
REVIVING OUR PROPHETIC SPIRIT

*How I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets
and that the Lord would put his Spirit in them.
(Num 11, 29)*

People often speak about how consecrated life is passing through a **time of crisis**, of profound change. How is it not going to be in crisis when everything around it is? We are privileged to be living within a **change of epoch**, and this affects the whole world, to differing degrees.

In spite of these tumultuous times, we believe, inspired by Mary, in the enduring and deep-down **action of the Holy Spirit** in history, working towards an alternative society, one that is more just and brotherly, and this fills us with hope. The Spirit is renewing the Church, calling it to be a ferment in this new society, and hence is inviting each of us to be a player in this renewal. As with the first Marists 200 years ago, the Spirit is calling us to *a new beginning*.

We have been caught up in this task of *aggiornamento* in the past 50 years since the 1967 Chapter, rightly named a *renewal* Chapter. I believe that our experience over this time, as has been the case for most other Religious as well, has been quite similar to a **biblical exile**, so that today we find ourselves in what has been called a **middle space**. We have left behind the land we inhabited 50 years ago, but we have not yet reached the new land; we are like exiles, in a middle space. Religious life, such as we knew it in the past, is in the process of disappearing but new forms of religious life have not yet seen the light of day. Such a state invites creativity, but often it is also home to disorientation and a feeling of failure.

During the exile, the People of God lived through a profound experience of loss and vulnerability, even feeling abandoned. Yet this was the very context in which God summoned a small group to exercise the **prophetic role** of articulating hope.

Isn't this same prophetic role entrusted to consecrated life in our days, when we too live like exiles along with the rest of the People of God? Pope Francis has urged Religious repeatedly to be **radical prophets** and to **awaken the world**.

This is an urgent call, for the impression of many inside the Church is similar to that of the People of Israel at some moments in their history: *We are given no signs from God; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be* (Ps 74,9). Could it be true that *the prophets are asleep*, in the words of the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch?

Charisms continue the historical role of the biblical prophets. They are gifts for the common good, capable of recalling the value of selfless giving, of justice, and of truth. The founders of religious institutes, Champagnat among them, were, as a rule, highly creative and innovative people, launching institutions to give shape to their charism and accomplish their received mission. And so, with the passage of time, little by little, structures were generated for this purpose, and robust works and organizations were born, that were frequently both agile and highly effective.

The problems arose when these very institutions that were born of the charism to keep it alive and be at its service, ended up becoming the ultimate *raison d'être* of the charismatic movement. This is what Pope Francis reminded us about: *Charisms endure, they are strong; works pass away. People sometimes confuse Institutes with their apostolic works. Institutes are creative and are always in search of new paths* (Dialogue with the USG, Nov. 2013).

The time comes when the nucleus of the original inspiration gets confused with the organisational and historical form it has taken on, and people do not understand that the salvation of the original inspiration consists in *changing these forms so as to remain faithful to their origins*. As contradictory as it sounds, **great creativity** is needed to be faithful to those who have gone before us. This is the **creative fidelity** spoken about in *Vita Consecrata* (37): *Institutes of Consecrated Life are invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world*.

I find the expression **creative destruction**, coined by the economist Joseph Schumpeter, to be very powerful. I think we must have the courage to **rethink, renew**, and even **dismantle** the organisational structures we have created, to be able to enjoy the freedom of setting out to new lands. Otherwise, it can happen that the prophetic power of a charism diminishes so much that it undergoes a *genetic mutation*.

I feel that, for us, after 200 hundred years of history, there is a serious and urgent call to **revive our prophetic spirit**: *How I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit in them!* (Num 11, 29). Isn't this what we are talking about when we speak of *a new beginning* or *a new La Valla*?

Aware that, *in general*, it is **creative minorities** who determine the future (Benedict XVI, 2009), we need a flourishing of creative individuals and communities to develop the necessary conditions for living again the miracle of our origins: the same enthusiasm, the same joy, the same fruits. We must put our most creative people on the peripheries. This is the most favourable place for any re-birth, instead of keeping them busy in maintaining structures that have been around forever, or focussed on the internal life and work of our organizations.

Charisms are not bottles of distilled water. They are to be lived out energetically, being adapted to the culture. But, people say, there is a risk of getting things wrong, of making mistakes. Yes, it is risky. For sure, there will always be mistakes, of that I have no doubt. But this should not hold us back, because then we would run the risk of even bigger mistakes. Moreover, we have to beg forgiveness constantly and acknowledge, with considerable shame, our apostolic frustrations caused by a lack of courage.

(Pope Francis, idem)

In any case, the decisive commitment of all is needed, starting with the leaders of the Institute, to relive the experience that Jesus put to Nicodemus: *you must be born again* (Jn 3,7), even though its body is 200 years old. This means that each one of us is to become a *stem cell*, capable of regenerating the whole organism.

Let us call to mind the words of Pope Francis: *Wake up the world! Give witness to a different way of doing, being, and living! It is possible to live differently in this world. Religious must be men and women capable of waking up the world*. He went on to say that the priority of religious life has to be that of *proclaiming the Kingdom, and this is non-negotiable. The stress has to fall on being prophets, and not in play-acting in this regard ...* (Pope Francis, idem)

Indeed, as Marists, we are not called primarily to be builders or keepers of institutions, but rather pioneers and daring souls, prophets of alternative ways of creating communities and communion between people; *shock therapy* for economic and political systems and for church institutions too.

In the document, *Making the Journey Together (Report of Br Superior General and his Council to the XXII General Chapter)*, we summarised our vision of the Institute at the present

moment. We offered reflections, and made some suggestions for future action. I am not going to repeat here what was said there – which, of course, I fully endorse – but I will highlight some areas that, in my opinion, can help us create a **new La Valla**, that is, **revive our prophetic spirit**.

An Institute ‘going forth’

Recently I was thinking about what these 16 years in Rome have taught me. The first thing that came to my mind was the experience that each time someone manages to **move out of his/her comfort zone** and head down an untried path, marvellous things start to happen, unhopd-for things, surprising things.

I believe that this is also true for institutions, as collective bodies. The extent to which we are able collectively to abandon our comfort zones and explore new paths, will be the measure of our feeling of growing in hope, vitality, and enthusiasm.

Isn't a good example of this the tremendous enthusiasm generated in the Church when Pope Francis put the focus on a Church *going forth* rather than the maintenance of the institution?

This is an important message for those in leadership in religious life, and we all know that a General Chapter is the supreme extraordinary authority of the Institute in matters within its competence. If we use up more energy in maintaining what exists than in helping to bring the fresh inspirations of the Spirit to birth, we should not be surprised by somewhat disappointing outcomes. *“If you want different results, don't keep doing the same thing”*, said Einstein.

Yet this is a call directed at all Marists. To move out of your comfort zone does not always mean going to some frontier mission or to another country. Geographical and existential peripheries can be found in the place where you are currently working or within a radius of a kilometre. The invitation to leave our comfort zone forms part of our DNA, even though at times we nest and plead to be left in peace. We know, however, that what is at stake is **our vitality, our future**.

At the start of the Chapter I said, *“Our main task during these weeks, then, is not to produce beautiful documents but rather to try to respond to the really important questions, with a compassionate heart like that of Champagnat. **Where does the Church need us most at this beginning of the 21st century? Where around the world are the most vulnerable children and young people, and how should we be serving them, as a global body?**”*

In the Council Report, you can find some reflections on this topic. Allow me to highlight a few points here.

Displaced children and young people

The country where we are meeting, Colombia, has the second highest number of internally displaced people of all countries in the world, behind Syria in first place. Among the displaced people in Colombia there are more than two million children.

On the world level, in June this year the UNHCR reported that there are 65.6 million people who have been forced to leave their home areas. This figure is made up of 22.5 million refugees, 40.3 million internally displaced people, and 2.8 million others in the process of seeking asylum.

If all these people were to be gathered into a single place in the world, they would form the 21st biggest country numerically, with a population similar to that of France and greater than that of Italy or Great Britain, for example. And more than this, if this group continues to grow at the same pace it has in recent years, by 2030 it would become the 5th highest population in the world.

A fact that is particularly relevant for us is that **half of all displaced people in the world are less than 18 years old.**

We are talking, then, about a phenomenon of enormous dimensions, something that I believe cannot leave us indifferent. As the Pope said in his Message for the Day for Migrants and Refugees this year, *Migration today is not a phenomenon limited to some areas of the planet. It affects all continents and is growing into a tragic situation of global proportions.* Indeed, it is a *sign of our times* that presents huge challenges.

The theme the Pope chose for this Day was precisely *Child Migrants, the Vulnerable and the Voiceless* because *children are the first among those to pay the heavy toll of emigration, almost always caused by violence, poverty, environmental conditions, as well as the negative aspects of globalization... (A)mong migrants, children constitute the most vulnerable group, because... they are voiceless: their precarious situation deprives them of documentation, hiding them from the world's eyes; the absence of adults to accompany them prevents their voices from being raised and heard. In this way, migrant children easily end up at the lowest levels of human degradation, where illegality and violence destroy the future of too many innocents, while the network of child abuse is difficult to break up.*

I was recently touched by a photo published in the Italian media, in which a group of immigrants arriving in a dinghy from north Africa, were holding up a notice where they had written: *Excuse us for not drowning.* This is surely the perception that most of them have, that they are disturbing us because they are upsetting our comfort and indifference.

For sure, many of you know the poem with which Primo Levi began his book, *Se questo è un uomo (Survival in Auschwitz: If This is a Man)*, an account of his own experience in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. It is probably good to re-read these lines in the light of the facts just mentioned.

*You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:*

*Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.*

*Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.*

Meditate that this came about:

*I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children,
Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.*

We Marists are already engaged in looking after migrants who are minors, as was described in a recent FMSI publication, *Rights without Borders. Marist initiatives in caring for Migrants and Refugees*. This gathers the experiences of 14 initiatives undertaken in 11 different countries. In fact, I know of many more, and this is a source of joy for all of us.

The question I believe that we have to address now, as a Chapter, goes much further than various one-off initiatives. Is there **something that we could and should be doing as a global body** to provide a response to this emerging situation in our world, either by ourselves or with other institutions?

Caring for our common home

Planet Earth is small and old, some 4440 million years old in fact. Around 3800 million years ago all types of life emerged on it, and 7 million years ago, beings emerged that were both conscious and intelligent, exceptionally active and threatening: human beings. What is alarming is that the Earth **no longer has sufficient reserves** in its storehouse to provide food and water for all its inhabitants. Its bio-capacity is degrading daily.

Some years back *Earth Overshooting Day* was launched by the *Global Footprint Network*. This day, the date of which varies from year to year, points to the moment when human demand for natural resources exceeds the capacity of the earth to regenerate them in a whole year. This day has shifted from the end of September 2000 to August 2nd this year. This is the earliest date since the world started to experience this phenomenon at the beginning of the 1970s. In other words, humanity is currently using resources 1.7 times as fast as eco-systems can regenerate them. This is the same as saying that we are using up 1.7 planets.

On the other hand, and hypothetically, if we wanted to extend the type of consumption enjoyed by affluent countries to the whole of humanity, we would need 5 planets the same size as ours, something that is absolutely impossible as well as irrational.

Faced with this human attack on Mother Earth which many scientists have criticised, the Pope, in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, lamented the weakness of the powers of this world that have been fooled into *thinking that everything can continue as usual to feed their self-destructive vices* (59) by *behaviour which at times appears suicidal* (55).

How do we overcome the dangers of going down this road? The Pope answered, Change course. *A change in direction. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years... These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, **pleading that we take another course.*** (53).

This change has a lot to do with the readiness to *outline the major paths of dialogue which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us* (163). If we do

nothing, we will have to face the worst. Yet the Pope trusts in the creative ability of human beings to combine forces around one great ideal, *one World with a common plan* (164).

The really urgent challenge, then, is to *protect our common home* (13); and for this we need, quoting Pope John Paul II, a **global ecological conversion** (5); **a culture of care that permeates all of society** (231).

In a happy coincidence with the slogan of our Bicentenary, the Pope states in his Encyclical, *The Earth Charter asked us to leave behind a period of self-destruction and **make a new start**, but we have not as yet developed a universal awareness needed to achieve this. Here, I would echo that courageous challenge: As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek **a new beginning**... Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.* (207)

How can we contribute to this *new beginning* for humanity? The Pope ends his Encyclical with the sixth chapter, *Ecological education and spirituality*. In it, he challenges educators to form for *ecological citizenship* (211) and a *new lifestyle*, based on *compassionate care; shared sobriety; the alliance between humanity and the environment*, due to their being intimately linked to one another; *co-responsibility* for everything that exists and lives, and for our common destiny (203-208).

In response to this invitation from the Pope, some of our Provinces on this American continent, have started to adopt the principles of **permaculture** to educate in a way that is truly integral. *Permaculture* is a design instrument for sustainable human systems for a future using less energy, inspired by nature, and is based on three ethical principles – care of the earth, care of people, and sharing resources.

The principles of *permaculture* draw their inspiration from the wisdom of many indigenous peoples, using concepts like *good living, living well, or a full life*. More than a philosophy of life, these principles provide a metaphor for a world in harmony with the Whole.

The reality of our planet demands **urgent action**. There is no choice. We cannot simply continue as always as if there is no threat. What will a *new beginning* with a stress on *global ecological conversion* mean for us? What contribution will we make to *protecting our common home*? How are we going to live out and spread a new culture, *a culture of care*? How can we promote *ecological citizenship* and a *new lifestyle*?

I think that a collective commitment on such a vital matter is important. Let us remember that *living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.* (LS 217)

Safeguarding of children

We know that the sexual abuse of minors, a terrible form of violence against children and adolescents, is an enormous social plague. Despite the fact that it is a growing problem in the world, most cases go undetected and unreported.

According to data released by the World Health Organisation (Sept. 2016), 1 in every 5 women and 1 in every 13 men across the world have claimed that they suffered sexual abuse during

their childhood. Similarly, the *Global Study*, prepared by UNICEF in 2014, estimated that more than 1 in every 10 girls suffered sexual abuse in their childhood.

Given the difficulties present in many countries of the world to detect and report cases of abuse, the data provided by a private organisation called *One in Four* seems to me much closer to the truth. This organisation was founded in the United Kingdom in 1999, and has an office in Ireland as well. According to this organisation, *evidence shows as many as **one in four adults** have experienced some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18*. These are figures from Europe (the Council of Europe recently launched a campaign entitled *One in Five*), but we know that they can be extrapolated to all the continents, to greater or lesser degrees.

Today, as an institution, we are trying to be, in one way or another, part of the solution to this social problem of enormous proportions. Still, we must acknowledge, with great remorse, that in the past we were part of the problem and that we might continue being so unless we make a serious commitment to both its prevention and the struggle for its eradication in our societies.

Institutions like ours, that should have protected minors from any form of abuse, failed them undeniably. Maybe we can find explanations to help understand how such situations of sexual abuse came about in our institutions but none of these explanations can be used as an excuse, for **they should never have occurred in the first place**.

The very existence of victims is a permanent reminder that we failed them as an institution. And if this was the case in the past, **we cannot fail them again**, not under any circumstances. We have all received a wonderful inheritance from 200 years of history, full of lights, but also with its shadows. This inheritance is the base on which we commit ourselves to build our future. Indeed, we can look to marvellous examples of excellence in education, of heroism and hard work; of family spirit; of models of faith, hope and charity; of marvellous companions in community; of simple, practical people with their feet on the ground... Today we realise that there have also been abusers, that is criminals, and that some leaders in the past, in spite of knowing of such situations, failed to act in an appropriate manner according to civil law and the Gospel. A protective veil of silence was thrown over cases of abuse for the sake of protecting the vocations of perpetrators and for the reputation of the institution. Victims were encouraged to keep silent and it was naively presumed that they would be capable of getting on with their lives, with no major consequences.

Today we know that abuse had and continues to have devastating effects on victims, who are left deeply wounded, often for their whole lives. On 2nd January 2017, in my message to mark the bicentenary of our foundation, I publicly asked forgiveness to victims of abuse in Marist institutions, because *we have not always acted with the sensitivity, speed and firmness that these situations demanded, or we have not always done enough to prevent abuse*.

Collectively, we did this again in the opening moments of this General Chapter. Yet we know that **it is not enough to ask forgiveness**. If in the past we failed victims and society, today we must be seen to be **especially committed** in the struggle against this social plague, beginning with our own institutions, but not only them.

We have to learn from our mistakes. *We agree to bear the burden and the grace of our past. We agree to honour what is, including even the broken things of life: ourselves, church, state, and all institutions. Their dark side is a necessary teacher.* (Richard Rohr)

Today, all of our administrative units have policies and protocols for the prevention of child abuse in our institutions. In nearly all places, we have people and/or teams responsible for

overseeing this matter. On a global level, we have made a significant effort in training and accompaniment. But I believe that **we must go much further** than doing the bare minimum. Bertolt Brecht used to invite contemporary people to be on their guard to protect democracy, since *the womb the monster crawled out of is still fertile*. Brecht was talking about dictatorship as a monster; in a similar way, I think that we need to ask ourselves, in all seriousness, if *the womb the monster of abuse crawled out of is still fertile*.

The Pre-Chapter Commission on Child Protection has prepared a report in which it signalled some points to be stressed, then provided principles and recommendations towards this topic being taken up as a priority in the Institute. They underlined the responsibility of those involved in Marist apostolic works and proposed the topic's inclusion in initial and ongoing formation. They spoke of empowering children and young people, and made recommendations on how to respond to cases of abuse. Besides endorsing these proposals of the Commission, may I dare suggest some other initiatives to complement them:

- That, as an Institute, **an in-depth study be carried out of possible causes** that gave rise to and enabled the abuse that happened, in alarming numbers in some places. This study could include recommendations for the future, based on our own experience.
- That FMSI, on behalf of the Institute, continue to be strongly committed to the defence of Child Rights, promoting in a particular way the prevention of any form of abuse and raising awareness of this topic in society at large. I think that we have to be **active and strategic in our commitment** to eradicate this social plague in all the countries where we have a presence.

Finally, I would like to underline the importance of collaborating shoulder to shoulder, in a fully transparent manner, with public institutions seeking the well-being of children and young people, and the eradication of sexual abuse. In this sense, I was really impressed by the words of Bishop Timothy Costelloe SDB, Archbishop of Perth (Australia), related to the painful experience of living through the investigations of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*. In his pastoral letter of February this year, he wrote, *I am convinced that without this public accounting, to which the Australian community has a right, we as a Church would not have been able to confront our failings so directly. The public interest has been well served by this exercise.*

And he ended by stating, *Now the whole community, including the members of our own Church, expects concrete actions which will demonstrate the genuineness of our words of apology, contrition and shame.*

Dancing with dinosaurs

In my last letter to Provincials, I made reference to the book *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, written by the Benedictine Mark Patrick Hederman. The surprising sub-title of the book is, *A Spirituality for the 21st Century...* What on earth do dinosaurs have to do with spirituality, especially a spirituality of the future?

The author reminds us in this book that dinosaurs were the animals who had the greatest success of all creatures to have inhabited this planet, since they held sway for over 160 million years, before disappearing some 65 million years ago. Other animals just had to learn to live with them and survive in spite of them.

Hederman suggests that today we have created *new dinosaurs*: Churches, Banks, multi-nationals ... And further, that unless organisations become dinosaurs, they will not survive the changing circumstances of history. Hence, it is better to dance with them, so as not to be torn apart by them!

If we contemplate the history of the Institute across its 200 years, we could say that we have become **a little dinosaur**. What began very simply at La Valla has been growing more complex with each passing day, especially in those places where we have been present for a long time. Educational works have multiplied, and their management and leadership have become ever more sophisticated and demanding; the number of Brothers is going down, in general, while the number of lay people present in our works has been continuously increasing; financing all these services has become a significant pressure for Province leaders ... A long list of factors could be added to describe the complexity of the present moment.

When faced with such complexity, our temptation is to pretend it does not exist and continue to do what we have always done, that is, when things were much simpler, or to set about managing complex matters without any preparation, as if religious profession automatically gives us what is needed in a professional world. In both cases, **the dinosaur produces victims**, frequently among the young Brothers.

So, should we simply deny the complexity? Not necessarily; rather, what it means is that we have to learn to *dance* with the complexity. Either way, I do not think that this has to be at any price. If the dinosaur structures that we have created are continually leaving victims along the way... it's time to ask ourselves if our structures are at the service of Marist life and mission, or if, on the contrary, our most energetic and best resources, are being consumed by the maintenance and management of these structures. And in the end, if we have to admit that we are not capable of *dancing* appropriately with this dinosaur, we must then seek out a dance partner better suited to who we are.

We have been adapting ourselves to this new reality as best we can, with greater or lesser success, depending on where we are. But we have to admit that **the coming years will be decisive for the survival of Marist mission**. Today we Brothers are a minority in our educational works, and this reality will become even more the case in the coming eight years. There is, then, no escape from adopting a different organisational structure for managing and accompanying Marist mission.

In fact, this was the express purpose of the project we called *New Models*, driven by our limitations in this regard, but, above all, by the values we profess, amongst which is our desire to be co-responsible with Marist laypeople. This project has helped us take some first steps towards taking on the character of a global body at the service of our mission, but I believe that we have to **keep advancing with daring and creativity** to give ourselves the most appropriate structures for the particular historical time in which we are living. These structures may appear complex, but they should feel *light* to those in leadership roles.

Of course, none of this excludes the **creative destruction** that I mentioned at the start, if this is the direction in which the Spirit of God is moving us. As I said earlier, *I think we have to have the courage to **rethink, renew and even dismantle** the organisational structures we have created, to be able to enjoy the freedom of setting out to new lands.*

New wine, new wineskins

In the report presented by Br Charles Raphael to the capitulants exactly 50 years ago, he said that as of the 1st January 1967 the number of Brothers was 9,704; 937 more than in 1958, the year of the previous General Chapter. He also said that the average age of the Institute was 39.7 (37.8 in 1958).

You will find updated statistics for today among the support documents available to you on the computer system of the Chapter. There you can see that we have 1/3 the number of Brothers in 1967, that is, 6,719 fewer than 50 years ago, and with an average age of 64,9.

I remember that, during the 1993 Chapter, participants were given an extensive statistical overview of the Institute. I was surprised by the reaction of a good number of capitulants who complained about this information, saying that such information merely led to discouragement. Is it better, then, to bury our heads in the sand... simply because we find it depressing?

At the time, I could not really understand such a reaction to objective facts. Today, however, it makes me think of the weight placed (and maybe still placed) on the *quantitative* in religious life and, even more importantly, on the image of religious life that this mentality reflects.

In the last 50 years, we have changed much as an Institute. So much so, that if a capitulant from 1967 were to enter this room today, he would probably think it was some other congregation's chapter and not that of the Marist Brothers. Yes, we have changed a lot. Yet, I wonder if the old images of religious life and our identity in the Church remain fixed nostalgically in our brains, perhaps unconsciously.

In a good number of situations, in spite of our numerical diminishment, we Brothers have continued to live in the middle of structures developed for the 1960s or earlier, and I am not convinced that this has either helped us understand our new circumstances or adapt to these. Even when our theological underpinnings have been updated and helped us understand ourselves in a new light, everything that surrounds us on in our daily lives, in many cases, has **anchored us in the past** more than in the future.

I wonder whether our initial formation has not been a reflection, in one way or another, of what has been happening in our communities. It is true that, in seeking to adapt itself to new contexts, formation has been changing with the passage of the years, but, frequently, with structures from the past or, often, adopting programs, structures or experimental processes that have lasted for short periods only.

Across the different continents, without exception, we have been able to rely on excellent Brothers who have given the best of themselves in the formation of our candidates, with remarkable generosity and commitment. Brothers who, even in the midst of confusion all around them, feeling their way, have offered what they considered the most appropriate process for forming the Marist Brothers of the future. And I am not speaking in the abstract since I, too, was one of these formators in the past century...

Surely, today, with the experience won over these recent years, we are in a better position to **take decisions** about the initial formation we would like and how we would like it to be.

The starting point, of course, has to be the profile of the Marist Brother we are imagining for the future. During the 2013 General Conference at the Hermitage, I believe that we made real progress in outlining a response to this question, but, as we well know, General Conferences do not have the authority available to a Chapter. Might this be the moment to take up once more some of the proposals advanced in 2013?

With an eye to the work done during the General Conference and also what was accomplished during the Colloquium on initial formation in 2015, I would like to recall some of the questions still waiting for answers:

- If we think that a Marist Brother is someone with 'global availability', *a Brother for the world*, what programs and houses of formation do we need? Would we accept for the Superior General to appoint Brothers to their mission after their final profession?
- If we are called to be *mystics and prophets*, what *process of initiation* is required?
- If we imagine our future as linked to lay Marists, what are the consequences of this for our formation?
- If we believe that Marist Youth Ministry is a privileged means for promoting vocations for the Church, why is it that it is not a priority in some administrative units?
- How can we improve the process of *screening* candidates, especially when there are bigger groups of them?
- What would the accompaniment and care of our Brothers in the second stage of post-novitiate formation look like if we really took their life mentoring seriously?
- Isn't now the right moment to rethink formation as a whole, from initial through to ongoing, in the light of the experience of recent years and the profile of the Marist Brother we want?

Being lay Marists

We are at a very important moment in the history of the Church – a moment of rebirth, a return to the practice of the early Church when lay people played a full role in the mission of the Church, one of our most urgent calls now is to promote that rebirth, with sensitivity, courage and vision. If we do not do this then we will have diminished the Church of the future, the Church, the people of God, the body of Christ, that we all love.

When Br Charles Howard wrote these words in his Circular on the *Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family* in 1991, there were hardly any organised groups of lay Marists. Today, 26 years later, there are more than 5,000 laypeople who are members of some type of Marist group. 3,526 belong to the Champagnat Movement, in one of the 266 fraternities, and the rest belong to mixed communities (Lay / Brothers), lay communities or some other type of Marist group or association.

At the same time, the experience lived by Marist laypeople has been gathered and described through various documents, some of them of high quality. The last of these is the one prepared by the Secretariat for the Laity of the Institute which is available to us on the Chapter computer system: *Being a Lay Marist*. I think this is an excellent framework of reference for the identity of lay Marists who feel called to live the Marist charism in the heart of the world. This could become, if we so want, **a great help** for all administrative units, especially those where there has been less progress in developing lay Marist life.

In any case, I think that we are all aware that such documents, however beautiful and sound they may be, are not what will make us advance together. The mere repetition of words and nice-sounding declarations of intent is useless if we do not then put into place the structures that will translate ideals into reality. In this regard, Pope Francis joked in a letter written to Cardinal Ouellet (2016), then President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (CAL), saying that slogans and nice phrases are not what will give life to communities, and adding,

For example, I now recall the famous phrase: “the hour of the laity has come”, but it seems the clock has stopped...

If we take a look back at our past, what has led to our progress in relation to Marist laypeople and to where we find ourselves today? Although we could surely name various building blocks, I would like to highlight the enormous importance of **personal relationships**. All of us, both Brothers and laypeople, have many figments of our imagination and preconceived ideas in our minds, but experience tells us that these evaporate when we sit down to share faith and life.

We must continue, then, on a daring path, **creating spaces of dialogue and encounter**, that foster mutual growth. Starting from there, there are still many other steps to take but these will fall into place more easily. The road forward is open and I am sure that the Spirit has many marvellous surprises in store for us, in the measure that we make forward progress.

What is the Lord telling us through the experience of these recent years? In my opinion, the Lord is reminding us, loud and clear, that He is behind this evolution of the lay Marist life and their connection to the Institute. And that **there is no turning back** in this process. That we must not do an about-turn. We can no longer conceive the future of Marist life and mission without relying on laypeople.

So, each administrative unit, each with its own starting point, has to ask itself what next steps it has to take. In some cases, it will be to put down firm foundations for Marist laypeople to flourish; in others, maybe some initial initiatives need to be completed; in others, it is a question of confronting with courage and transparency the conflicts that are part and parcel of all interpersonal relationships; in others, perhaps, of consolidating relationships and organisational structures that are seen to be the most appropriate for the future ...

Whatever may be the case, we can rely on the gift of the experience of those who set out before us, as well as on the sound practices that we can share, in a spirit of fraternity.

Let us give heartfelt thanks to the Lord and to our Good Mother who have blessed us with the gift of Marist laypeople who are not only numerous but of great quality, as we can see for ourselves in the laypeople here with us these days at the Chapter. Nevertheless, I believe that the urgent task placed before us by Br Charles Howard in 1991 retains its special relevance: to **continue promoting *this rebirth* with sensitivity, courage and vision**.

We know that being prophetic is the other face of being mystic. I ask the Spirit, using the words of Moses, for the gift of prophecy for each of us, a gift that can be translated as discernment, wisdom and audacity. *How I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit in them.* (Num 11, 29).

The Church, children and young people are expecting creative and courageous responses from us, convinced that there is a profound truth in what St Catherine of Siena said, *If you are who you should be, you will set the whole world ablaze!*