

LETTER FROM THE SUPERIOR GENERAL

April 2024



Society of Mary
Marist Fathers and Brothers



Like Mary, Bearers of Hope

2024

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Dear Confreres,

In leadership as the Superior General of the Society of Mary over the last six or more years, I have been privileged to have conversed deeply with very many of you. This attentive listening to your concerns and the wisdom and the experience particular to each of you has been one of the most profound graces of this ministry of leadership.

I have deeply appreciated your openness and trust and I have learned a lot. Having listened widely, reflected and pondered prayerfully, and having carefully consulted my Council, I would now like to report back to you, individually and communally, as to how I believe the Spirit, who has always breathed life into Mary and into the Church, may now be breathing new life into the Society of Mary.

I hope this letter may provide an impetus for further prayer and spiritual conversation among all of us within the Society, especially as many confreres prepare for Unit Chapters and as all of us prepare for the General Chapter in 2025.

I am presenting my own sense of where we are now as Marists and where I myself believe we are being invited to go. However, we are on this journey together and I hope this letter may help all of us together to find the way ahead for us as Marists.

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1 Some signs of our times

Influencing our understanding of mission today

We believe that God has created our world and has seen “that it is good”. Even when we turn away from God, he continually redeems the world in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit of God. Even when the world seems dark and unwelcoming there are always so many signs of God’s redemptive grace for those who see with the eyes of faith and act with courage and boldness.

We need to discern these “seeds of the Gospel” and nourish them. This is a special challenge for those who live in highly secularized cultures.

Our natural world is hurting and crying out for respect as we wonder whether our planet can even offer life for future generations.

We believe that the living heart-beat of our world is the Eucharist, when we gather to give thanks to God, and celebrate the presence of the Body of Christ among us in Word and Sacrament and in the Christian community.

Even so, we can wonder about the state of our world. We see so much brokenness, violence and woundedness. Among and within nations there are many wars and rumours of wars. Some are reported widely. Many violent wars are hardly reported at all, at the whim of the media moguls and the vested interests of powerful people and institutions.

Our natural world is hurting and crying out for respect as we wonder whether our planet can even offer life for future generations.

Our beautiful and beloved Church is suffering from divisions and scandals. Many people in some parts of the world are just walking away from the church having become disenchanted, angry or dismissive. Our small Society of Mary is facing many challenges throughout the world. Some of our confreres, individually, are suffering from serious personal challenges and can come to wonder if they are all alone.

Some others of our confreres are feeling tired, weak or aged. We are all seeking the mercy of God and trying to turn away from our personal sinfulness. We do believe that Christ has redeemed the world, but, even so, some days we can feel overwhelmed.

Traditionally cultures and nations have adopted one religion or another. These religions have helped to hold the societies together. We can see how some Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim states are still held together by shared religious beliefs and practices. Christianity also once provided coherence to many societies and in some places still does so.

"Christendom" as a social network providing for a cohesive society has largely broken down in many parts of our world.

Christianity as a guiding force for social cohesion has lost much of its energy in many parts of our Marist world.

WE BELIEVE THAT THE LIVING HEART-BEAT OF OUR WORLD IS THE EUCHARIST

Our situation today is, perhaps, more akin to the early church. We may be returning to understanding ourselves as more of a domestic church, small communities of believers who serve the people around them, especially the poor, and attract people to Christ by their faith and hope in God, their love of God and neighbour.

Even as small and disparate communities we are united as the Body of Christ, led by our Bishops, especially the Bishop of Rome, and as one Society of Mary within the Church.

This is “a Marist moment” for all of us and for the Church. Our Founder, the Venerable Jean-Claude Colin, was fond of reminding us that we have no other model than that of the early church. He commented in 1841: *“As for ourselves, we do not take any congregation for our model. We have no other model than the new born church”*. (F.S. 42,3)

Our Constitutions spell it out: *“Let them learn from the first Marists to find in the presence of Mary at Nazareth and Pentecost, in the early Church and at the end of time, the secret of their own presence in the Church and the world of today”*. (#228)

We can share in Christ’s redemptive grace and play our own small part in healing our world through our own on-going work for personal conversion to Jesus Christ and by forming small, fraternal communities of faithful Marists at the heart of the Church who support each other to undertake Mary’s Work of bringing the Good News to the people around us, especially to the poor.



A Marist way of responding to some of the signs of our time.

We Marists are inspired to make our own small but significant contribution to reconciling and healing in the Church and the world of today.

We make our primary contribution by committing ourselves daily to deepen our personal relationship with God – Father, Son and Spirit – and to follow Jesus Christ as Mary, the first and perfect disciple, followed him before us. Our lives are called to on-going personal conversion to Jesus Christ.

Our way of life is “religious”, shaped by seeking God. Strategies and statistics have their place in understanding our mission in the world of today, but much more important than any statistic is the passionate commitment in Marist hearts to follow Jesus Christ as his disciples.

Fundamentally, our vocation is a call to holiness, to love God and neighbour with the heart of Christ.

It can never be “this or that charism instead of Church” but always “charism within and for the Church”.

Another contribution, the ambience of our particular call to holiness, is our lives in Marist missionary communities. We are so much more than simply a group of workers committed to a common enterprise, however noble.

We are a religious Congregation with our own rich history, called by Mary to our personal and shared search for God within our religious communities. Contemplation, liturgy, personal and shared prayer breathe life each moment within our Marist commitment.

We also contribute to the Church and the world of today by rejoicing in our beautiful Marist charism, a gift of the Holy Spirit to build up the church in the world.

We are invited to embrace our charism ever more profoundly each passing season of our lives. Our charism provides the impetus for our lives as Marists and, through us, our charism breathes life into the Church and into the world.

I have heard suggestions that a religious charism can be trumpeted as a type of alternative church when people ally themselves more passionately with any particular charism than with the life of the institutional church.

It can never be “this or that charism instead of Church” but always “charism within and for the Church”.



Our way of renewal for the future is surely to re-commit ourselves to living in small communities much as we understand from the earliest days of the church.



All our Marist communities, starting with our own, for all our human fragility, are called to be small oases of hope in some of today's deserts, signs of hope in a world that sometimes despairs, welcoming places for people to come together to enkindle the fire of the love of God and love of neighbour in Jesus Christ and springs of living water for our missionary enterprises. These communities are signs of the Good News of Jesus Christ alive in our world.

Sometimes we have, of necessity or for special reasons, commissioned some confreres to live on their own. Even so, these confreres share in our common Marist vocation and mission, each in his own way. However, our way of renewal for the future is surely to re-commit ourselves to living in small communities much as we understand from the earliest days of the church.

We need to study how they lived and adapt what we learn to our particular circumstances, in our time.

2 Communities for mission

Nazareth

From our first beginnings Nazareth has always been an important symbol for us as Marists. For Father Jean-Claude: *"Our spirit, the spirit of the Society ... I personally find it in all its fulness in the house at Nazareth"* (F.S. 188, 12)

Nazareth speaks of a small village where people grew together in faith together with Mary, Joseph and their son. It was far from the centres of power, whether Jerusalem or Rome or elsewhere, even though it did suffer under the yoke of demands from these centres of power, especially in the form of oppressive taxes often resulting in landlessness and social displacement among the villagers, as we know from many of Jesus' parables and discourses.

Nazareth calls Marists to a deep interiority, to profound prayer. If our Society is to thrive into the future, our life of prayer and contemplation is the soil in which we grow.

Our Marist vocation bears abundant fruit when it is rooted in the Word and the Eucharist, in lives shaped by the Prayer of the Church, with an extended time each day in personal prayer (the 2017 Chapter recommends one hour), the reading and the study of the Scriptures and theology, with the daily rosary and with the regular sharing of the Word in community.

As we try to depth our call to live simply in small, prayerful, Marist mission communities we find a part of our inspiration in the spirit of Nazareth

It is not a question of: "I will say my prayers and then I will do my work". This attitude can lead to a form of dualism. Prayer – contemplative, shared and liturgical – bears fruit in living with a sense of God's abiding and loving presence which harmonizes everything. Contemplative and liturgical prayer is the heart of our work and of our missionary zeal. Our more senior confreres often encourage us with their commitment to a life of serious prayer. However, the call to a profound and committed prayer life extends to all of us, from our youngest novice to our most senior confreres.

Nazareth is also a call to live simply, frugally, together in fraternity. Nazareth was a poor village where people lived off the land and by the work of their hands. In this age of the scandalously unjust distribution of wealth and the affluence of some, while many of our contemporaries are living in poverty or oppression, we are called to live simply and share all things.

The spirit of Nazareth calls Marists to live simply and among the poor, finding our home, our "Nazareth", in the midst of people whom we are called to serve. Our Marist vocation loses its authenticity whenever we live in affluence. Fr. Colin: *"Let them strenuously avoid in their buildings and living quarters, in their style of life, and in their dealings with others, all that suggests display, ostentation or a desire for attention"*. (#228)



Our era of ecologically unsustainable greediness also demands that we live simply and sustainably. In our way of eating, living, travelling and communicating we are called to a simple life of faith in fraternity. Nazareth is a symbol for us of this way of life. Nazareth is also a symbol for us of our earthiness, our humility, our simplicity in our relations with all around us.

We Marists have always shunned the spotlight, finding ourselves drawn naturally to the ordinary lives of ordinary people among whom we immerse ourselves, hidden and unknown, as leaven in the dough.

As we try to depth our call to live simply in small, prayerful, Marist mission communities we find a part of our inspiration in the spirit of Nazareth.

The early Church ...to the ends of the world.

However, Nazareth does not limit us only to local horizons. Mary left Nazareth and went "in haste to the hill country of Judea". Jesus, too, at the right time, left Nazareth proclaiming that his vocation was to bring Good News to the poor and freedom to prisoners, light to those in darkness and healing for the sick.

Luke's Gospel speaks of Jesus' journeying from his home province of Galilee to Jerusalem while Luke's second volume, the Acts of Apostles, chronicles the early disciples and apostles of the early church as they journey from Jerusalem to Rome, the centre of the world in that time, forming small communities of believers as they go. These small Christian communities in the early Church shape our vision as Marists of today.

Marists, too, are called to journey to the peripheries for the sake of the Good News of God's Kingdom. Our vocation is nurtured in Nazareth, but it finds dynamic expression in our missionary hearts always looking towards and committed to the peripheries. *"Mary's Work will not be finished until, at the end of time, all God's children are gathered together "one in heart and mind (cf Acts 4:32)".* (2017 Gen. Chapter. 7).

Our vocation is nurtured in Nazareth, but it finds dynamic expression in our missionary hearts always looking towards and committed to the peripheries.

The story of the early church resonates well for our times when "Christendom" has so often lost its power to support our lives and ministries. Now, what encourages us, as in the early church, is our burning desire to share our faith in Jesus Christ which is nourished in small, dynamic communities.

These communities are the first place of mission and, in time, become missionary themselves as people see Christians living in harmony and ask themselves why these Marists are so joyful and at peace, when the confreres living there are all so different in culture, language, age and personality.

In times past many Marists went to distant lands and established mission stations, sometimes quite isolated, whether in the Pacific or in other parts of the Marist world.

Fr. Jean-Claude was opposed to Marists living individually even though he acknowledged that they were often accomplishing great work in their own quiet way. He was so opposed to it, and so prepared to fight hard for this against the very real demands of vast mission areas, certain bishops, and the pressure from Propaganda Fide in Rome, that by 1849 he would send no more missionaries to such a way of life in the Pacific.

There are similar pressures today. Some church leaders and some project directors, and administrators of all sorts, quite understandably need one person here and one person there to cover as many bases as possible. Marists are not normally in a position to respond to those needs whenever the response demands one Marist living on his own.



From the time of Fr. Jean-Claude we have always believed that we are at our best as missionaries when we live in missionary communities. The communities speak eloquently of living the Gospel. When they are welcoming to all people, and especially to the marginalized, our communities offer people the experience of "life in the Spirit".

When our confreres are diversified by age and cultural difference and languages then we testify to the possibility of living in harmony and dialogue to our world which so often prefers compartmentalization and nationalism.



"Mission" is mostly about an attitude of heart and only secondarily about physical geography.

When we are respectful of each other, appreciating our differences and yet compassionate to one another, we reflect more about the love of God at the heart of the Trinity than dry theological treatises.

There used to be a phrase among Marists that someone was "going to the missions". Somehow "missionaries" were differentiated from those who stayed at home. Now we would see that distinction as, at best, most unhelpful.

We are all called to be missionaries, starting in our own hearts and expressed in our own local communities and reaching from there out to the world around us, especially the world of the peripheries, both physical and existential. "Mission" is mostly about an attitude of heart and only secondarily about physical geography.

When we live our mission wholeheartedly we participate in the inner life of God whose inner love breathes into our world – the Father sending the Son, the Father and the Son sending the Spirit. "Our" mission is a sharing in God's own mission when we respond to the call of God's love, constantly discerning where He is asking us to go, what we are to do and how we are to do it.



Our prayerful lives direct our discernment for how, where and what we undertake to live our mission.

This way of contemplation and discernment is both personal and communal, one harmonizing with the other.

In our missionary lives, to which we are all called until our last breath, we immerse ourselves in the heart of God through contemplative, personal and liturgical prayer – reaching its highest point with our joyful and faithful celebration of the Eucharist. Our prayerful lives direct our discernment for how, where and what we undertake to live our mission.

This way of contemplation and discernment is both personal and communal, one harmonizing with the other. We share our prayer and discernment together in a synodal way that is tested in the fulcrum of the vow of obedience, “obeying a man for the sake of God”. (#101). This is how we know what we are being called to do. Mary, who both “pondered all these things in her heart” and “set out for the hill country of Judah” inspires us to continue her journey in her own time in our journeys today.

In our broken, divided and too often violent world, our small, prayerful and diverse communities proclaim of the love of God and bring healing and hope. This is an essential dimension to our Marist missionary lives.

Omnes Gentes Communities

The early church seems to have flourished when disciples of the Lord, often newly baptized and newly introduced to “the breaking of the bread”, came together in small communities. Luke portrays an image of those early communities when he writes:

The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no-one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4: 32 – 33).

The early church community was united in heart and mind, shared everything in common and gave testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and so they were blessed and fruitful. We also know that, from the very beginning, the early disciples and the early communities were called to suffer for their beliefs, sometimes to the point of martyrdom.

These communities were – and are – radically different from the prevailing cultures, based as they are on Gospel of Jesus Christ rather than the ephemeral values of the world around them.

Jean-Claude Colin takes up this theme from Luke when he said in 1846:

As for us, Messieurs, we must re-create the faith of the first believers. This is precisely what was foretold in our very earliest days (he uttered these words in a somewhat mysterious and uneasy manner). It was foretold that the Society of Mary was to take as a model none of the congregations which preceded it ... our only model was to be and indeed was the early church. And the blessed Virgin, who did such great things then, will do even greater ones at the end of time, because the human race will be even more ill. (F.S. 117, 3).

Our own 2017 General Chapter linked the call to deep prayer and to mission in the context of community when it stated:

"Contemplation as the energy source, the mystical heart of Marist mission, is intimately linked with our identity as Marist religious. To form a communion for mission, we need to deepen the contemplative dimension of our lives (cf Constit. 118). With Jesus at the centre we can, like Mary, be missionaries of hope." (2017 Gen. Chapter. 30)

The same Chapter gave us guidelines for what Marist "missionaries of hope" are called to be doing:

"We are looking for ministries which reflect our identity as apostolic Marist religious, fulfil the requirements for our community life, express the corporate nature of our mission, provide avenues for evangelization, give a clear sign of Marist mission to possible candidates, give us the opportunity to work with branches of the

We discerned that one way forward for our Society of Mary was by working within small, prayerful, inclusive, mission communities, especially on "the peripheries".

Marist Family and provide opportunities especially for young people to work alongside Marist in paid or volunteer employment." (2017 Gen. Chapter. 21).

As a general leadership team over the last six years, we reflected on all of these directions which we believe are Spirit-inspired. We also considered the new emphases on Marist international formation (which we will address later in this letter) and we discerned that one way forward for our Society of Mary was by working within small (ideally with four or five members), prayerful, inclusive, mission communities, especially on "the peripheries".

The mission of these communities would prioritize "education especially among the young and disadvantaged, city-centre evangelization, works specifically among the material poor, and responding to the needs of migrants, and in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. In all ministries, grounded in the Gospel, Marists pay special attention to safeguarding, planetary health and social justice." (2017 Gen. Chapt. 22 – 24.)

We rejoice that many of our existing communities are already giving a clear expression of this direction and our task is simply to encourage these communities. In passing, I would like to note that some of our missionary parish communities can express these directions very clearly.

As I have travelled around our Marist world several confreres have suggested to me: "You need to explain better what these "omnes gentes" mission-communities are all about."



However, we also wanted to create some communities that would be especially proactive in giving expression to these directions. We have tried to create a few communities that are intentionally small, inclusive or "catholic" (inter-cultural and ideally inter-generational), prayerful, with a real simplicity of life that incarnates the Gospel in an especially clear way and evangelizing by the fraternal service offered to the people around them, especially to the poor.

We gave a name to these communities and called them "omnes gentes communities". The name comes from the Brief that the Society received on April 29, 1836, from Pope Gregory XVI when he commissioned the Oceanian mission to our nascent Congregation. The Brief from Propaganda Fide opens with the words: "Omnium gentium salus", "the salvation of all peoples".

In a sense these new "omnes gentes" communities are sending Marists to the new frontiers of today's world and starting the Society again, while always faithful to our traditions and to the mission of the Church.

These communities are signs of hope for the future. So far, we have formally established only three – one in Ranong, in Thailand, in collaboration with the District of Asia; one in Marayong in the diocese of Paramatta in New South Wales, Australia; one in Samsun, in Turkey. One of these communities is in the secularized world, one within the Buddhist world of Asia and one within the Muslim world at the crossroads between Europe and Asia.

All of them, to a greater or lesser extent, serve migrant peoples. We are hoping to be able to open one or two such communities more before the Chapter of 2025, discerning possibilities at the next ARC Meeting in May this year, and beyond.

As I have travelled around our Marist world several confreres have suggested to me: "You need to explain better what these "omnes gentes" mission-communities are all about." I hope their significance is clearer with the help of this letter.

The best way to encourage the mission directions that are set by our Constitutions and by the 2017 Chapter is discerned within each of our existing communities. If the "omnes gentes" are intentionally small mission communities – prayerful, inclusive of difference of culture and language, mission orientated among the poor, the youth and the migrants – they are not at all exclusive.

There are not two Societies of Mary – one called "omnes gentes communities" and then "all the rest".



These mission directions are true for our whole Society everywhere. The “omnes gentes” communities are simply more intentional new mission undertakings that express more starkly what we are all being called to do, and very often are already doing. They are further signs of hope and new life for our missionary society.

Naturally these “omnes gentes” communities will place some strain on units that are struggling to maintain their missionary directions at home. Some very fine and often younger Marists have been asked to go to these communities, sometimes leaving home units struggling to meet their own commitments.

The “omnes gentes” communities are further signs of hope and new life for our missionary society.

These “omnes gentes” communities are new and fresh initiatives and sometimes that will mean that some more traditional ministries will have to be relinquished. The 2017 Chapter encourages us in this direction when it says: *“The superior general in collaboration with ARC shall endeavor to indicate some works to which younger and newly ordained Marist should preferably be appointed.”* (26).

The whole Society is deeply grateful to those units and to their leaders who have generously agreed to encourage some of their talented younger confreres to be available for these missions. We are also appreciative to our confreres who have accepted the call to participate in these missions. Often it involves a significant cultural upheaval and considerable efforts to learn new languages.

We also acknowledge some fear, especially among those who have made a radical commitment to dedicate their missionary efforts to these communities, that they might not “survive” the next Chapter, the decisions of future leadership teams or the human challenges they face. These communities are above all an act of discerning faith. We trust these communities to the Lord, as we trust every mission in the Society, confident that the Spirit is leading us, as Mary herself was led. They will “survive”, and indeed thrive, as long as they are “meant” to, whenever all of us Marists are praying, discerning and open to the Spirit challenging us. The future is in God’s hands. Meantime, we do the best we can.

3 A Marist spirituality for mission

A “Marist spirituality for mission” is a vast topic in itself. I would like to make just a couple of observations.

Traditionally, for very good reasons, we have understood “hidden and unknown” as a Marist characteristic that shaped how we related as Marists to others in the church and the world. It was often seen as a “Marist virtue” for each of us to cultivate. This is as important now as ever.

However, I would like “hidden and unknown” to be understood also as a missionary principle. The poor of our world, the unwanted migrants and refugees, the people on the peripheries of our world, are “hidden and unknown” through no choice of their own. No-one wants to know them. They are hidden away because no one wants to see them. Society hides them and silences them.

When we Marists search out and live in solidarity with such people who are forced to be hidden and unknown and when we celebrate the Good News with them and encourage them to develop their own voice crying for justice, we are living our own charism in an especially authentic way. “Hidden and unknown” is not only a Marist virtue but it is also, and very importantly, a Marist missionary calling.

We have always celebrated “The Holy Name of Mary” as our patronal feast on September 12. Indeed, it can and should be celebrated as an act of filial piety within our rich Marist tradition. However, I believe that our patronal feast-day of the Holy Name of Mary also shapes our missionary spirituality.

Our shared, beautiful Marist charism is not exclusively “ours” but can be a blessing for anyone.

Mary was among the “anawim”, one of the poor and forgotten people of her age. Yet this poor and obscure woman – unlike most others in history – is blessed with a Name which signifies her unique call from God.

When we come to know the names of the poor and obscure people around us and celebrate each of their uniquely divine vocations to live a richly human life, open to God revealed in Jesus Christ, then we celebrate our own missionary vocation with a special authenticity.

Our Marist mission is enriched when we can work well with other members of the Marist family, whether religious or lay, and look for creative ways of giving life to our charism together on mission. We can work so closely with laity, for example, that they are happy to call themselves Marists.

Some lay Marists may make some form of commitment, too. In the case of education, for example, Marists can invite people to live the Marist Spirit so radically that a school develops clearly as a Marist school, often with lay people in all the key areas of responsibility.

We can train Marist lay formators who then work with others to embrace our Marist Way. Our shared, beautiful Marist charism is not exclusively “ours” but can be a blessing for anyone. We share our Marist missionary vocation within the ever-widening Marist Family, religious and lay.

This is a time to renew our Marist missionary spirituality. It requires a certain asceticism to open ourselves to be converted radically to the Word of God each day and to avoid any sense of “spiritual worldliness” which can make our way of life seem colourless or anemic; to keep open to new possibilities of leaving behind our comfortable patterns of life; rather than to surrender to any “acedia” or resignation believing that nothing can be done any more, or just to decide that there is little life left in our Society and so I will “go it alone” for all practical purposes.

We may have completed our ministry or our pastoral role but we are always called to be Marist missionaries, signs of God’s love that invites others into union with him, until our last breath.

4 Formation for mission

These small, vibrant missionary communities that are modelled on the early Church and that are lived among the people on the peripheries of our time, demand a particular formation



small, vibrant missionary communities that are modelled on the early Church and that are lived among the people on the peripheries of our time demand a particular formation journey

journey always within the requirements of the Church for the formation of all Roman Catholic religious and priests.

We are searching for a particular style of candidate who will flourish humanly and spiritually by living our Marist mission according to our particular charism. We need to be offering a formation programme that will help any candidate to discern if this is where he is truly being called to live his Christian vocation and, if so, to help him develop his Marist call.

Vocations

The future of our little Society depends on a robust number of candidates coming into the formation programme and committing themselves to stay.

Our first challenge in inviting vocations to the Marist family is for us to be praying for vocations.

As I have already proposed, I request that every community offers their Mass to Our Lady of Saturday every week for the intention of strong vocations to Marist life. Also, every community is requested to pray for one hour of Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament every week for the intention of vocations to the Marist family. As I have been travelling around it has been a real blessing to participate in these prayers in some communities.

The best recommendation of our way of life is our own enthusiasm for our vocation and our zeal for the Work of Mary, whatever our own particular ministry.



We also need to be inviting young people to join the Society of Mary. We need to show we believe that our Society offers young people a dynamic future rich in prayer, fraternity and Marist mission by living our own vocation with joy in word and action. The best recommendation of our way of life is our own enthusiasm for our vocation and our zeal for the Work of Mary, whatever our own particular ministry.

It is helpful that our students at “Casa di Maria” in Rome are working regularly on a Marist vocations’ website. Our younger confreres play an especially important role in calling their peers. With the international websites we are receiving enquiries from different parts of the world. Naturally these enquiries require prudent and sensitive responses but we remain open to the promptings for the Spirit who may blow in unexpected places.

We are grateful to the challenging work of the assigned directors of vocations for each unit. However, we cannot leave all the hard work to them. Each one of us needs to be doing all he can to encourage good vocations for our Society.

When candidates enter into an accompaniment programme or arrive in our communities on a “come and see” programme we also need to care well for them with our personal interest, our well-planned programmes and our commitment to helping them discern their vocations.

We know in faith that God alone is the One who calls. We commit ourselves to make every human effort we can, spiritually and humanly, but we do not count numbers as the only degree of “success”. We acknowledge that this is a wintertime for vocations in some parts of the church but keep holding out for the spring. Once we have done all we humanly can then we trust the Spirit of God, who called Mary before us, will do the rest.

Initial formation

We have all been through Marist formation programmes in our own time and so we naturally feel we understand formation rather well. However, so much has changed since “our time”. Initial formation has a very different “feel” to it today. We are currently blessed with a robust formation programme which, however, is always a work in progress.

One of the main changes from former times is that initial formation has become more international and inter-cultural from the time a young man enters the international novitiate, usually in Davao in the Philippines, until he leaves the international theologate in Rome several years later, usually as a deacon.

International formation has helped us to consolidate and integrate the work of our trained Marist formators. Formation is a ministry which requires special skills and training. Formation is so much more than ticking the boxes of various requirements, although we do have to be faithful to all the demands of the Church for religious and priestly formation.

Formators need to accompany our young Marists as they discern if they really have a genuine vocation to the Society of Mary as a priest or a brother. All our formators need to be working collaboratively in the Society and for this reason it has been a blessing to have a gathering of all the formators together every few years so that they can share their experience and their vision.

Formators help our candidates to develop their vocations along each young Marist's particular path. There is an established formation journey, but there has also to be room for young Marists to develop along his particular vocational way. Although they journey as a peer group, each young Marist's journey is unique and his particular talents need to be developed for the sake of the Work of Mary within the church.

International formation has also exposed our young confreres to a wider ecclesial, social, academic and Marist world. From their earliest days as Marists our young confreres are living in an international community and developing the considerable skills demanded for this. Both in the Philippines and in Rome they grow in their experience of the universal church, whether in the young, dynamic church in Mindanao in the Philippines or in the very international city of Rome, where the church was founded by Saints Peter and Paul. Academically they study with students from all over the world, almost always including students from their own region of the world. Their horizons, their experience and their knowledge is growing all the time.

All of this is a good preparation for the different Marist world that they will inhabit. They are as well prepared as possible – spiritually, academically, personally and pastorally - for the international missionary communities that seem to be essential for the future of the Society.



All the students find international formation very challenging personally. It is not easy to learn new languages, to live in different countries and with different cultures. However, these are skills that will be required in the future as the Society of Mary is developing



Their pastoral assignments, both within Rome and internationally, as well as vacations in their home units, keep the realities of our world before them. They are especially challenged in their pastoral formation to bring the Good News of the Gospel to the poor of our world, by their own way of living and by their attitude of heart. There are sacrifices, too, to provide for this formation. All the students find international formation very challenging personally. It is not easy to learn new languages, to live in different countries and with different cultures. However, these are skills that will be required in the future as the Society of Mary is developing. Self-contained, mono-cultural, and national units in the Society do not seem viable for much longer. Their home units also make sacrifices in encouraging their youngest members to be living abroad for several years of their formation.

The advantages of growing in a Marist vocation within the ambience of the home region is limited to the first few years while the candidates are studying philosophy and the history and languages particular to their home region. One practical consequence is that younger students do not have the more mature senior role models around them. Also, prospective candidates for Marist life are told that many years of their formation will be off-shore.

For some prospective candidates this is a good challenge and they are happy to embark on international formation. Other candidates would prefer to stay at home and so they may opt to enter another seminary. A prospective candidate is offered a particular path of formation from the beginning and so he has some idea of what will probably lie ahead of him.

The costs of international formation at first seemed formidable. Thanks to the generosity of all the units in contributing to a trust account and the good management of our financial teams, especially our international finance team, we now have sufficient resources earning enough interest to cover almost all the costs for international formation as well as some of the costs of some local formation. We seem to be on a stable financial footing, at least for the foreseeable future, for which the Society is grateful to all the contributors.

We have appointed a commission of three people – one Marist Priest, one Marist Sister and one Filipino SVD priest (an expert on intercultural formation) – to evaluate our international formation before the next Chapter of 2025. We look forward to studying their conclusions and recommendations as a way of helping us to improve our formation programme.

Meantime, we are grateful to so many confreres, not least to our students, who make this international formation programme so dynamic. Although it can always be improved it does seem well suited to forming future Marists for the international missionary communities in which they will be able to grow in their vocation wherever they may be assigned in the years to come. Their future will surely be very different from our past.

There is an attempt to ensure that young Marists are assigned to mission communities that nurture their vocation



On-going formation.

We are trying to help Marists to keep growing in their vocation even after they leave a formation house. As Superior General, along with the Council, we work with local major superiors as they appoint young Marists at least for the first five years after they leave the formation house.

This is an attempt to ensure that young Marists are assigned to mission communities that nurture their vocation. There is always the pressure to ask young Marists to “fill the gaps” as more senior Marists become less available to meet our long-standing requirements.

The danger is to think the younger Marist needs to “step up and fill the shoes of those who have gone ahead of them”. Our young confreres need to be assigned to life-giving mission communities which will encourage them in those difficult first years of ministry where some may be tempted to give up.

We have been inviting younger Marists, after some years in pastoral work, to take a few years away from full-time ministry in order to evaluate their first years of ministry and to develop their spiritual, personal and intellectual gifts.



Commonly, but not always, they come to Rome to participate in the Religious Life of the General House in Monteverde or assist in the formation team at “Casa di Maria”. This way they gain a fresh understanding of how the international Society works and they encounter Marists from all over the world.

More importantly, after those often hectic first few years of ministry, they have time for regular prayer, study, spiritual direction and counselling.

These younger confreres undertake some area of post-graduate studies in one of the Pontifical Universities. Sometimes they undertake studies that contribute to some particular ministry – for example, they might study formation or canon law.

More importantly, we are encouraging them all to reach a certain level of theological expertise in an area of theology that especially interests them and serves the needs of the Church and the Society that they now understand better after their initial years of pastoral ministry. We hope they will reach the level of theological competence of at least a Licentiate or Masters’ degree. Those who may be called to the full-time intellectual apostolate are encouraged to study for a Doctorate.

This programme of on-going studies helps to make our Marist contribution to the local missionary initiatives more theologically attuned. Marists need to be able to offer a depth of theological reflection within whatever ministry they may undertake, often through the lens of one branch of theology that especially interests them.

Young Marists grow by being accompanied to reflect deeply on their widening experience and by reading, reflecting and studying with as much depth as possible to integrate and broaden their experience intelligently and profoundly.

It may well be helpful, also, to develop other professional skills in secular areas of expertise. They might study education, for example, or finance or leadership and administration, or any other discipline that will help them to serve in mission. This is also to be encouraged but not at the expense of theology, the study of the Word and the Tradition, which is our primary but not exclusive professional contribution to the world of today. In the last six years a good number of our younger confreres have completed this programme and returned to their home units, or taken up a mission in another unit, much enriched for their time of on-going formation, usually in Rome.

Almost always the programme has been evaluated very positively. We are especially grateful for some of our senior confreres who have accompanied these younger Marists.

There are other programmes, too, such as Colnian Renewal programmes at La Neyliere available for Marists of all ages and designed in the tradition of the "second novitiate".

We are also trying to encourage Marist Studies by offering an annual time of accompaniment to people interested in dedicating several weeks mid-year specifically to the study of one area of Marist history or spirituality. This Marist Studies course has sometimes included participants from the wider Marist family.

We are also inviting younger confreres to come together for a few weeks after some years of ministry to share their mission experiences, encourage each other from the different regions with mutual fraternal support and to expand their knowledge of Marist missionary approaches. Last year this Marist Mission Workshop was held in Ranong in Thailand and was attended by ten of our confreres. We hope this may be an annual event.

The formation ministry and our formation programmes are our life-blood for the future of our Society. They need the best spiritual, academic, fraternal, and pastoral training we can offer.

We appreciate that some of our more senior confreres may desire to avail of the courses available to address special concerns that are held outside the Society and we would encourage this. We were also invited to participate in a 'third-age' course with the Marist Brothers and two of our confreres recently appreciated this. There does not seem to be sufficient interest in our running our own "third age" programme within the Society.

In summary

The formation ministry and our formation programmes are our life-blood for the future of our Society. The formation programmes are shaped by the need to be forming Marists, mostly priests, but also brothers, who are on fire for mission in our world. They need the best spiritual, academic, fraternal, and pastoral training we can offer.



All the programmes are directed to helping Marists to grow in competence and enthusiasm for serving the people, especially the poor and those on the peripheries, within vibrant Marist mission communities anywhere throughout the world where they may be asked to go.

Formation is so much more than meeting a list of requirements and should be an on-going way of life in our increasingly culturally diverse and complex world.

5 Governance for mission

Flexible structures of governance.

The temptation when we think of the new-born church in the Acts of the Apostles is to dream that it was gloriously free of structures, so charismatic that they did not need to be weighed down with administration. In fact, the early Christian communities quickly learned that they needed different people to be tasked with different ministries. Saint Paul uses the image of the body with many parts, each dependent on the other and well-ordered within itself.

Our world is changing rapidly and so are we, as the Society of Mary, changing very fast. How can we keep a steady course in such turbulent times?

For us to be faithful and focused on our mission to undertake the Work of Mary for today and for the future, and to embrace our missionary charism, we need to adopt flexible, healthy and robust structures of governance. This will demand re-envisioning our traditional ways of leadership to meet the changing conditions.

We Marists are called to adapt to the demands of our age and prepare ourselves for the future in “a change of era”. Our world is changing rapidly and so are we, as the Society of Mary, changing very fast. How can we keep a steady course in such turbulent times?

The ministry of leadership

Leadership is a particular talent that needs to be discerned and then developed within the Society.



When we do find good candidates for leadership we need to encourage them fraternally, spiritually and professionally. An encouraging word can always support a leader.

It is a particular ministry and not everyone is called to it or believes he can make himself available for it. When we do find good candidates for leadership we need to encourage them fraternally, spiritually and professionally. An encouraging word can always support a leader and destructive criticism leaves leaders discouraged, always allowing ample room for frank, fraternal and issues-based conversation.

The style of leadership is changing in our church with a greater emphasis on the art of discernment and "spiritual conversations" – "synodality" – so that on-going training in discerning leadership will help our leaders in their task which can be very stressful.

However, the fact is that, in some parts of our Marist world, it is increasingly difficult, indeed almost impossible, to find leaders. Perhaps we can find a major superior but then he can find it impossible to establish a council. Confreres often decline the request to be a superior. Some of our particularly generous confreres are being asked to assume positions of leadership way beyond the time when we can reasonably make this demand on them.

One sign, among others, that the time has come to change structures of governance is when we no longer have an available pool of competent confreres for leadership. Then it is time to ask ourselves if we need to change the structures so that we keep focused on our priority which is the mission of the Society lived within small, missionary communities, each of which also

needs local leadership. We also need to assure the needs of our senior confreres are well attended to, as well as on-going formation and administration.

The movement towards districts (and perhaps to individual communities).

When a traditional provincial unit is beginning to creak and strain – it may not be able to find suitable leaders or formators, or it may not be able to achieve financial and administrative self-sufficiency – then some of our units have decided to request that they become "districts".

In our recent history we created "missionary districts" such as Peru-Brazil, Africa, and Asia. They were younger units within the Society and largely dependent on outside assistance, especially from the leadership in Rome. Originally the hope was that they would eventually become a province.

Provinces, on the other hand, were units that were once self-sufficient in terms of leadership, finance, mission and formation. When a province asks to become a district it is a new situation, analogous but not quite the same as the situation of a mission-district.

In reality, none of the mission-districts has developed into a province in recent history. It seems they have no particular desire to work towards radical self-sufficiency. On the other hand, all of the missionary-districts are presently contributing confreres to international mission teams beyond their shores and all of them are attracting at least some vocations.

When a province becomes a district – for example, both Mexico and Australia recently – then they are saying they are down-sizing and



simplifying their leadership structures and may be seeking assistance from the international Society in terms of leadership, administration and possibly finance.

For practical reasons they do need to maintain local administration of finance, care of the elderly and local legal issues which may include boundary violations. All of these areas need local attention for local conditions and cannot reasonably be handled by leaders outside the country. A professed Marist needs to be able to maintain the overall responsibility for these areas even when Lay Partners may carry most of the burden of the administrative day.

Perhaps the time will come when a local unit cannot manage to maintain the structures of a district. The time may be coming in some areas when there may be no more Marists in a country where we have traditionally been present.

Before we leave a country completely there may remain one community or a couple of communities, probably mostly of senior confreres, who may

request to come either directly under the Superior General or else request to join another unit led by the Major Superior of that other unit. Obviously, all Marists and all communities are required to have a Major Superior.

All of these structural changes are healthy and can be handled sensitively, respectfully and with a certain equanimity when we proceed slowly, prayerfully and deliberately. The major difficulty is often within our own hearts which are reluctant to let go of what we have known for so long – it seems harder for many older people to embrace change - or of claiming that “cultural differences” make such re-structuring unimaginable.

It requires some positive energy to embrace these changes in governmental structure and it is certainly easier to make progress in re-shaping our governance, for the sake of mission, when we approach it earlier than later. If we do not move as soon as reasonably possible, even if not every confrere is in agreement, a unit is in danger of simply imploding and then confreres and the people whom we are called to serve could be hurt.

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However, if we do embrace these changes with courage, there can be a new energy for mission and renewed flexibility to see us through to new life in the Spirit.

From a district to a province.

It is quite foreseeable that a group of districts, while retaining their essential local responsibilities that are non-transferable, may decide to combine with other districts or an existing province to form a more robust unit under one Major Superior. That unit may be called a province.

We are not prophets, but it does seem quite likely that before too long we may, perhaps, have three or four provinces in the Society of Mary that may be composed of districts and provinces such as:

- Asia-Pacific with Asia, Australia, New Zealand and/or Oceania.
- South America, Mexico and the USA.
- Europe, Africa and Canada.

It seems this may be the way we are going, but we will move prudently and sensitively. Let's see! It would be helpful if we create conditions for such a movement by working together in areas of closer co-operation in the meantime.

These new structures for governance find fertile soil when we work together informally on mission within these structures before any formal unification and when we come to know and appreciate each other as brothers and friends within the region, sharing as much as possible in common. Inasmuch as we create the conditions of fraternity and mission in common the structures will follow at the right time. It is, however, important to be moving in these directions or the units may have already imploded and will lack the strength to make the necessary adjustments.

Eventually one governance structure for mission for the whole Society?

Perhaps in due course – here we are certainly in the area of surmise - even three or four provinces may be too cumbersome for our mission. Even these possible three or four provinces may be a provisional step towards one Society under one Superior General, in due course.

When we consider the demographics of the Society, our rapid ageing and the numbers of confreres in formation, it is easy to suppose that we will be a Congregation of about 150 or 200 active members within a few decades. A certain number of those confreres will be required for administration, leadership and formation.

Possibly, that might mean about thirty active Marist missionary communities throughout the world. (At the moment we are less than six hundred Marists in thirty countries.) Of course, we never know how the Spirit will blow, but we need to search for signs and discern how the Spirit may be leading us.

Things may change. It was only a few decades ago that the central leadership was calling for greater localization and strengthening the local units along national lines. Now we are calling for inter-cultural communities under more central leadership. The times change and what was appropriate some decades ago may no longer be for the best.

Some of us may once have believed that the General and his Council could be top-heavy in Rome. I have now come to believe that, in face of the difficulties in finding strong local leadership, we need to dedicate our best leaders to central leadership so that the centre can offer direction and freedom of movement for mission. It is a great sacrifice for local units to offer their best leaders to serve in Rome, but, for the sake of the overall vitality of the Society, I am confident that this is a wise use of our leaders.

We have tried to experiment with different ways of working as a general council – for example, by having one or two councillors living in their home units and working on the general council part-time – but found that the ministry of central leadership is best exercised within one team based in one central base. This seems to serve better the overall interests of the Society.

I know not everyone will agree with this approach – and I may have been among them myself years ago – but I have come to believe this from my experience of the last six years in leadership.

we are calling for inter-cultural communities under more central leadership. The times change and what was appropriate some decades ago may no longer be for the best.

It is possible to suppose that in due course the most flexible form of government for the Society will be one centralized leadership, presumably, but not necessarily, based in Rome.

This could eventually see the end of individual units – both provinces and districts – and return to our form of governance at the beginning, one Society of Mary under the Superior General, divided for the sake of mission. Interestingly, the Marist Sisters have been working in this direction for several years now.

The “omnes gentes” communities – small, prayerful, inter-cultural and inter-generational, with front line missionary outreaches – would seem well placed to support such structures of leadership for the future. It may be that as traditional ministries and units are relinquished, communities rather like the “omnes gentes” communities, will remain, united internationally under a central leadership.

Leadership, situations, and priorities all change over time. Some confreres may say: “none of this concerns me ... I have done my time”. Fair enough! Others may have strong opinions for or against this suggestion of how the future may look. It is good to be able to discern this together and we do have Chapters ahead of us in the next couple of years.

We all do the best we can and hand it over in faithful discernment together of the signs of the times and to our younger confreres who will be bearing the heat of the day in their turn. Meantime, we try to work with those around us to create flexible and stable conditions of governance to enable the Marist missionary charism to flourish in our time and well into the future.

“Commissions” as an example of one way forward.

The 2017 Chapter encouraged us to search for creative ways to develop our competence as Marists in certain directions for mission, including the areas of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, the work with ecology, and our work with migrants. (2017 GC, 9)

We have created three groups of working Marists, one for each of these missionary directions, and called them “commissions”. They work together, mostly on Zoom, to deepen their own expertise in these prioritized areas of missionary work and to make some practical contribution, as best they can, to the local church and to the wider Society of Mary.

Sometimes the work of these commissions has shaped new ministries such as some centres of ecological spirituality in Oceania or a centre for inter-religious and inter-cultural harmony in Thailand.

One of the interesting aspects of the work of these commissions is that they bring together Marists – including Marists of our wider family, lay and religious – across the borders of traditional units to come together in areas of common missionary interest. They are communicating about and deepening their missionary awareness and are connecting around the Marist world.

Besides the encouragement they derive from their work, they are also modelling one way forward of “Marists without borders”. It would be a healthy development for other groups of Marists who share similar interests in some aspect of our mission and spirituality to arrange to meet “virtually” in order to deepen skills and share knowledge and experience across our Marist world thus serving better the needs of our church and our world.





One international Society for mission.

All Marists are as one. We read in our Constitutions:

"Since September 24, 1836, when the first superior general was elected, Marists have understood the Society as a single body, dispersed for the sake of their mission, but united in Spirit". (#157).

As such, we need to make every effort to build up our unity and fraternity for mission. When people step back from participation in the full life of the Society, or "go it alone", we are all much the weaker for that.

There is certainly a danger that as a Marist reaches a certain age he may decide that he will withdraw in some way from our common Marist enterprise. There are many forms of withdrawal.

At the beginning we quoted the famous words from our Constitutions:

"Let them learn from the first Marists to find in the presence of Mary at Nazareth and Pentecost, in the early Church and at the end of time, the secret of their own presence in the Church and the world of today". (#228)

For most of this letter we have focused on the early Church. However, we recall too that Mary's Work will not be finished until, at the end of time, all God's children are gathered together "one in heart and mind". (c.f. 2017 G.C. 7)

Our senior confreres have a special role in our Society of bringing us all together "one in heart and mind" and so to continue Mary's Work with a special focus. We ask our esteemed senior confreres never simply to withdraw from the active mission of the Society but to participate in it as vibrantly as you reasonably can in your circumstances.

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You are a powerhouse of prayer for the mission of the Society, and everyone needs your bright interest, support and wisdom. While encouraging a new generation of Marists to carry the heat of the missionary day, you can contribute greatly with a fatherly and gracious word offered from your own experience and wisdom.

Some days you may be experiencing suffering which, if united with the suffering of Christ on the cross, participates in his redemption of our world. Please do not withdraw or surrender. Rather please be looking for new ways to contribute and to learn new things and take on new challenges, no matter how small they may seem in comparison with what you have achieved in the past.

When we see a senior confrere full of light and life, even if he is quite frail physically, it is an enormous encouragement for everyone. Above all, we need your prayerful and fraternal encouragement.

Conclusion

There are local and General Chapters coming up very soon.

This fraternal letter is an offering towards greater discernment and more Spirit-filled decisions that lie ahead of us. Please read it as a personal offering from myself and my council towards nourishing our Society to be ever more faithfully generous in undertaking the Work of Mary now and into the future. Together we discern the Way ahead. I hope this letter may help us *step a little more courageously*.

Fraternally, in Mary's Name.

Fr John Larsen s.m.
Superior General.

April 2024.
Rome.