

ONCE ONLY

Remembering Chris Mannion
Marist Brother
(1951-1994)

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1951-1994

*"More and more I'm convinced that
it isn't the length of life which is important
but the passion and commitment
with which you live it.
This life is a gift to be enjoyed,
to be used to the full precisely because
it will end in death (MY DEATH!)
one unforeseen day.*

*I must live this gift of life now
without worrying
about what will be afterwards.
If I don't,
then what is the purpose of the Incarnation?"*

*Chris Mannion
May 12, 1994*



September 1, 1994.

*Dear Brothers and Family and
Friends of Chris,*

This small booklet captures something of Chris Mannion's spirit. It contains excerpts from his writings as well as from a number of letters of tribute that have poured in since his untimely death on July 1, 1994.

Each of us knew Chris in a different way. For Terry, Harry, Catherine and Anne Marie he was a member of the family – their son and brother; the same was true for the Awas – his adopted family in the Cameroon.

Chris was also a brother – in a very real way – to his Marist Brothers and the wider Marist Family. To others he was a friend, a teacher, a listening ear, a Novice Master, a fellow teammate, a Provincial or General Councillor.

Always, though, in the midst of the many roles he had in life, Christopher Mannion was "Chris." His untimely death has caused all of us to pause and consider who he was for us and what he meant in our lives. In the short time that he and I served together in the General Administration I grew in affection for him and came to value his love for his Brothers, and his insight and capacity for hard work. Chris was a man of fiery passion, simple courage, deep spirituality. Now that he is gone, I know that I, for one, will miss him very much.

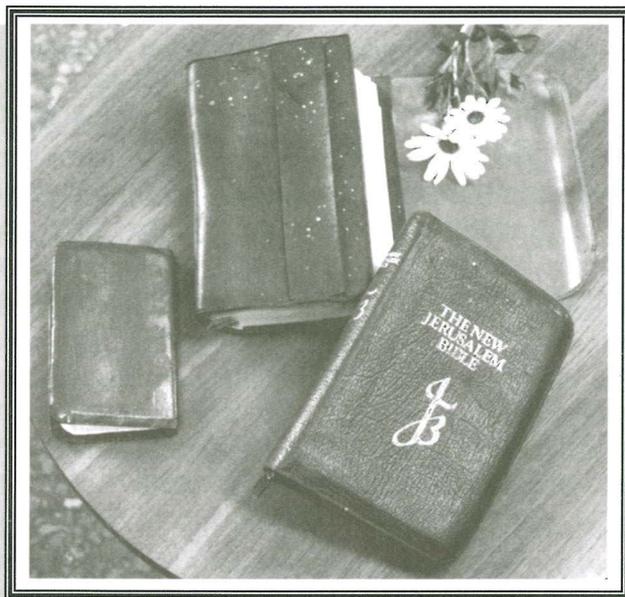
As you read through these pages I hope that you'll find something of the Chris Mannion that we knew; the one who lives on and always will. We were blessed to have him for the time we did; now that he is gone, he'd want us to remember him as full of life – living with passion and commitment.



In this booklet Chris writes, "No matter what the future holds I have had a life of great breadth, experience and richness." Chris, my dear brother, we are all grateful for having been part of that life – knowing you have been a gift beyond measure. And now the time has come to let you go to the Fullness of Life – pressed down, full measure, running over. May you rest in God's everlasting peace.

Fraternally,

*Brother Benito Arbues FMS
Superior General, 1993-2001*



**Chris' prayer books stained with his blood.
Marist Brothers' General House, Rome.**



Biographical Note

Chris Mannion's life began in Thornaby, Yorkshire on May 15, 1951. Looking back on his forty-three years of life, what was striking about him was his love of sport and history, his pride in his family, his great affection for his Brothers, Cameroon, and the Awas – his adopted family in Bamenda – and his countless friends -- yes, he fell in love easily and often.

This son of Harry and Terry Mannion decided in 1962 that he wanted to be a Marist Brother and missionary. Seven years later he entered the postulancy in Habay, Belgium. After three weeks of French lessons, English was put aside and at eighteen he began to speak French -- a skill that stood him in good stead when he was elected to the General Council in October 1993.

Novitiate followed in Dublin and in 1971 Chris made his first vows as a Marist Brother. A year at Maynooth gave him a Diploma in Religious Studies; he received his BA in history with honours from London University in 1975.

Chris' ten years in Bamenda, Cameroon, interrupted by a year's teacher training in Glasgow, helped him realize that early dream he had in 1962. He talked often about his years in Africa; whenever he did so, it was always with enthusiasm and affection.

In 1985 the Province called him back to Great Britain to prepare himself to be Novice Master. Chris participated in the formators' course at the Institute of St. Anselm for a year and then moved to Dublin to take up his new work.

March 1991 saw another change in his life: he was elected Provincial of the Province of Great Britain and Cameroon. Chris served in that capacity until his election to the General Council.

Chris Mannion's life came to an end in the early evening of July 1, 1994; in Rwanda; on a mission of mercy. He was killed by warring factions in Save during a battle to control that city.



Chris' letter home on the day he professed his final vows

October 25, 1976

Sacred Heart College – Bamenda, Cameroon

Dear Mom and Dad,

Thank you for the letter of the 6th which arrived in good time and for the cards and prayers. Today we have all had a day off school to recover from yesterday's excitement. You were both in my thoughts and prayers very much during the day and the Bishop included you both in his litany of religious profession. I am now, by God's gift and grace, a Marist Brother for life –may He grant me the grace to persevere each day.

This last week or two I have been surrounded with so much love and real affection from my Brothers, friends in Cameroon and abroad, pupils and many others. Though yesterday's ceremony was a really serious step it was so much easier with all these good people supporting me.

I have never been happier and healthier, in all ways, than I am now. God is truly good and merciful. I know that you both share in the joy and happiness of this occasion even more so because of your generous sacrifice in not being present. You have both done so much since that day in South Shields in 1962 when I first came home and said I wanted to be a Marist Brother and I cannot really express the love and gratitude which is mine toward you. That you will continue to be in my prayers each day of my life is one small thing you can be sure of, my dearest parents.

The ceremony was beautiful. I am posting on to you a tape which we made of the whole Mass and am enclosing a copy of Bishop Paul's sermon. Our boys and girls in Lourdes sang superbly – the cathedral looked glorious. Bishop Paul and seven other priests concelebrated Holy Mass and Br. John and



I were on the altar, whilst there were 1400 people in the congregation.

The actual profession itself went very smoothly and although I was bathed in sweat people said I looked very calm. The Lourdes girls performed a most beautiful offertory dance and also danced on the steps of the cathedral in my honour afterwards. The whole ceremony was simply beautiful and a great thing for the local people who showed themselves very interested. The Bishop sends his thanks for allowing me to make my vows here. He was really marvellous, as were many people who worked very hard preparing for the occasion.

Over 100 people came back for the meal, many having made a big effort to travel over the very bad roads. Fortunately the weather was beautiful yesterday. My descriptive powers really fail me but everything was just twice as good and beautiful and wholesome as I could have wished.

Do not misunderstand me, Mom and Dad, but in a very real way I was at home yesterday. The words of Jesus in the gospel are true – there is a hundredfold here as well as life eternal. Yesterday was in many ways a beginning – the ending is in God's hands.

I received many presents from people yesterday in their generosity and genuine, unexpected kindness. There will be many letters to write. When I get home on leave in July you will see some of them. As soon as the photos are developed, I'll send you off the best ones. Tomorrow is back to work – the life which the vows will help me live, I hope.

I am so happy, I hope that you can feel it too –and know that you are rejoicing with me. When I am home we shall really talk of this, and when I write again. Thank you so much, my dear ones, for making yesterday possible.

Your fortunate son,

Chris xxxx



Poems by Chris**Notes, springtime 1994.***Baillieborough*

Wet Baillieboro' pilgrimage,
 a sombre scape of ruined castle.
 Johnny's falteringly dawning memories
 mined from mossy ramparts
 and fallen chapel walls.

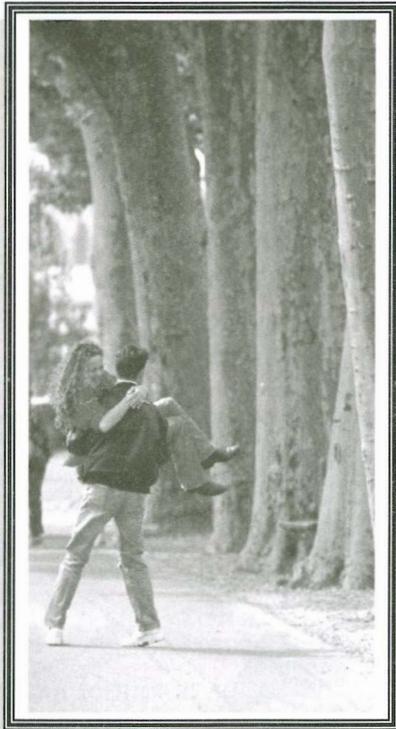
Seven Champagnats lying eternally
 in sandstone seamed brotherhood:
 metal Marist crosses guarding
 bones, dust and quiet sanctity
 in dripping Cavan forest – all mist
 and mystery.

My wish, long years from now,
 to lie in similar plot to
 teenage Dermot and worked out
 weathered Brother William.
 Their Marist gift and mine
 gratefully given into God's grace.



April 29, 1994
Paris

I've found myself wondering about those who are left out, left behind, by our school system and society: the beggars in the Metro stations, the young couples in the spring sunshine. Looking around the conference hall at one point it struck me how tired and middle-aged and grey (and worthy!) all these people were – and I am one of them!! So what – in a fortnight I'll be 43 years old. I should feel middle-aged!



May 2, 1994
Rome

Detoxify yourself from the drug of certainty!

May 6, 1994

Yesterday during meditation, for a brief while and for the first time in ages, I had a sense of the presence of Christ, of the Lord there with me, speaking to me, inviting me to “remain in His love and keep His commandments.” There was a strong sense of my need to respond to the call to conversion... I need and want to come closer to Jesus; otherwise, this life is one of meaninglessness and of sterile protection from the world. To live life fully Jesus must be at the centre. Otherwise... why be FMS?





Thirty Days

Bruised beauty, sleep-starved struggle
to be the Handmaid of the Lord.
Shot silvered silken strands,
gentle kiss of your hair within my hands.

And all this only a vague shade
of inner glory: outward reflection
of Your hidden mysterious love story.



May 6, 1994

Take time to pray, to relax, to be really yourself. Warts, gifts and all. DON'T GET TOO SERIOUS, Chris!

May 12, 1994
Rome

More and more I'm convinced that it isn't length of life which is important but the passion and commitment with which you live it. This life is a gift to be enjoyed, to be used to the full precisely because it will end in death (MY DEATH!) one unforeseen day. I must live this gift of life now without worrying what will be afterwards. God in His mercy and goodness will take care of that. If I worry so much now about "going to heaven" or not then I will not be able to engage fully in the here and now. If I don't, then what is the purpose of the Incarnation?

Questions of death and the meaning of my life and living it to the full are coming up a lot these days. What is that saying to me? A call to greater interiority, integrity and commitment, perhaps.

My prayer is "going well" at present with occasional flashes of presence, a sense of the Lord being there and asking me to be patient and to respond. How isn't clear yet.



Carnal Kearney

Loving you, was it something
I really did not want to do.

No reason, no rhythm
– walking in wet snow
glimpses of histories, triumphs and
almost disasters.
Your laughter, disturbing Martha's peace
– and somersaulting my heart's beat.

Small is beautiful!
Christ's love: wanting to want Him
(not wanting the wanting of you)
to be the focus.

Slow dawn of love
reluctant, expectant, surprised.
Gentle and jealous, hopeful, doubting.
Sister and suffering friend.
Your pain and sleepless journey:
Longing to walk with you
but unfree, afraid.

God's loving enfleshed, enfolded
in your feminine grace.
Couple coloured crown;

Challenging eyes of frost and fire.
Catching myself watching you move,
fully woman, with my heart's eye.

Carnal Kearney, deep spirit.
Loving you, was it something
I really did not want to do?

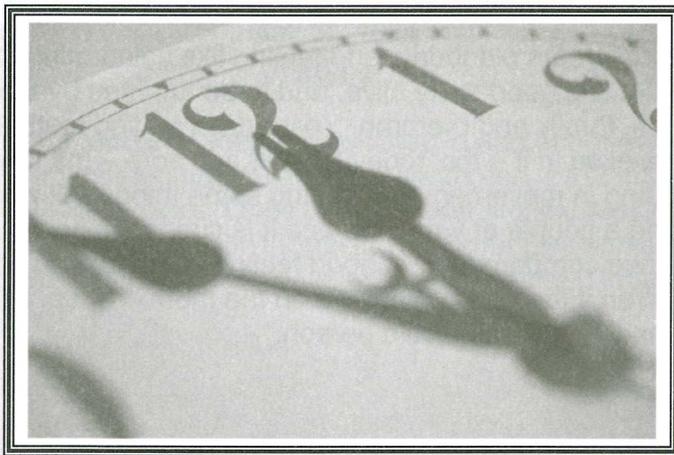


Phone call

Railing, wallowing,
wanderings.

Days pass – pain too.

Only mute sadness now
and loving tender concern.



May 12, 1994

I'm having glimpses, and moments of happiness and contentment in this unfolding present life. These eight years will be very rich no matter what happens. Doubts and regrets will always be with me in the midst of my joys and hopes. Lots in me that remains unresolved. Good! No matter what the future holds I have had a life of great breadth, experience and richness.

May 15, 1994 Rome

Forty-three years old today, and feeling like celebrating the gift of this life. It is good to be alive, and to be affirmed by the love of friends, family and brethren. Yesterday I played football and really revelled in it – tho' today I'm stiff and sore – but it was great being in movement and seeing some things still work. As I'm losing a couple of yards of pace it is curious how my experience compensates. A good feeling being able to hold my own – even if the body pays for it on the morrow! Yes, I'm still an intensely physical, tactile person.



May 15, 1994

The film *Philadelphia* yesterday was pretty powerful. Focused in me questions about identity, friendship, conversion, death, celebration, and tenderness. The death of John Smith on Thursday was a shock and a loss, but also a strong element of rejoicing in a good, compassionate man's life. Happy Birthday, Chris!

Having Barbara, Kevin and the boys here next week will be wonderful.

May 30, 1994 Rome

Odd lines of tentative poetry have flitted in and out of my mind recently, concerned particularly with death and with the value of this unique life. Rilke's "Once Only," a beautiful expression of some of my musings. Don't force it, Chris, but give some time when the spirit is on you to develop the themes and images into words.



Ninth Elegy

Rainer Maria Rilke

Why, when this span of life can be spent serenely
in the form of a laurel, slightly darker than all
the surrounding green, with tiny waves on the border
of every leaf (like the smile of a wind) –oh, why
have to be human, and, shunning Destiny,
long for Destiny...?

Not because happiness really exists,
that precipitate profit of imminent loss.

Not out of curiosity, not just to practice the heart,
that could still be there in the laurel...

But because truly being here is much,
and because all this that's here, so fleetingly,
seems to require us and strangely concerns us.
Us the most fleeting of all. Just once, everything,
only for once. Once and no more.

And we, too, once. And never again.

But this having been once, though only once,
having been once on earth – can it ever be cancelled?

And so we keep pressing on and trying to perform it,
trying to contain it in our simple hands,
in the more and more crowded gaze, in the speechless heart.
Trying to become it. To give it to whom?

We'd rather hold on to it all for ever...

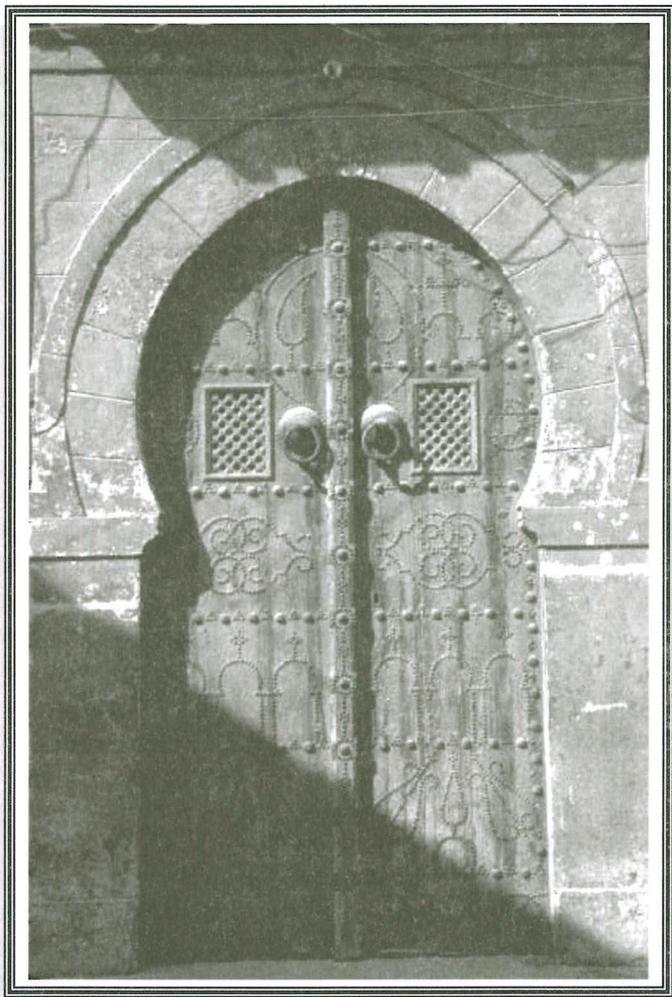
Ah, but what can we take along into that other realm?

Not the art of looking, which is learned so slowly,
and nothing that happened here. Nothing.

Sufferings, then. Above all, the hardness of life,
the long experience of love; in fact, purely untellable things.

Isn't it the secret intent of this taciturn earth,
when it forces lovers together,
that inside their boundless emotion
all things may shudder with joy?



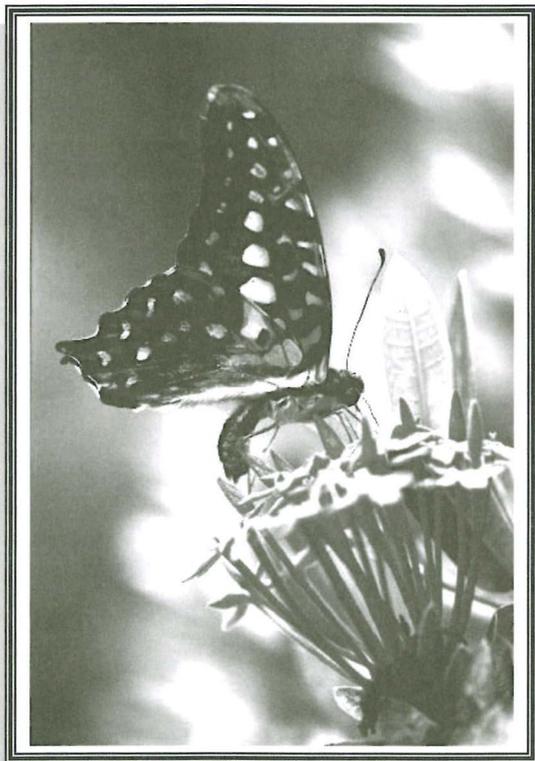


ONCE ONLY 

Anne

Alive, aglow, alert, aghast.
Nervous newness – never naughty!

Natural, nonplussed, narky, nonpareil.
Elaborate, exhilarate, ecstatic – exhausted!



May 30, 1994

We're almost at the end of May, my favourite month, and it is getting pretty hot and sticky already. Where has the month gone? A maze of meetings, small groups and work. However, it has been in many ways a good period – the return of Seán, the Listons' visit, some good runs and football matches and some glimpses of the Lord in prayer. The more regular life has certainly been a help. I'm gradually settling into some kind of a routine... It is important to just "be with" the uncertainty in this period of transition: not to rush through to conclusions or to try to avoid the uncomfortableness of this process or to guess what the future will be. Carpe diem – seize the day and live it as fully as I can in faith and doubt and love.

June 1, 1994

Rome

Looking in the mirror at a small spot on my nose, it struck me with absolute clarity and certainty that one day this flesh which is Chris Mannion will be no more – I will die. A sobering and questioning, but strangely not a frightening or infrequent, thought. Just more vivid tonight.

June 4, 1994

Rome

I'm feeling wonderfully alive and invigorated after a game of football this afternoon. I came back in absolutely exhausted and quite dehydrated – yet feeling so vigorous and ALIVE. The pure physical joy of movement and of being able to run and jump and shoot. What a gift.



Crooked Chris

Aeons ago, when I could run freely,
thoughtlessly and fast.

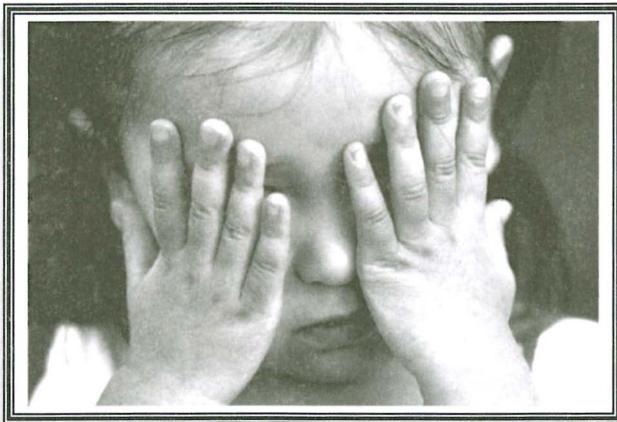
So swiftly spent –
why am I surprised it did not last?

Empty macho pride in broken
arthritic foot (wound stripe).

Shirt stiff shoulder
and

sclerotic joints must make
their arrangements with
fast approaching forty. Say good-bye
to dreams and embrace
my ordinary broken wearing down
– if not yet quite completely out!

Ambushed by arthritic bones
and snapped ligaments in my brain.



June 8, 1994
Rome

Dennis Potter died yesterday of cancer. His recent phrase, “the nowness of everything is absolutely wondrous,” is so true. God is in the now. When I'm dead the Lord will ask me: “And did you enjoy my creation, Chris?” I want to be able to honestly answer YES – and to have LIVED fully before dying.

June 8, 1994

Halfway through the Connolly's leadership workshop – and it is a *workshop* – and I am finding it very useful. I am learning many things about myself and the way I behave, think and re-act. I'm not quite as perfect as I thought, and not quite the shit I suspected either.

June 23, 1994
Rome

“Have written one poem and am struggling with another just now. Signs of either life or desperation! Anyway have sent four of them off to get published – will see what happens.”



As Well Too

I love you as well too:
incandescent hour on Prestatyn promenade,
unexpected squeeze of hands
in fleeting appreciative goodnight.
Sudden sight of gentlest beauty
awaited among the rush hour crowd outside Eason's
so fierce I pretend not to have noticed you.

I love you as well too:
tired and sore,
tested by the infirmities of
life's wear and tear,
oppressed but unbroken, not quenched,
within your stubborn loving generosity.

I love you as well too:
nursing the frightening tenderness
of fidelity beyond mere dogged perseverance.
As well too, as I try never
to cross uninvited the threshold of your dwelling
nor to tame the loving to comprehensible
and safe action replays.

Or when your throaty laugh
punctures my over-serious devotion!

As well too I love you.

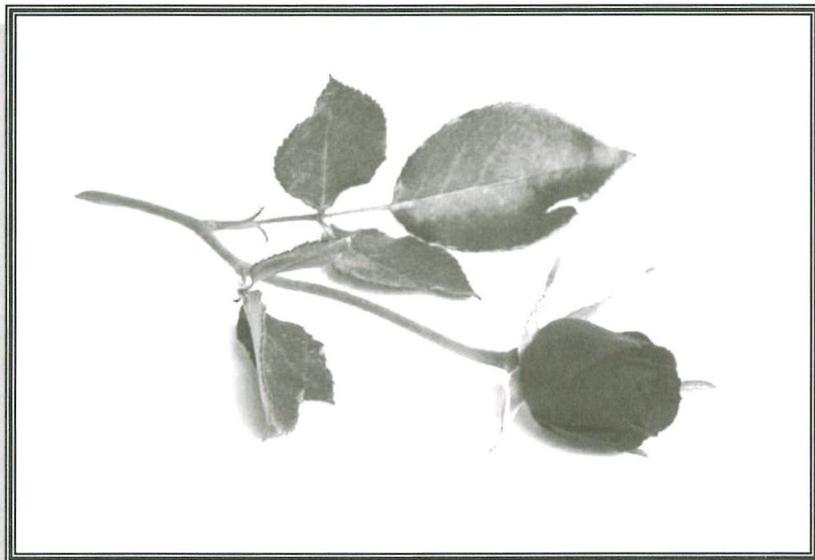


Exposition

Bless you, caress you,
enfold and possess you.

Blessed by you, caressed by you,
enfolded within you:

Possessed.



About Chris

Excerpts from letters of condolence

In a letter dated August 25,1994 Chris' cousin Louise wrote to his parents:

“Chris was an exceptional person. He was vibrant, intelligent and caring; he was generous with his time and in his thoughts; he treated everyone he met as special, both to him and to God. He once said to me that one of the things he had learned through his years as a brother was that to love the world you had to love person by person. The other thing he learned was that evil truly existed. I feel that his death has borne out both points – Chris' love for other inspired him to go to Rwanda, despite the evil which is running amok there.

“Chris talked from time to time of the ongoing choice which a religious person makes as to how best he should serve God. He chose life as a Marist not once, but daily; his commitment to God held strong through times of conviction and of doubt, through ease and through hardship. I think it was a dedication which caused Chris more stress and pain at different points in his life than most of us could tolerate and yet it never seemed to jade him – he refreshed his commitment to life every morning, no matter what had happened yesterday. Of all the gifts he brought to us I think this is the one we should hold close to our hearts during this appallingly painful year.

“I know I don't need to tell you how special your son was – I'm writing these words simply because I'll miss him so much. One day we will all be united far from the pain and conflicts of this world, but until then I believe the spirit that inspired Chris Mannion will never be far from any of us.”



**From Most Reverend Paul Verdzekov
Archbishop of Bamenda
August 23, 1994**

“Most of Brother Chris' life as a Marist Brother was spent here in Bamenda, serving our local Church in the Christian education of youth. In fact, it was here in Saint Joseph's Cathedral Bamenda, that Chris made his final profession as a Marist Brother. A very deep and special bond united him to the Church which is at Bamenda. He was very well known and held in very high esteem by all: parents of young men who attended Sacred Heart College, ex-students of the College, and the wider Christian community. The news of Brother Chris' death has filled all of us here with shock and dismay.

“Be assured that we are united with you in mourning the death of Brother Chris who died carrying out the mission of Christian love entrusted to him by the Superior General of the Marist Brothers. We entrust him into the loving hands of our heavenly Father.”

**From Marist Brothers Lucien Brosse and Guy Palandre,
August 28, 1994**

“On several occasions we had the good fortune to meet Brother Chris Mannion. In each instance we were able to attest to his giftedness as a listener, his concern for his brothers, his great love for the Institute.

“During our last meeting – at the end of last March – he had just been through Nairobi, on that African continent where a part of his province lies – an area he knew well, having spent many years of his life there – that African continent where violence has claimed so many lives.”



**From Rev. Maurice McGill, Superior General,
Bill Tollan, John McCluskey, Mill Hill Missionaries
August 23, 1994**

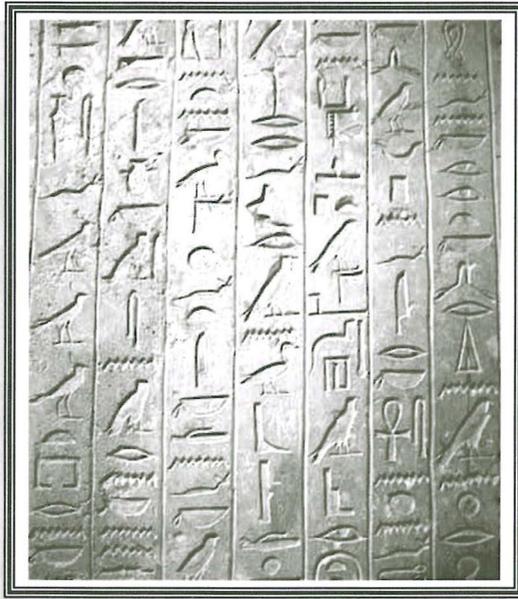
“We came to know Chris very well from his time in Cameroon, and have been in touch with him ever since, though inevitably we didn't meet as often as we would have liked. It is just so hard to accept that we are unlikely to meet again in this life. So much comes to mind, so many memories. Such a young, vigorous, earnest, generous life. We have lost a friend, you a brother and friend, and the Church, the world, a deeply human searching soul, committed to his Marist family and to the coming of the Kingdom.”



Live the questions

Rainer Maria Rilke

I want to beg you, as much as I can, be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart; try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms or books that are written in a foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers; they cannot be given to you now because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. You will then gradually, without even noticing it perhaps, live along some day into the answer.



**From Sister Patricia Watson
Superior General of the Sisters of Sion
August 23, 1994**

“Chris was such a good, good person, such fun, so likable! I've shed a few tears for him and I'm sure you have too. What can I say, except to assure you of my solidarity with you and the others on your team... maybe even the miracle that Chris might just turn up –and yet I hear the words, ‘Greater love no man has than he give his life for his friends.’ Chris was that sort of guy, wasn't he? A real Jesus man!”

**From Rev. Joaquín Fernández SM
Superior General of the Marist Fathers
August 25, 1994**

“At last the sad news has arrived that we have all been suspecting and fearing, that Chris has indeed died... A number of us knew and admired Chris personally, and we recall his quiet good humour, his friendliness and his great missionary zeal. He seemed to be the ideal person to send on such a mission of mercy. It is part of the mystery of divine Providence that the outcome was not what we had hoped for. At this point we have to admire the spirit of faith of Chris' father when he said ‘I must believe that the mission that God sent him on earth for is finished.’ It must be a consolation for such a faith-filled family that he gave his life so generously for others and ultimately sacrificed it in imitation of Jesus.”



**From Rev. Claude Grou CSC
Justice and Peace Commission
The Union of Superiors General, Rome**

“Chris was present at the meeting we organized in April to discuss the situation in Rwanda. He was among those who insisted we try to do whatever we can to help the people of Rwanda at this moment. Chris accepted risking his own life to try to help some of his brothers in Rwanda. He courageously joined them, knowing the risks involved.

“Chris joins hundreds of other religious who have been killed during the last months in Rwanda. While many of these men were caught in this situation, others chose to stay with the people, Chris went further and chose to go to the country and do what he could. This is for all of us a marvellous example of selfless love for his brothers.”

**From Brother Timothy McCrindle FMS
Provincial of South Africa
August 25, 1994**

“As we mourn Chris' death, we remember him with such fondness, joy and esteem as a person, and with great respect and admiration for his zeal to serve the needs of others. We give thanks to God for the gifts of his relatively short life and his Marist vocation, and for his loyalty, generosity and unstinting dedication to his mission. We were looking forward to his visit to South Africa later this year with Brother Gaston.”

Hints of Mortality

There were leaves on the ground this morning
lying limp after last night's rain.
They were brown, brown
with an early autumn.

Cool sunlight slanted in at a fresh angle,
rearranging the shadows.
Was there really a slight chill in the breeze
or was it just a glint
of grey in my hair?



**From Brother Richard Dunleavy FMS
Marist Brothers' Novitiate, Lomeri, FIJI.
August 30, 1994**

“Before and after his appointment as Provincial, I had a number of opportunities to share deeply Chris' personal hopes, fears, courageous faith and warm-hearted love of his family, his many close friends, and his Brothers.

He was, as you so well described him, a man of fiery passion. What a tremendous loss you have suffered as a community and leadership team and we as an Institute.”

**From Rev. W. Broderick SJ
Craighead Spirituality Centre
August 24, 1994**

“I admired Chris' courage in travelling to Rwanda at such a time on his congregation's business.

“I feel his death in a personal way because he did on occasion come to visit me at Craighead and also because I was the Director at St. Beuno's when Chris did a three month course there before he became novice master. We all admired his single-mindedness – in spirituality, in physical fitness– and in every other way.”

**From Brother A. Giménez de Bagués FMS
Provincial of Levante
August 26, 1994**

“I had the opportunity to meet Chris at the two most recent European Provincials Conferences; at the last General Chapter we worked together on the same commission, and also in Rome we competed on the same playing field. This is how I will always remember Chris: a young man, dynamic, self-confident, imperturbable, and a shining example of poise and stability.”



Finale

Patrick Kavanagh

Lines written on a seat on the Grand Canal,
"Erected to the memory of Mrs. Dermot O'Brien."
O commemorate me where there is water,
Canal water preferably, so stilly
Greeny at the heart of summer. Brother,
Commemorate me thus beautifully.
Where by a lock Niagariously roar
The falls for those who sit in the tremendous silence
Of mid-July. No one will speak in prose
Who finds his way to these Parnassian islands.
A swan goes by head low with many apologies.
Fantastic light looks through the eye of bridges
And look! a barge comes bringing from Athy
And other far-flung towns mythologies.
O commemorate me with no hero courageous
Tomb – just a canal-bank seat for the passer-by.



