

Reflection from the Superior General

Last week I attended, just out of Rome, a regular meeting of the Union of Superiors General. One afternoon was dedicated to an interesting discussion about the phenomenon of active religious priests desiring to become diocesan priests, or adopting a “diocesan mentality”.

Some religious priests apply to incardinate permanently into a welcoming diocese. Other religious priests slowly undergo a subtle change of mentality. They can begin to adopt a life-style, quite appropriate to a diocesan priest, where the primary allegiance is given to the diocese but which weakens their vowed community life and availability for mission within their own Congregation. Perhaps the religious priest becomes disaffected or hurt by his experience of religious life. Perhaps he comes to believe that the diocesan ministry can offer greater freedom, financially and otherwise, while securing his future in an amenable locale.



The Parish church of Cerdon

Some of these Religious Congregations, whose leaders I met, are now primarily involved in parish ministry even if their Founders had been just as opposed as Father Jean-Claude to parochial ministry, at least as it was experienced in post-Revolutionary European countries. Other Founders would accept parishes as long as another ministry were aligned, such as a school or a formation or spiritual centre.

So, what are we Marists, who share in the experience of many other Congregations, to make of all this?

Many Marists over the years have laboured generously and fruitfully in the parochial ministry and we rejoice in their love and zeal. Parish life, lived vibrantly, can be a life-giving scenario for everyone, as many of us

know from experience. When the parish is thriving, it becomes a hub of human and religious activity involving people of all ages and states of life. Many bishops are asking for us to serve in parishes.

Our distinctive contribution to any diocese is our unique Marist charism. Our charism is always dynamic, never static. When our ministries, parochial or otherwise, celebrate, deepen and develop our Marist charism we will be serving the local church authentically. Our charism, joyously embraced and welcoming, attracts others who want to journey together along the Marist Way, sharing in our celebrations, our history and spirituality, our hopes and struggles. On visitation I often encounter people who express their joy for being in a “Marist parish” and their hope that Marists will remain.

Our Marist community life is at the heart of our mission. When we share all things in common – our prayer, our resources, our lives – and live as “one in mind and heart”, we reflect the inner-life of our Trinitarian God, we re-create the early church as our only model, and welcome others to share in our community life as well as forming their own Gospel communities. A robust Marist community, while challenging to live well, is an antidote to individualism and a call to community in a polarized world.

We need to keep discerning our commitments in the light of our “call to be truly missionary”. (#12). It is difficult to define what is indeed a truly “missionary” ministry. Our Constitutions guide us: “Marists are called to establish the church where it does not exist or renew existing communities rather than to participate in its activities in places where it is already established with sufficient resources”. (#14)

We gratefully rejoice in the life and ministry of our brother diocesan priests. We also celebrate our own unique and life-giving vocation to live our Marist charism and mission ever more robustly over the years.

This Wednesday, June 6, we recall the saintly life of Marcellin Champagnat. He was a diocesan priest who, by taking his vows in the Society of Mary, was able to breathe Mary’s spirit of compassion in a new way, spreading the Good News to the ends of the world.

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