

A New La Valla

Convocation of the
22nd General Chapter

Letter of the
Superior
General

8th
September
2016

Dear Marists of Champagnat,



The table preserved in the house of our origins at La Valla, has become a symbol of the community that gathered around it. Like all objects connected to real experiences of our own history, this table connects us to stories that have come down to us, and awakens in us a variety of emotions.

There could be no better image to remind us of that day on the 2nd January 1817, when Fr. Champagnat gathered his first followers, and invited them to **live as a family of brothers.**

From that moment on, they shared bread and conversation, joys and sadness, dreams and frustrations around that table. The testimony of Bro. Laurent (Jean Claude Audras) is particularly touching:

**They shared bread
and conversation, joys
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around that table.**



Fr. Champagnat bought a small house just above the Parish house and, at the very beginning, put a good young man in it. My brother was the second, I was the third, and Couturier or Bro. Anthony the fourth; then came Bro. Bartholomew and our dear Brother François. For a time, there were six of us.

[...]

In the beginning, we were very poor. The bread was the colour of the soil, but we always had what we needed. Like the kindest of fathers, our good Superior took great care of us. For example, I will always remember the trouble he took when he found me ill in La Valla. Each day he would come to visit me, and he would take the opportunity to bring me some little thing to help me, and a word of comfort to encourage me to endure patiently my suffering for the love of God.

[...]

He used to talk to us frequently about the care that divine Providence has for those who put their trust in it, and in particular as it related to our situation. And whenever he spoke of God's goodness and love for us, he would somehow transmit the divine fire that filled him, to such an extent that none of the difficulties and miseries of life could possibly have shaken us. His great devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary inspired everyone.

[...]

A mother has no greater love for her children than the love he lavished on us. The comparison, of course, is obviously not an exact one, since mothers generally love their children in a human way. His love for us, on the other hand, was clearly from God.

[...]

He was very happy and gentle, but firm. He knew how to inject humour into the conversation to enliven the company. He was never uneasy around the Brothers. We used to ask him embarrassing questions, but he had no difficulty in responding to them, and did so in such a clear way as to leave the brothers satisfied. ...

The table at La Valla, that we all know, evokes the experiences of the first brothers, so well narrated by Bro. Laurent. And that table has become a permanent invitation to experience the gift of brotherhood in a simple, yet profound way.

I find it fascinating that one of the symbols that has remained among us from the last General Chapter (2009) is specifically *the table*, or to be exact, round tables at which the whole Chapter took place. Although this was not our explicit intention, these round tables became a powerful visual image of the *value of fraternal dialogue*, a message, which has not only captured the attention of Marists, but also of external observers. The latest monograph edition of *Vida Religiosa* (3/2016) is dedicated to General Chapters, and it has an article written by Salesian sister, María Dolores Ruiz Pérez, in which she states:



Listening to one's brother means listening attentively. With our listening we are saying, "both who you are and what you are saying interest me". And today this is not easy, because Chapter assemblies, as in communities all over the world, use modern technology and the "temptation or trap" of distraction is always present, especially if in typical Chapter halls, with everyone seated in rows. Although we do have experiences like the Marist Brothers' Chapter of 2009, which took place with capitulants seated at round tables.

In my introduction to the *Document of the 21st General Chapter*, I said that the letter written by the capitulants, a part of the final document, was a response to the regional letters, which had been written during the preparatory phase of the Chapter

In fact, I believe that the letter is supposed to be a way of **continuing the dialogue** throughout the Institute, which began in the preparatory phase. This carried on during the five weeks of the Chapter, not only around the tables in the chapter hall, but also with many other people, largely thanks to the Internet. In the introduction we read that, *written in a direct and simple style, the letter invites us **not to stop the dialogue now the General Chapter is over.** All the people who, in one way or another, took part in the various phases of the chapter process should feel called to continue this way of listening and dialogue, becoming more familiar with the call of the Lord to the Marist Institute today.*

Keeping the conversation alive: the process is the goal

I like to think that the dialogue begun at the last General Chapter has in fact continued without interruption. In every Province and District there have been a number of opportunities to delve more deeply into the meaning of the call to *go in*



haste to a new land. The *General Conference* (2013) was another wonderful moment to develop in more concrete terms some of the main calls of the General Chapter, and the *Marist International Mission Assembly* (2014) once again initiated thousands of conversations throughout our Marist world.

A variety of other processes at General, Regional or Provincial level, have involved a great deal of dialogue, promoting participation and a general feeling of being *co-creators* of a common future.

At this point, as we convoke the 22nd General Chapter, we are all invited once more to sit around the table or around the fire, and **continue the conversation** about those topics which are really important to all of us.

I am sure that many of us have had an experience of **conversations that transform us**. It is interesting to note that, normally, they are not conversations about how to change others; rather, **the very process of engaging in conversation** produces changes in each one of us. A particular phrase, spoken or heard; a life experience which has touched our hearts; a question that has taken us out of our habitual way of thinking ... these were all seeds of subsequent transformation. Yes, frequently the very process is transforming; the process, then, in some way becomes the goal.

I am sure that many of us have had an experience of conversations that transform us.

*The future is not some place we are going,
but one we are creating;
the paths to it are not found
but made,
and the making of those pathways
changes both the maker
and the destination.*

Margaret Silf

We can “thwart” God’s dream if we fail to let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit

Pope Francis, in his homily at the opening Eucharist of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family (2014), invited all the participants at the Synod **to speak clearly and listen with humility** ... because, as he said, *we can “thwart” God’s dream if we fail to let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit.*

I believe that the process designed by the Preparatory Commission for the Chapter can help us to *let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit*. To this end, they propose three stages, which have been integrated with the consultation already underway for the revision of the Constitutions:

- 1. From October 2016 to February 2017:** each Marist community is invited to have three conversations, exploring together the meaning of living the **La Valla experience today.**
- 2. From February to May 2017:** following the invitation of Pope Francis to be a Church that goes out, and that allows itself to be challenged by the **geographical and existential frontiers,** they propose that we go out to meet

those people who are on the margins, opening our minds and hearts to what the Spirit may wish to say to us through them. It can be, without doubt, a good way to avoid the danger of becoming self-referential that the Pope frequently warns us against.

- 3. From May to August 2017:** *as a prior step in our preparation for the General Chapter, the participants from each Administrative Unit will organise a time for communities or the whole Province or District to share **experiences of the previous stages**. This will help capitulants capture what has come from their administrative unit and transmit this wealth of experience to the Chapter assembly.*

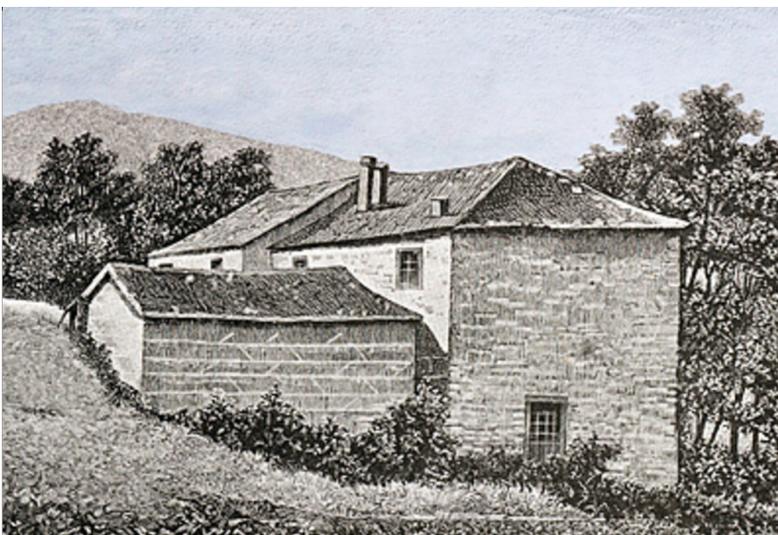
You will receive all the necessary information for the pre-Chapter preparatory phase in due course, **but I would like to invite you as of now to enter deeply into this process**, attentive to the movements of the Spirit in each person, and open to the God who surprises us.

To speak clearly and listen with humility: what a wonderful programme for the preparation and the unfolding of our forthcoming General Chapter!

A New La Valla

The convocation of the 22nd General Chapter, under the slogan *A New La Valla*, invites all of us to *A New Beginning*. This connects us deeply with the three years of preparation as we begin the third century of Marist life.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa (4th century) said that in our Christian life we go **from beginning to beginning**, *through beginnings that have no end*. That means that our life, as Christians, is a constant beginning again. For this reason, we dispose ourselves once more to listen to the Spirit, and we constantly prepare to carry out his will.



Our Marist Constitutions (139) tell us that one of the aims of a General Chapter is to *deal with major issues concerning the nature, aim, and spirit of the Institute, and to further their renewal and adaptation, preserving all the while the spiritual heritage of the Institute*. In some way, then, each General Chapter is a kind of new beginning, since we collectively ask ourselves what God wants of us at this particular moment in history and we try to supply the means needed to respond to God's calls.

A New La Valla, then, is not a call to



reproduce, in some nostalgic or romantic way, the first Marist community. Rather, it is **to make La Valla relevant today**, at the beginning of the 21st century, as a new world is emerging.

The Marist Institute was not born once and for all in 1817. **It continues to be born today.**

The philosopher María Zambrano says,

man's birth is incomplete: he was not really born nor has he entirely grown for this world, since he does not fit into it, nor is there any accommodation for him; neither his birth, nor that of the world which awaits him, is complete. For this reason, he must complete the birthing process, and must make his own world; he must always be giving birth to himself and to the reality surrounding him.

What a wonderful task it is to be able to collaborate in the birth of the Institute, which is always incomplete!

Colombia, September 2017

Exactly one year from now, on the **8th September 2017**, the 22nd General Chapter will begin in Rionegro (Colombia), some 40 kilometres from Medellín. It will be the first time in our history that a General Chapter will be held outside the seat of the General Government. We may recall that the first two General Chapters were held in ND de L'Hermitage; eight in Saint-Genis-Laval (France); five in Grugliasco (Italy) and six in Rome.

Almost from the beginning, we could clearly see the need to go somewhere else as a sign of a new beginning

The General Council reached this decision after a year and a half of study and discernment. Almost from the beginning, we could clearly see the need **to go somewhere else as a sign of a new beginning**, but it was difficult to choose the exact place to hold the Chapter. In the course of studying the various alternatives, we took a number of basic aspects into consideration, among which were:

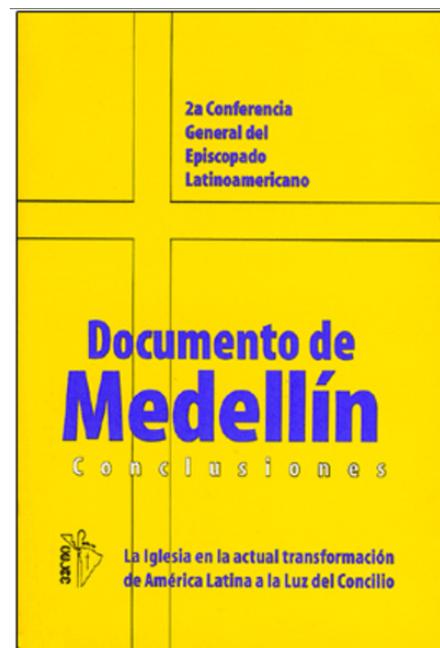
1. *The symbolic nature of the place;*
2. *The availability of a minimum of conditions for a large group to work over several weeks;*
3. *The possibility of the support of the Marist community in the country.*

The General Council concluded that the place chosen adequately fulfilled all three requirements.

Firstly, its symbolic character: we know that Colombia was the first country in Latin America to count on Marist presence, and that more than half the Marist mission in our world today is concentrated on the American continent. However, in addition to that, the name **Medellín is a powerful symbol in the history of the Church.**

In 2017, we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the convocation of the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference. The conclusions of that Conference had a profound impact not only on the Church on the Continent but in the universal Church. Let us recall that a number of well-known Bishops - Bishops Pironio, Samuel Ruiz, Leonidas Proaño and Hélder Câmara were present at the Conference. Medellín represents the attempt to express in very concrete ways the spirit of Vatican II in Latin America. It offered three essential elements around the identity of the Church on that continent: **the option for the poor, liberation theology and basic ecclesial communities.**

If we look even further into the symbolic character of the place, we realise that Colombia is a country of deep contrasts, a fact that may help capitulants experience **going out to the peripheries.** Colombia, which has a very multicultural and multi-ethnic population, is known for the friendliness of its people and their wonderful spirit of welcome. At the same time, however, it is a country that has experienced internal armed conflict since 1960. The country has a huge wealth of natural resources, but, according to the United Nations Development Programme, it is the **14th out of 134 countries with the highest rate of inequality.** In more recent times, the quality of education has increased, but almost half a million minors still have no access to education, and some 5,000 of these are *street children*...



Finally, I would like to highlight the symbolic nature of the **Colombian Amazon**, part of the great Amazon region, described by Pope Francis in *Laudato sii* as one of those *richly biodiverse lungs of our planet*... *We know how important these are for the entire earth and for the future of humanity* (38). Colombia is the second country in the world in terms of biodiversity; and so, in that context, it may be easier to listen to the urgent appeal *for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all* (14).

As for the other things we might require, we believe that these will be adequately met in the centre run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools where the Chapter will be held, as well as by our Marist communities in Colombia.



All are convoked

We should all feel ourselves convoked to live this Chapter event. Our Constitutions (138) state,

The General Chapter is an assembly representative of the whole Institute. It is an expression of the participation of all Brothers in the life and mission of the Institute, as well as of their co-responsibility in its government.

It exercises the highest extraordinary authority. The Brother Superior General convokes it and presides over it. He convokes the ordinary General Chapter every eight years.

In this 22nd General Chapter, there will be a total of 79 capitulants: 32 by right, and 47 by election.

As a specific way of respecting the principle of representation, the number of elected delegates will be 15 more than the number of those who are members by right. Members by right include the Brother Superior General, the former Brother Superior General, the Brother Vicar General and the Councillors General who are in office at the time the Chapter opens, and the Brothers Provincial (C 140.1 y 140.2). In this 22nd General Chapter, there will be a total of **79 capitulants: 32 by right, and 47 by election.**

The functions of these 79 capitulants are very well defined in our Constitutions (139):

- *to elect the Brother Superior General, the Brother Vicar General, and the members of the General Council, as prescribed in the proper law of the Institute;*
- *to deal with major issues concerning the nature, aim, and spirit of the Institute, and to further their renewal and adaptation, preserving all the while the spiritual heritage of the Institute;*
- *to draw up Statutes for the whole Institute;*
- *to put before the Holy See the modifications that may be needed on some points of the Constitutions.*

All Brothers perpetually professed, except those exlaustrated or those in the process of joining another Institute, are eligible as delegates to the General Chapter. Those with the right of electing delegates to the General Chapter are: all Brothers, whether in temporary or perpetual profession, except those exlaustrated or those in the process of transferring to another Institute. In due course, brothers will receive the necessary instructions to carry out the elections.



The Brother Capitulants and other participants in the Chapter will be counting on your experience, reflection, prayer and support.

In accordance with the regulations of the Statutes of the General Chapter (12), the General Council will invite other people to the Chapter (lay men and women, young brothers), their number not to exceed 20% of the total number of capitulants. The nature and time frame for the participation of those persons invited will be defined in dialogue with the Preparatory Commission

Clearly not all of us can participate directly in the General Chapter, all the more so since it will take place in Colombia. However, we are all convoked to make our contribution throughout the different preparatory phases, and throughout the development and implementation of the Chapter.

The Brother Capitulants and other participants in the Chapter will be counting on **your experience, reflection, prayer and support.**

Letting something go to preserve the whole

We go from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that have no end. A General Chapter offers us a chance to begin again. It is a wonderful opportunity, but it is also a painful one, because it implies **abandoning land that we have known to enter new territory.**

A General Chapter offers us a chance to begin again

There is a thread that runs through Sacred Scripture, from Genesis to the book of the Apocalypse: **get up and go**, begin again. We hear it said in moments of great decision: to Abraham, to the people of Egypt, to the prophets who had become settled, to Jonah, Elijah to the great sinners, to Joseph for his flight into and return from Egypt, in the Acts of the Apostles ... the same is being said to each one of us today, and indeed to all Marists of Champagnat, *Get up and go!* This was, in fact, the explicit invitation of the 21st General Chapter: *With Mary, go in haste to a new land!*

I never cease to be amazed by the generosity and availability of so many people who joyfully agree to start afresh. I see it every year in Provinces and Districts when new communities, or new services or projects are set up. I see it when I receive letters from brothers or lay people ready to begin again wherever our world most needs them: young people, but others too who, in their old age like Abraham, make themselves available to leave their land and open themselves to the unknown.

A General Chapter allows us to take decisions of this kind, decisions that will affect us all, to move from being prisoners of what was done in the past or of simply managing what already exists, to allowing ourselves to be taken up by the ever-emerging newness of the Spirit.

And, as all of us know, every choice implies some form of renunciation. There is a story told of Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkaj. In the year 68, aware of the inevitable fate awaiting the city of Jerusalem and the temple (they were in fact burned to the ground and destroyed in the year 70) he wanted to save the most important thing there was, the *Torah*. To do so, he planned to leave the city, which was being

besieged by Vespasian. So, one day, knowing that Vespasian only allowed the dead to be taken out of the city for burial, Jochanan ben Zakkaj got into a coffin, and thus managed to save himself and the *Torah*.

Some time later, Jochanan presented himself before the Emperor to request a favour of him: to save the small Sanhedrin of Yavne. And it was there that he refounded Judaism as the people of the *Torah*, thus salvaging what was most essential. Paolo De Benedetti, an Italian theologian and biblical scholar of Jewish origin, has this to say about the episode:

Rabbi Jochanan's decision was an invaluable one for Judaism: he managed to hold onto the continuity of the tradition, that continuous chain of oral Law, and together with the other masters gathered in Yavne, was able to assure the judicial, ritual, organisational and moral means so that Judaism might survive [...]. What one man is able to do gives us much to reflect on: Rabbi Jochanan was a sage with no official authority [...]. Even so, he was the only one to see clearly what could be kept and what would have to be abandoned if they were to safeguard the whole [...]. In words of today, he knew how to interpret the signs of the times. But in these signs he saw not only history; he also saw the mysterious will of God, which he was accustomed to honour in all its precepts.

God willing, we too, like Rabbi Jochanan, may be able to discern, at this decisive moment in our history, what needs to be kept and what needs to be let go of in order to preserve the whole.

The icon of the Visitation shows **two extraordinary examples of maternity**. The philosopher Antonella Lumini, who describes herself as a hermit in the city, expresses this beautifully:

Mary reveals the awakening of original innocence, which, from the very beginning, has remained uncontaminated and preserved in the intimacy of humanity [...]. Elizabeth, on the other hand, is the barren old woman who, beyond all possibility, becomes a mother through grace. She presents as the figure of a barren and tired humanity, whose unexpected fruit comes to fruition as if distilled from the final pressing, and so becomes the living cell on which something new may be established.





For the maternity of these two women to become a reality, both the **YES of Mary**, an expression of her openness to the gift of the Spirit, as well as the **NO of Elizabeth** (*No! He is to be called John*), a break with the tradition of *'but it has always been like that'*, were necessary in order to be faithful to the will of God. In fact, John means *he who is faithful*.

Let us allow ourselves to be inspired by the courage of these two women of faith, Mary and Elizabeth.

May they walk with us in our discernment, and may they give us something of their courage, especially to the members of our 22nd General Chapter, that we may all learn to say *yes* or *no*, under the inspiration of the Spirit, and so bring forth new life.

Fraternally,

Amor: Tere

Prayer for the 22nd General Chapter

Father, Son and Holy Spirit
fill us with the faith, vision and courage
of our founder Saint Marcellin
as we prepare to enter
our third century
as Marists of Champagnat.

Gathered around Mary,
Our Good Mother,
we desire to seek You,
to be weavers of community
with all our sisters and brothers,
and to bring your Good News to young people,
especially those on the periphery.

Ever-loving God,
from our simple foundation in La Valla,
we come to the threshold of our third century,

to create together a new beginning.

Confident that you are faithful O God,
and that we participate in Mary's work,
we place our preparation, discernment
and the decisions of our 22nd General Chapter
under your protection and guidance.

May this time of remembrance, reconciliation and
celebration
be marked by wisdom, audacity, gratitude and faith
as we journey in haste to the future
which beckons us,
today and always.

Amen.

Preparatory Commission
22nd General Chapter



marists **2017**
22nd general chapter