

FIRST MEETING OF REPRESENTATIVES OF MARIST INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION
--

*"Our presence in the field of **higher education** gives us a privileged context to promote the dialogue between faith and contemporary thought. We foster high standards of academic discipline and research, contribute to cultural and social progress, and provide professional training and personal formation for future leaders. Through our campus ministry we assist students to integrate their development in faith with their personal ethics and their sense of social justice." (In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat A Vision for Marist Education Today, #156)*

1. Introduction

We, brothers and laypeople, share the Marist charism in our mission in the sector of higher education. We are very happy to have been called to this meeting. We see this as a true call of the Spirit and of Saint Marcellin Champagnat to give new and creative responses to the great challenges of contemporary society.

At the heart of the Church, we are called to evangelise the current culture. We plunge also to the heart of the Marist Institute when we explore avenues that can help resolve the enormous and difficult problems of education in a multipolar, complex and post-Christian world. We share Champagnat's dream when we try to respond concretely to the challenges of present humanity today and when we consolidate a better future for coming generations.

We believe that this will be realised if we show to the young people of today that Jesus is alive and that he fights for their cause when they often face huge and worrying questions. Jesus continues to love each one, whether they be Christian or not; Jesus loves children and young people particularly and he has a special affection for the poorest of the poor.

With Mary, our Good Mother, we give witness to what it means to live as a Christian today. Mary is the strong woman who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was present at the start of the Church to make courageous decisions with the Apostles. She sustains our hope and gives us courage to confront the future in the field of higher education.

In this forum, we pay homage to the many brothers who have preceded us and we thank them. They have shared their experience and courage with us to respond to present challenges with that generosity dreamed of by Champagnat. In their time, these brothers were pioneers in developing educational projects for higher levels of education, as Champagnat had done at another level, when he reformed the teaching method in 1832. In practice, since the debut of the Marist adventure in education, the brothers and lay teachers have always been open to the idea of founding institutions of advanced education.

We believe that this meeting at Curitiba marks the official debut of a project of the Congregation to constitute higher education in teacher training and other disciplines, as a substantial and vital element of the Marist response to the current world.

We thank the Brother Superior General and his Council who, through Brothers Emili Turú and Juan Miguel Anaya, made this event possible. We believe that, in this way, the Marist mission for higher education is recognised and valued.

During these days, we have shared our experiences in the field of higher education, we have come to know each other better and we have sensed the charism of Champagnat in our search for new forms of education that will bring us closer to young people. A university is an organised environment of varied dialogue and discussion. That makes it a privileged place for

seeking the meaning of life, of suffering, of hope and of love, by moving away from one's own comforts, individual interests and the materialistic, hedonistic and consuming pressures of the world.

We believe in the capacity and the power of the university environment to allow people to listen to, to study and to announce what is new and free in the Gospel, amidst pluralism, differences and even opposition. However, it is primordial that we are able to announce the innovation of the Good News: how God loves the young and puts his confidence in them as those responsible for the future of humanity.

More so, the current situation demonstrates the importance of being present in higher education since the university campus has become a new field for the evangelisation of the young.

2. Our reality

Marist higher education started in a systemised way in Brazil in 1931. At this time, the same need for education was felt in Latin America as it had been felt in France fifty years before. Brother Nestor, the third Superior General, expressed his concerns in a letter dated the 5th June 1881: "It is without doubt useless to insist further on the need for studies. Today, the brevet is legally essential for all: we have to sit the exams, and do so with the least possible delay. Thus, to the work, with courage and holy joy, for God, for the salvation of souls and for the homeland." (Brother Nestor, Circulars of the Superiors General, vol. VI, p. 318)

Such a vision widened our horizons and encouraged us to take the first steps in the field of higher education.

Today, in 2004, seventy-three years later, we are meeting as brothers and laypeople to share our common concerns and to initiate Marist projects relevant to higher education.

Our group consists of forty-five representatives from twenty-two Marist Institutions of higher education. We are able to share our experiences, full of joy and hope. Nine out of the ten nations that have Centres of higher education are represented here: Australia, the Philippines, Angola, Spain, the United States of America, Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Brazil and East Timor.

There are currently 80 brothers, 115 priests or religious sisters and 15,000 laypeople working in higher education. We look after 116,370 students. We offer 422 different programmes for diplomas and doctorates. We work in 39 campuses and in 7 university hospitals.

We, who have come together here, are convinced that our institutions our favourable environments for preparing teachers who will educate children, adolescents and young people throughout the entire world to have hearts that know no bounds as with Champagnat.

We instruct by evangelising and we evangelise by instructing. Our challenge is to bring the Gospel closer to young people so as to realise Champagnat's dream today. The world has changed and we must change with it so that young people find that we have new ways of answering their serious and troubling questions about the meaning of life and reasons for hoping in the future. With young people, we feel called to change the world to make it more equitable, more just and more interdependent, and to ensure a better quality of life for all. We can do this in our universities and in the other non-Marist higher institutions with whom we collaborate.

3. Our vision

We are convinced that the presence of our Institute in higher education is a concrete way of responding courageously and audaciously to the needs of the modern world.

We see in tertiary education an effective method for training teachers and university lecturers, all propagators of Marist pedagogy who can help young people to access an education that will permit them to overcome obstacles due to poverty. A university not only forms numerous and better educators in this way, but also professionals in many other disciplines.

The calls of the last General Chapter ask us to work in education to build a society that is more equitable, more just and more prosperous for all.

As a consequence, our presence in institutions of higher education is an opportunity to co-operate internationally, to exchange experiences, to share the mission, to become more flexible and adaptable in the training of young brothers and laypeople who share the Marist mission, in a complex world with its great cultural, political, economic and religious challenges.

4. The challenges

If we have a heart like that of Saint Marcellin Champagnat, we are confronted by the situation of young people, in whom we see our "*Montagnes*" of today. We live in new times where complex problems do not have clear and simple solutions. By love for Jesus, for Champagnat and for young people, we accept to face these problems together, in a dynamic way, in order to identify solutions. We recognise the following great challenges:

a) Challenges concerning the Church

The calls of John Paul II to evangelise the culture of youth presses us to understand the symbolic world of young people and the meaning that they give to it. Developing catechesis, youth ministry and doctrinal teachings according to modern concepts and interpretations is a challenge for us and the Church in our mission of evangelising the culture of youth!

The loss of the sense of mystery and transcendence makes the acceptance of the Christian life and its development more difficult. It is a great challenge for the culture of priestly and religious vocations. We share this concern with the Church and we are attempting to find solutions to reinforce this important aspect that consists of finding again the sense of mystery in a world seduced by money, pleasure and immediate gratification.

More so, the university setting is a milieu of vocational discernment and it offers opportunities to accompany young people towards their maturity in the faith and to combine faith, culture and life. This work of maturation in faith and of vocational discernment is done frequently at the university level these days.

We emphasize the importance of the Marist mission in the Church by specifying that it must make itself better known. We believe that our contribution to the human sciences is fundamental and is a necessary contribution to the world of contemporary science. The culture of death that marks our society must recognise the value of human life. Science and technology must serve and promote life. We have something important to say on this subject in order to support the mission of the Church in the contemporary world.

b) Challenges concerning the Institute

In studying the Marist charism, we feel the need to deepen the experience of Champagnat. Marcellin had some intuitions that he concretised by responding to the needs that emerged throughout his life.

We should take up the challenge again of incorporating into our study of the sources and of Marcellin's charism all the range of situations and responses where Marcellin appears as a visionary capable of adapting to the equivalent of higher education of his day. We could study the decisions he made from 1832 onwards.

One of our challenges would be to find new tools for maintaining our unity, our Marist identity and those things we have in common. We must also build, develop and encourage a mentality that is universal, global, tolerant, interdependent and participative.

Today, the culture seems to be dehumanising because poverty and increasing exclusion are important elements of it. To not be able to access education engenders poverty and exclusion. To live on the fringes of knowledge prevents change in the structures and cycle of poverty. We take up the challenge of making higher education available to the poor. We know that this will be difficult, but we believe that it will be an important contribution that is within our reach to eradicate one of the important causes of poverty. We will also be able to respond to one of the calls of the 20th General Chapter.

An important challenge for us is to define the mission, the vision and the values of Marist higher formation, as well as the specific identity of our higher education with its Christian, Catholic and Marist characteristics.

The universities can also work together in order to outline a Marist educational model for higher education.

They take up the challenge of encouraging higher education to form the new generation of Marist Brothers better. An education of the highest intellectual, professional, philosophical and theological level is necessary, as well as practical experience in the field of study.

This brings us to look at the milieu of higher formation as a fertile terrain for the hatching of new Marist vocations in the coming future. The aim is to form competent apostles, passionate about the Marist educational mission.

We must also encourage co-operative projects between the Provinces and religions, as has already been suggested by the General Administration. What is new is that the universities could conceive, implement and evaluate these projects to respond rapidly and effectively to the needs of the Institute.

We see also the challenge of forming the future leaders of our Marist works in our universities. This will also be an excellent opportunity for the Provinces to use the universities as centres of research for their Provincial or Regional projects, guaranteeing a better chance of success thanks to a rigorous scientific methodology. The Institute will thus have help in its implementation and on-going evaluation of different projects. We are putting new methods for learning, for evangelisation and for social change at the service of the mission where the works of the Province are found.

We have finally the challenge to develop the culture of the shared mission between brothers and laypeople. They will be formed in our universities and they will share their experience of charism as being complementary. We are following the dream and the charism of Saint Marcellin Champagnat. The shared mission with its new dimensions and its own ambitions is the current way of incarnating Marcellin's vision today.

c) Challenges concerning youth

In the calls of the 20th General Chapter, number 31 speaks of new ways in education, evangelisation and solidarity. Higher education presents us with the challenge of being one of the new ways of education *to be with young people wherever they are found* and to be united with them in their problems and to try to help them to find answers that allow them to live their concrete reality in a Christian way.

We also feel called to humanise further this post-modern, pragmatic and utilitarian culture, so well developed among the new generations. We need to learn to respect different cultures. Young people challenge us to accept the differences and find solutions together to common and important problems.

Another challenge would be to establish a centre for research on youth that would allow us to look at the situation of young people in the various regions of the world. We could use this to develop our projects of evangelisation and education in an up-to-date and effective way, as the situations change.

d) Challenges for the university itself.

We accept the challenge to make our universities places where, freely, we can examine and research new ways for developing, spreading, conserving and adapting the culture according to a Christian and Catholic model, having a Marist colour.

We see the challenge of using effectively the modern resources of information technology to be more effective in the milieus where we exercise our educational mission. The world being always more interconnected, we will be able to find information more effectively and more quickly on the inculturation of the Gospel, evangelisation and especially the culture of young people.

Finally, Marist universities must prepare leaders for the Marist world, the Church, civil society and schools.

5. Conclusion

After this intense time of work, reflection and joyful sharing of our lives and of our experiences, we are sharing the fruit of our reflections and desires with all the brothers of the Institute and with all our lay co-workers.

Those among us who have had the chance to participate in this first meeting of Marist Institutions of Higher Education, believe that meetings like this contribute to the resource of dynamic, up-to-date and effective responses from the university milieu, to work with the entire Institute to implement the calls of the Church, of the Congregation and of the young people whom we serve.

All to Jesus through Mary and all to Mary for Jesus.

Curitiba, 9th November 2004