

Reflection from the Superior General

Rome, September 2018

Dear Confreres

A menacing shadow is cast over our Church in these days of unrelenting publication of the horrendous effects of sexual abuse perpetrated within the Church and, too often, covered over by the Church leadership. We are all affected by this. Some of us will probably be discouraged and wonder if the Church whom we have loved is fundamentally flawed.

Indeed, the scandal of sexual abuse within the Church and of the poor response of the leadership has affected our own Society from its very earliest days. In our present time we Marists have our own sorry stories to tell. As the 2017 Chapter says: "We acknowledge with sorrow and regret the crimes of sexual abuse committed by Marists and those occasions when it was badly handled by Marist authorities". (n.40)



Tragic as it is, this is a *Kairos* moment in our Church and our Society. It is a call to radical conversion, both personally and as a Congregation. It also demands renewed commitment to giving birth to a more Marian Church. Congregational conversion demands we implement decisively the call of the Chapter that "all units have protocols in place conducive to creating a safeguarding culture. Marists are to follow these protocols in both letter and Spirit." (n.41). It is good that two of our Marists are committed to the Jesuit Centre for Safeguarding Children at the Gregorian University. Fr Albert Kabala (A) has already graduated from there and next month Fr Sione Hamala (O) is beginning a two-year Licentiate programme focused on Child Protection. Every region of our Marist world needs protocols that are of the highest professional standards and that are enthusiastically adopted by everyone. Even more than this, Our Holy Father Francis calls us to conversion - *metanoia* - in his letter: "To the People of God". (August 20, 2018).

At our best, we Marists have never been inclined towards a clerical attitude that exalts ordained ministers as a special elite and privileged force. We read

in the Constitutions: "our spirituality is simple and modest in its expression, close to the lives of ordinary people ... and it tries to make its own the Christian experience lived by Mary." (117). Conversion leads us towards living in small, prayerful communities, close to the ordinary lives of the people, especially the poor.

September 12 and the Feast of the Holy Name of Mary is fast approaching. Mary represents so many people from cultures like hers that are oppressed. She was a virgin, unimportant. She enjoyed no protection from the scandalous stories about her. Yet she knew she was called by God "to conceive a Son whom she was to name Jesus". Poor and unimportant as she was she was given a name and a mission. Against the prevailing hierarchical culture of the day, she was the one who was called holy. The Church with a Marian face, which this abuse crisis demands, will encounter the poor and lost youth, the abandoned, the lonely migrant, by his or her unique name which is holy and sacred. The Holy Name of Mary demands that we know and appreciate each person – especially the most forgotten, hidden and unknown among us – because each person has a name, a call, a mission, and each name is holy.

Abuse, or turning a blind eye to abuse, must be a turning point. We embrace this tragic and critical moment in the Church's history as a call to conversion and to building a Marian Church. The iconic feast of the Holy Name of Mary challenges us who bear her Name to search out the nameless and most vulnerable hidden among us and give them the Good News that : "all generations will call them blessed. The Almighty has done great things for them for Holy is His Name".

John Larsen s.m.