finances well and give formation its due attention, the number of men required in our internal ministry will be as follows:

- 7 working in the general administration,
- 11 major superiors at any given time,
- 11 provincial/district bursars,
- 36 formators minimum (given the number of pre-novitiate houses, novitiate and theologates),
- 3 formators in training at any given time,
- 9 other full time personnel in the larger units (councillors, recruiters, etc.),
- 14 regional superiors & bursars in Europe,
- 8 regional superiors in Oceania.

These leadership, formational and administrative functions will, if we maintain these structures, require more than 90 people! However, I do realise that some of these jobs are combined to varying degrees with external ministry. A massive proportion of confreres, with much to offer the apostolic outreach of the Society, are principally engaged in the Society's internal workings. Is this what we want to continue into the future?

More focused ministries

The centre of attention with regard to ministry at the general chapter was on more-focused ministries reflecting the capacity of the confreres and the needs of the world in which we live (SD 21). Our immediate intention is to decide on those core ministries we wish to retain and develop, guided by the following chapter decisions:

theology for all Marist students who begin their theology programme that year and are not in the Oceania theologates.

A picture is emerging which clearly indicates that there are insufficient student numbers to justify the maintenance and staffing of so many theologates. A question to be addressed at our meeting in September is: will one theologate be sufficient for the whole province of Oceania and one theologate in Rome for the remaining units within the Society of Mary?

Extended period of renewal for those finally professed within the past ten years

Another factor causing serious concern is the lack of perseverance amongst temporary and finally professed members. Of the 72 Marists who were finally professed since 1997, 22 have left the Society. The general chapter recognised this problem and has asked the general council to put in place “a long period of spiritual renewal” so as to give those who have experienced ministry, for five to ten years, the opportunity to deepen their sense of vocation. Currently the general administration is working on a programme.

C. GOVERNANCE AND THE RE-ALIGNMENT OF OUR MISSION AND MINISTRIES

Governance

The general chapter has asked for “*an external review of all levels of government*” (SD 14), a major task between now and the Council of the Society in 2013.

first time our Constitutions. His few words at a Mass he celebrated with our community showed that he had no difficulty at all in listing the essential elements of what it is to be Marist.

At this point questions of Marist identity are more practical rather than theoretical. We benefit from half a century of world-class research into Marist origins, the essence of which has been expressed in accessible language in our current Constitutions and other publications.

Recovering and deepening our Marist identity is a question of both conversion of heart and practical changes in the way that we live our daily lives and organise ourselves as an apostolic body. It is not engaging in a new historical or theoretical enquiry.

For instance, new research is not needed to confirm the authenticity of Jan Hulshof’s efforts to undo the drift into taking on the roles of diocesan parochial clergy and to recover the educational thrust that has been proper to the Society from its origins.

At the beginning of our mandate what we, the general and his council, have come up with as our primary task captures this practical imperative very well - concretely, the deepening our Marist identity at this particular time in the history of our congregation is to be done by appropriating our Constitutions and carrying out the decisions of the general chapter.

What the bishop grasped immediately and expressed simply and eloquently is the fundamental fact that the identity of the Society of Mary is, from beginning to end, centred on the person of the Virgin Mary. This he saw from his reading the

first chapter of the Constitutions, the title of which is: *Nature and Foundations of the Society* - in other words, *What is the Society of Mary?*

We will recover this identity to the extent that we become men of prayer and action at the service of what we believe to be a personal initiative, here and now in the church and the world, of the Virgin Mary, our first and perpetual superior.

Programme of renewal based on the Constitutions

The creation of a programme of renewal based on an appropriation of the constitutions is one of the goals of the general chapter (SD 11). Such a programme will require sustained effort and commitment on the part of each one if it is going to bear fruit.

The general council is of the view that, in order to implement SD 24, a one year simple and uncomplicated programme is worth considering - starting on September, 12, 2011, and ending on the silver jubilee of the approval of the Constitutions on the same date in 2012.

The primary aim of the programme is to ensure that Marists prayerfully and reflectively read the Constitutions and be more deeply engaged in the Society and its work. To this end, all Marist communities throughout the Society might read a single number from the Constitutions at a meal each day throughout the year.

Each individual Marist might read the Constitutions and bring them into his personal prayer. In particular, it is recommended that each of us takes the Constitutions as the subject of his personal prayer (cf. Const. 120) once a week.

Pre-novitiate programmes

At present we have pre-novitiate houses in all our provinces and districts. It is becoming more difficult to staff and run these houses well in terms of professionally trained formators and adequate financial resources. We need to rationalise.

Novitiates

In accordance with decisions already made by the previous general administration, there will be two novitiates taking place in 2011 - one English-speaking in Fiji, the other Spanish-speaking in Mexico. After that date the numbers of candidates and their places of origin may force a rethink. There will be one English-speaking novitiate in 2012 which may have to cater for all novitiate candidates in the Society of Mary.

International theologates

At the present time, we have two theology formation houses in Oceania, one in Bomana (Papua New Guinea) and the other in Suva (Fiji). There are theologates in Guadalajara (Mexico), Callao (Peru/Venezuela), Belo Horizonte (Brazil), and also Auckland (New Zealand) which services the formation needs of the province and some students from Oceania. Europe is in the process of setting-up a theologate in London (England) for its students, albeit on a temporary basis.

As already decided by the previous administration and confirmed by the general chapter (SD 34), an international theologate will be established in Rome in 2012 to provide

Formation

One of the most demanding and difficult ministries within the Society is that of formation. Formators down through the years have worked tirelessly to achieve the best for those in formation and the Society's mission. In spite of their generous work and that of their major superiors and due largely to too few numbers and inadequate resources, many unit formators find that they cannot meet the three criteria used to judge the effectiveness of formation programmes: viability, quality, and consistency.

With regard to future planning, the presuppositions we are working from are that there will be small numbers in formation in all units of the Society, including a decrease of vocations in Oceania. As the Society will be small, particularly for younger candidates during an indeterminate part of their Marist lives, it will be important that Marists get to know each other and that all will be able to speak a common language.

Training of formators

Adequate staffing for formation means constantly having men in training. We need to have a pool of formators who can work in the novitiate, post-novitiate and second novitiate programmes at national and international levels. The general council has decided to establish a programme for the training of formators in Rome beginning in January 2011. Several provinces and districts have already been approached to make confreres available for training.

Communities or provinces/districts might choose to coordinate this personal meditation on a particular day, for example each Saturday, a day of special devotion to the Virgin Mary in the tradition of the Society.

The general administration intends to provide an aid for prayerful reflection on the Constitutions.

Provinces/districts are encouraged to search creatively for a means of opening up the Constitutions leading to conversion and growth. Annual retreats represent promising opportunities to do this. The programme might finish with a forum on the Constitutions organised by the general administration ending on September 12, 2012.

All of this will be discussed in greater detail with the major superiors and the general administration in our joint meeting in September. Your suggestions, either directly to your major superior or to any member of the general administration, are most welcome.

We are a more global Society

Marists live in a globalised world which calls us beyond our national boundaries. Our working internationally was given a new impetus at the general chapter. The governance section calls for "*communication across the Society*" and "*strengthening the connections between the various parts of the Society*" (cf. SD 13).

The decisions on the promotion of vocations and recruitment calls for an international vocations website and other forms of cooperation (cf. SD 32). There was a chapter committee on sharing of resources which led to the adoption of

important recommendations regarding sharing of personnel, skills, and financial resources, and of coordinating ongoing formation programmes (cf. SD 43-55).

If a network of city-centre churches is to be developed according to the desire of the chapter (SD 21), then further internationalisation is necessary. If the whole important area of initial formation is to be done well then much international cooperation is necessary. Of course this does not mean that all Marists will be directly involved internationally; confreres of a certain age need not fear being asked to go to another country or having to learn a new language. However, as the Society really becomes smaller, many younger confreres will certainly be called upon to be open to movement across the Society for formation, mission, and service to the Society.

New candidates need be made aware that they are joining such a Society, that they will have to do significant parts of their formation elsewhere and that there is no guarantee that the Society will necessarily always be present in their country of origin. Internationality in the Society also means that more of the younger members will know one another, that some of our communities will always be a witness to real intercultural living. All this provides an exciting opportunity for the younger members, especially, to come to an existential experience that we are one Society with a common mission and that, in order to have a good future, we need to pull together and contribute talents wherever they may be required.

The chapter also called for action with the Marist Laity in a number of ways. To facilitate this work Lote Raiwalui has been appointed the International Animator.

So we are called to think more in terms of the whole Society and to have stronger links between us, especially if we are to continue to supply quality leaders, formators, bursars and formation houses.

B. VOCATIONS RECRUITMENT AND FORMATION

Recruitment

With the exception of Oceania and possibly Africa, the lack of vocations is the most serious threat to the viability of the Society of Mary into the future. Our absolute priority is to bring home to each and every Marist the importance of putting in place key persons whose primary task it will be to foster vocations within each province and district. We are of the view that the vocations we seek will have to be of a particular kind - people who have the potential to re-found the Society. The general chapter does not ask us to embark on a serious programme of recruitment in order to survive for survival's sake. The aim is to recruit and form men with the human qualities and the spiritual calibre required to live and work in an authentically Marist way and to ensure the continued viability of the Society.

To achieve these goals, we are asking each unit to draw up a clear recruitment policy and back it with considerable energy. The plan should be coordinated by a unit director in each province/district with local directors under his guidance in each place of ministry. We have appointed Alejandro Munoz as the *International Coordinator of Vocations Recruitment*. He will be of assistance to anyone who wishes to initiate effective ways of vocations development.