

MARIST PLACES
The Hermitage

LET US RECLAIM THE SPIRIT OF THE HERMITAGE!



Brother Seán Sammon SG
6th June 2007

MARIST PLACES
The Hermitage

**Let us reclaim
the spirit
of Hermitage!**

Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS
6th June 2007

Seán D. Sammon SG

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

Rome, June 6, 2007

Publisher:

Institute of Marist Brothers

General House

Roma - ITALIA

Production and Administrative Center:

Marist Brothers

Piazzale Marcellino Champagnat, 2

00144 Roma - ITALIA

Tel. (39) 06545171

Fax. (39) 06 54517217

publica@fms.it

www.champagnat.org

Formatting and Photolithography:

TIPOCROM S.R.L.

Via A. Meucci, 28

00012 Guidonia

Roma - ITALIA

Printing:

C.S.C.GRAFICA S.R.L.

Via A. Meucci, 28

00012 Guidonia

Roma - ITALIA



LET US RECLAIM THE SPIRIT OF THE HERMITAGE!¹

6th June 2007

Dear brothers and friends,

From the days when he called the Hermitage “home” right up until the present, the house that Marcellin built has had a special place in the hearts of so many of us². Whether we have visited what is also affectionately referred to as the “Mother House,” read an account of its construction and subsequent history, or simply viewed pictures of it during one or other of its various metamorphoses, we could not help but sense something of ourselves in its solid stone construction, rich soil, and simple and pragmatic design.

In building the Hermitage, the founder showed signs of

true leadership: he stepped out, took a risk, looked to the future. I write to ask all of us to do the same today.

This letter comes with three aims in mind. First of all, to explain the details and discuss the implications of a joint decision made late in 2006 by members of the General Council and the Council of the Province of L’Hermitage to refurbish some of the buildings that make up Notre Dame de l’Hermitage and to transform others.

Next, to encourage you to join us by taking up the spirit that drives this project and making your own the mind, heart, and vision of Marcellin Champagnat and his first followers.

Finally, to ask for your collaboration and support for what we have come to call the *Hermitage Project*.

To realize these aims, the letter is divided into five distinct

¹ Seán Sammon, FMS. *Closing address at the 7th General Conference*, Negombo, Sri Lanka, 2005.

² A word of thanks to Brothers Luis Garcia Sobrado, FMS and Alain Delorme, FMS, who helped greatly with the research necessary to write this letter.

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

parts. The first includes some introductory remarks about our Marist places, while the second concentrates exclusively on the history of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage from the time of its construction up until today. Part three follows with a description

*Four sites in particular,
referred to as
“Marist Places”
are dear to those of us
who call ourselves
Marist: Le Rosey,
La Valla-en-Gier,
Les Maisonnettes and
L'Hermitage.*

of the project itself and part four discusses each of the sites to be renewed. The final or fifth part includes three requests: for study and reflection, for prayers, and for support. Let's begin with Part I: Marist places.

PART I

MARIST PLACES

Many of us who are brothers or Marist lay partners have made the *Champagnat Pilgrimage*. At each step along the way, we were moved by the events recalled and sensed the presence of people like François, Laurent, Sylvester, Jean-Baptiste, Louis Marie, Marcellin himself and so many others. In time, we began to understand that we were moving through places filled with Marist charism.

Four sites in particular, referred to as “Marist Places,” are dear to those of us who call ourselves Marist: Le Rosey, La Valla-en-Gier, Les Maisonnettes, and L'Hermitage.

a. Le Rosey

The first place, Le Rosey, is the small hamlet near Marllhes where Marcellin was born in 1789. Today we are in possession of two rooms in the house in which his family lived. The upper one is the place where the



founder rested and studied during his holidays from the seminary while the lower one contains the oven in which his mother and others would have baked bread for the family.

A free-standing chapel, whose construction to celebrate the founder's beatification was financed by donations from Marist students throughout the world, stands nearby and to the left of the house. Marcellin's family home, the chapel, and a hostel complete this first of our Marist places.

In visiting Le Rosey we meet Marcellin the child and adolescent and come to understand the ways in which his parents, John Baptist Champagnat and Marie Chirac, shaped his open and honest character, business sense, and love of work. Most importantly we begin to appreciate the foundation they laid for his life of faith and consecration to God.

b. La Valla

We move on to La Valla, the second of our four Marist places, to find the first house of

the Little Brothers of Mary, known also as "the cradle of the Institute." Entering on the ground floor, we walk through places dear to any Marist heart: Marcellin's bedroom, the first community's oratory, a small kitchen and a dining room with the table used by the founder and our early brothers. This table has become a symbol of sorts for the family spirit that lies at the heart of Marist life.

On the first floor we are struck by the functional design of the dormitory in which the first brothers slept. During the Institute's early years this building in La Valla also housed the postulants who slept in the attic. The simplicity of the house and its furnishings has a way of making all who pass through it feel welcome and at home.

La Valla is also the site of the first Marist school. Marcellin opened it within a year of gathering together his initial group of aspirants. He began with a single classroom and added a second within the first year. In 1820, working with our early

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

brothers, the founder undertook a major expansion, building two dormitories and a dining room so as to be able to receive boys from the hamlets around La Valla. In school from Monday to Friday, the children returned home for the weekend.³

Today, this first Marist community, school, and boarding facility are set within a series of larger buildings added at a later date to meet new needs. In 1892, the entire complex became a juniorate and remained so until 1965 when, once again, it served as a school for the children of La Valla and the surrounding area.

La Valla is that Marist place where we can most easily connect with the spirit of our beginnings: a life marked by simplicity, family spirit and a passion for making Jesus known and loved among poor children and young people.

c. *Les Maisonnettes*

Les Maisonnettes, situated on one of the numerous hills found on the left side of the Ban river, is the hamlet where Brother François was born. Somewhat isolated geographically, it is within sight across a slight valley from La Valla.

*Similar to the relationship
between a father and son,
over time a profound bond
developed between
Marcellin and Gabriel
who became our
first Superior General.*

The young Gabriel Rivat, later François, was brought by an older brother to one of Marcellin's catechism lessons. His piety so impressed the founder that he asked the boy's parents to allow

³ Cf. Pierre Zind, FMS. *Sur les traces de Marcellin Champagnat, tome 1*. Rome, 2001, pp. 99-100.



him live with the brothers so as to benefit from a good education. Similar to the relationship between a father and son, over time a profound bond developed between Marcellin and Gabriel who became our first Superior General. La Valla and Les Maisonnettes constitute together a special Marist place of beginnings.

d. Notre Dame de l'Hermitage

Of all four Marist places, however, the Hermitage is at the heart of our story. Marcellin spent the greater part of his life here. Within the walls of the house and on the surrounding property, the first generations of brothers gave shape and character to the Marist way of life and mission. The impressive building left to us as a legacy by the founder and his early recruits continues to inspire us today because of the project's audacity and the circumstances surrounding its realization.

At the Hermitage we find the founder's tomb and reliquary as well as the graves of brothers

whose names have become a familiar reference for every generation of Marist brothers and lay partners that has followed.

While there are four Marist places, in this letter I plan to share a reflection solely about Notre Dame de l'Hermitage. My reason for doing so is quite practical. After three years of study and planning, the members of the General Council and of the Council of the Province of l'Hermitage have decided to begin the initial phase of our work of renovation at this site.

Though Le Rosey, La Valla, and Les Maisonnettes are important parts of the renovation project we have planned, no work will begin in connection with any of them until the project at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage is complete. I will certainly let you know when we are ready to begin the second phase of our work. Before turning my attention to the details of the planned renovation at the Hermitage, permit me to explain the spirit that motivates us to undertake it.

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

PART II

NOTRE DAME DE L'HERMITAGE «LOOK UPON THE ROCK FROM WHICH WE WERE CUT!»

(Is 51,1)

The story of Marcellin's Hermitage begins long before the first stone was cut. When walking between La Valla and St. Chamond he often passed a property in a sheltered section of the Gier river valley. Bounded on the east and west by steep mountain ridges, they were rivaled in height only by the oaks that fell between.⁴

On May 13th, 1824 he and Father Courveille went to the office of Mr. Finaz of St. Chamond and there bought the property from Mr. Montellier. An area of 206 acres was purchased for 5000 francs payable in one year, with interest at five percent.⁵

All the brothers gladly helped the builders and masons with the construction of the house during their next summer vacation. The founder rented an old house on the left bank of the Gier to house them. Marcellin slept on an open balcony during the summer while his brothers slept as best they could in an old garret. All gathered at four o'clock each morning and made their way to a spot among the trees that had been set up as a make shift chapel. And so the work began.

Marcellin Champagnat constructed more than a building at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage; he also began to shape the character of his Little Brothers of Mary. He did so by lending his hand to the construction of the building and organizing our early brothers to work with him and the few professional builders he had hired. For more than a year they labored in the

⁴ Brother Stephen Farrell, FMS. *Achievement from the Depths*, Drummoyne, NSW: Marist Brothers, 1984. p. 96.

⁵ Farrell, p. 97.



quarry from sunrise to sunset, prayed regularly, and shared a lifestyle that was austere.

With what result? Memorable events and stories became the threads in a tapestry that captured the spirit that surrounded our foundation: the evident protection of Mary, daily Eucharist, the “chapel in the woods”, Marcellin and his brothers breaking rocks with energy and enthusiasm while one among their number read aloud a text on spirituality, simple food, and nights spent sleeping in the old barn. These and other elements shaped the relationships of those involved and gave unique form to our charism. What it meant to be Marist became clearer with each passing day.

Recalling the story of the construction of the Hermitage, I am struck by two elements. One, the intensity with which the work was carried out; two, the realization that construction continued throughout the life of the founder. The fact that he and our early brothers were able

to complete the initial construction in just over twelve months (between May 1824 and August 1825) despite the scarcity of means and the small number of professional builders involved is nothing short of remarkable.

And in the midst of it all, they were still able to develop and manage the schools at La Valla, Marlhès, Saint-Sauveur, Tarentaise and Bourg-Argental and open two new ones at Charlieu and Chavanay. Their evident enthusiasm for the work and the excellence of what they produced caused the people of their day not only to admire the fruit of their labor but the spirit that animated it as well.

Construction at Notre Dame de l’Hermitage continued throughout Marcellin’s lifetime. It involved both the renovation of parts of the house’s interior, such as the dormitories, as well as the demolition of sections of the original building including the first chapel.

New buildings were also added with a bakery and the stables being completed in 1827, a

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

new chapel in 1836 and a new kitchen the following year.

Today, from the vantage point of history we are challenged to reclaim the spirit that built the Hermitage and to make it our own. Those involved in the construction of this treasure built with the future in mind. Their dreams were

The thirty-three years during which Marcellin and François led our Institute from Notre Dame de l'Hermitage were an intense time in our history, one that helped give unique shape to our charism and formed our spirit as a group.

daring, their actions bold, their hearts on fire. Yes, they took risks but what they accomplished, having so little to begin with, should inspire and move us to do the same.

Mother House and Formation Center

Notre Dame de l'Hermitage has had a number of lives and served as many purposes. When the brothers at La Valla moved there in August 1825, the place became the Mother House. It was also Marcellin's home until his death in 1840. During the years in which François served as his successor up until 1858, when in order to be closer to Lyon the Superior General and his Council moved to Saint Genis-Laval, the house continued to serve as home for the General Administration.

Throughout this period, the Hermitage was also a postulancy and novitiate and served as an infirmary for brothers who were retired or in ill-health. In time it became a juniorate as well, though the location of the program alternated between the Hermitage and a house nearby in Grange-Payre.

In 1848 Brother François initiated a scholasticate as part of the initial formation of Marist Brothers. During its first years



the program, like that of the juniorate, moved back and forth between the Hermitage and the house in Grange-Payre.

Sylvester was appointed first Master of Scholastics and when not in residence there, he and his charges spent weekends at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage. The spontaneous character of their Master as well as the interaction that took place between the scholastics and the elder brothers brought from time to time some welcome excitement as well as a few frustrations into the lives of all who lived at the Mother House.⁶

The thirty-three years during which Marcellin and François led our Institute from Notre Dame de l'Hermitage were an intense time in our history, one that helped give unique shape to our charism and formed our spirit as a group.

As we walk through the property we sense in the walls of the

building, on the paths along the banks of the Gier, and in the rocks situated close to the house and in some instances towering alongside it, the mysterious presence of Marcellin and our first brothers.

Who can spend time in this sacred space and not feel an urge rising up within to reclaim – for ourselves and our brothers and lay partners, for our communities and works, for the young people whom we are called to serve – the love these men had for one another and for our mission, their ability to live in God's presence and their joy in so doing, their reliance on Mary, and their untiring devotion to bringing God's *Good News* to the poor children and young people of their day?

Provincial House

As 1858 came to a close, with but a handful of brothers living there, the Hermitage became once again the Provincial House

⁶ Pierre Zind, FMS. *Sur les traces de Marcellin Champagnat et du Fr. François*, tome 2, Roma, 2001, p. 183.

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

of the Province of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage. It served that purpose for the next 12 years while continuing also as a formation center and infirmary.

In 1876 and 1877, during the mandate of Brother Louis Marie as Superior General, the chapel of the house was extended and refurbished, witnessing to the importance that Marcellin and the first generation of brothers gave to celebration of the liturgy. More than 20 years later, in 1898, the building known today as *Le Rocher* was officially opened as a scholasticate and became in time a symbol of the significance placed on this stage of initial formation.

During the nineteen-fifties the brothers took the farm buildings that Marcellin had built in 1839 and transformed them into a complex that became known as *Le Cèdre*. This renovation allowed the commu-

nity to welcome a greater number of children and young people for catechism classes and sessions of spiritual formation.

The apse on the North-West side of the main chapel that we so admire today was constructed to mark the beatification of Marcellin in 1955 and to provide a home for the reliquary containing his remains.

As we consider the history of the Hermitage as a whole, it becomes evident that Father Champagnat and our first brothers never stopped building the place. The generations that followed did the same. Perhaps herein lies the origin of the phrase *mal de la pierre*⁷, a phenomenon that appears to have accompanied the Little Brothers of Mary in one situation after another.

Difficult times

Political events also helped shape the history of Notre

⁷ A French expression that literally means the “sickness of stone.” In the past it has been used to refer to those Provincials and school Directors who were continually developing Marist institutions by constructing new buildings.



Dame de l'Hermitage. Recall that the singing of the *Salve Regina* became a tradition there and throughout the Institute as a consequence of the social upheaval brought about by the 1830 uprising in France.

In 1903 as a result of the *Combes Law*, then Superior General Theophane Durand and his Council moved the General Administration from France (St. Genis) to Italy (Grugliasco). The novitiate was also relocated to that country and set up in the town of San Mauro. At the same time, to avoid possible desecration, Marcellin's remains were transferred to a discreet place in Les Maisonnettes. They were returned to the Hermitage in 1920.

On August 13th, 1925, the new Superior General, Brother Diogene, traveled from Grugliasco to Notre Dame de l'Hermitage to celebrate a centenary since its official opening as our first Mother House. There he

was welcomed by Brother Stratonique, a former Superior General and for 25 years Superior of the Hermitage community, and well over a hundred brothers who had gathered for the occasion.

Stratonique, the main speaker, summarized in a few words the growing conviction among the brothers of his generation: "the heroic spirit that animated Fr. Champagnat and the novices and brothers that began this venture in 1825 reached out to every house and school in the Institute with admirable fertility". He defined the historical building as "a masterpiece of simplicity and endurance"⁸.

With all that it had faced in a century of life, the Hermitage had yet to be tested by fire. When that occurred in 1940 the flames consumed the fifth floor roof of the northwest side wing in which the novitiate was housed as well as most of the rooms situated under it. The

⁸ Cfr. *Bulletin de l'Institut*, volume XXIII, pp. 144 and 147.

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

overall structure itself, however, remained intact. For their part, the Brothers quickly repaired the damage and used the occasion to improve some other parts of the house.

As the Hermitage took on an identity more suitable for the age that had dawned, it began to welcome adolescents and young adults from the Marist School network throughout France.

A new identity for Notre Dame de l'Hermitage

The many changes that occurred in religious life during the 1960s and the years that followed understandably had an impact on Notre Dame de l'Hermitage. As time passed, its buildings and the property were put to new uses.

With the number of those entering growing ever smaller, the Superiors judged it best to consolidate the various houses of formation throughout France. As a result, there was to be one national novitiate at La Cabanne and a scholasticate located at St. Genis.

For its part, Notre Dame de l'Hermitage ceased to serve as a novitiate in 1960. The scholasticate located there closed its doors in 1964 and the juniorate in 1969. With its role once again reduced to that of a Provincial and retirement house, both the General and Province administrations begin to plan a future use for the house's vast spaces, so dear to the brothers but now left practically empty.

Fortunately, planning coincided with a growing awareness of our need to make an institutional response to Vatican II's invitation that we return to the spirit of our origins. The gift that Father Champagnat and our early brothers had made to us was quickly rediscovered and our appreciation of it was deepened by the pioneering work of



researchers such as Brother Pierre Zind and those who followed him during subsequent years. As a consequence, Marist places became increasingly centers of pilgrimage for brothers and lay Marists alike.

As the Hermitage took on an identity more suitable for the age that had dawned, it began to welcome adolescents and young adults from the Marist School network throughout France and from the Diocese of St. Etienne. By 1973 the house and surrounding property had established themselves as a Youth Center.

Two years later an international community was appointed and given the role of welcoming and guiding the ever increasing number of pilgrims visiting Marist places. Eventually our General Administration and the Province Administration of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage entered into a written agreement to share responsibility for the buildings and property as well as the community residing there. In 1987 following several evaluations, a decision was made to replace the

international community with one made up of brothers from the Province of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage and to integrate this community into that of the Provincial Administration.

The bicentenary of Marcellin's birth was celebrated in 1989. Brothers from the Province of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage, with the support of the General Administration, marked the event in a number of ways. A particularly memorable celebration was the European Marist Youth gathering that brought together several thousand young people who were connected to our Institute in one way or another. It was a joyous experience of prayer, as well as of faith-sharing and Marist family spirit.

About the same time, the main chapel, bedrooms and meeting rooms as well as the visitors' quarters were refurbished in both the historical building and *Le Rocher*. This work was aimed at better accommodating the ever increasing number of brothers who were visiting the Hermitage as part of programs of renewal.

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

The restructuring of administrative units that occurred throughout most of our Institute during the last decade gave Marist Europe a fresh geographic face. The new Province of L'Hermitage brought together the two former provinces of France, the former Province of Catalonia as well as our foundations in Switzerland, Algeria, Hungary and Greece.

With the formation of this new Province in 2003, Notre Dame de l'Hermitage ceased to function as a Provincial House. Once again, we were challenged to find thoughtful and creative ways in which to transform the role of this important property and its buildings to meet the ministry demands of the future.

A Center to welcome and to accompany Marist pilgrims

For more than 30 years now, Notre Dame de l'Hermitage has served both as a center to welcome and accompany Marist pilgrims and visitors and as a Provincial and retirement house.

During the last decade and a half, however, more and more lay Marists, groups of brothers and others, not associated with our Midlife and Third-age sessions, have swelled the ranks of those coming to the Hermitage seeking to deepen their knowledge and appreciation of the sources of our Institute and its mission. Indications are that this steady stream of pilgrims will only increase during the years ahead.

To ensure that the place would have the wherewithal to continue its ministry of welcome and to accommodate the needs of an increasing varied group of pilgrims (children, couples and families, as well as brothers), a study needed to be undertaken to assess the facilities and programs at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage. With this purpose in mind, the General Council and the Council of the new Province of L'Hermitage set up in 2004 an International Commission for Marist Places. Its mission was quite straightforward: to help both councils develop an overall plan for



Notre Dame de l'Hermitage. That plan was to be called "The Hermitage Project".

PART III

THE HERMITAGE PROJECT

The *Hermitage Project* includes both the renewal of persons and of places and has two aims:

1. Developing a new program of welcome and animation for visitors to Notre Dame de l'Hermitage;
2. Planning and carrying out the renovation of the buildings and other significant spaces that are part the property of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage so that they will facilitate the implementation of the above mentioned program.

This project is the fruit of considerable reflection and wide-ranging consultation. Not only was it submitted for review to the two councils involved but

also to the communities of L'Hermitage. Taking advantage of the 7th General Conference in September 2005, members of the General Council presented the main elements of the project. In turn, they received a number of helpful recommendations and overwhelming support for the plan.

The Province of L'Hermitage has committed itself to pay two thirds of the overall cost while the General Council pledged the General Administration, with the help of the Provinces and Districts of the Institute, to cover the remaining third.

I am grateful to the brothers of the Province of L'Hermitage for their generous support. Without it, I doubt we would have the courage to undertake this work.

The project's heart

Places of foundation play an important role in the development of religious feeling and belief. During times of rapid and profound cultural change, such as the present, they are particu-

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

larly significant serving as an essential reference point for the group's work of rediscovering and defining anew its spirituality and identity.

In our Marist tradition, both of these elements took their original charismatic shape from the interaction of Marcellin and our first brothers and found their expression in the ways in which these men related to God, to Jesus and Mary, to one another, and to the poor children and young people of their day.

François described the historical building of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage as "the reliquary of the Blessed Founder, where everything speaks of him."⁹ This description is no less true today for it continues to be the place where we come face-to-face with the founding experience of Marcellin and his early recruits. The *Hermitage Project* aims at assisting brothers and lay people realize their hope of encountering today this same

foundational experience. For if the Hermitage has something unique to offer, it is the special presence of Marcellin and his first followers. The building and its surroundings are truly an exceptional expression of their lives and works.

Co-responsibility

The documents of recent General Chapters have been clear about this point: any future for our Marist life and mission will be the fruit of efforts on the part of both brothers and lay Marists. Those of us who are brothers should welcome this development and be thankful for the fact that so many of our lay colleagues and friends are keen to deepen their own Marist identity and are attracted to the spirituality of Marcellin and our first brothers, as well as to the tradition to which it has given rise.

In renewing the spaces at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage we

⁹ *Bulletin of the Institute*, Volume X, p 146)



have no intention of creating a museum in which to display the achievements of the past. Rather we want to take one step further the dream that Marcellin had in mind when he built the place.

So, while respecting the past, this project is undertaken with the future in mind. The work of renewal is serious business and rightly so we shall be held accountable by future generations for the way in which we embraced it.

What do I mean, then, when I use the expression “reclaiming the spirit of the Hermitage?” Nothing more and nothing less

than entering into an encounter with Marcellin Champagnat and those who were his contemporaries and making our own their faith, their vision, their courage, and their boldness of action. This spirit of the Hermitage is and will continue to be the basis for our unity in the midst of what will be the increasingly rich and international nature of our Institute and its mission. Having been an international Institute for well over a hundred years, now is the time to begin acting like one.¹⁰

I am convinced that greater internationality in our communities and works is an essential ingredient for bringing about the increase in vitality for which we all long. The renovation of the buildings that make up the Hermitage will help everyone who visits there – regardless of nationality, race, or cultural background – to feel truly at home.

¹⁰ Seán D. Sammon, FMS. *Revolution of the Heart: Marcellin's Spirituality and a Contemporary Identity for his Little Brothers of Mary*, Roma: Fratelli Maristi, 2003, (31)1.

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

Truly, if we are ever to renew our Institute and its works the spirit of the Hermitage must be ours beyond question. Taking on the mind and heart of the founder is an important step in this direction. So also is continued bold and courageous action on the part of us all.

No exercise in nostalgia

The *Hermitage Project*, therefore, is no exercise in nostalgia, an attempt to reclaim an imagined glorious past. While the remains of the founder and our early brothers are well-placed there, the house and its environs are more rightly thought of as living memorials to these men and their dream.

So, while respecting the past, this project is undertaken with the future in mind. The work of renewal is serious business and rightly so we shall be held accountable by future generations for the way in which we embraced it. The time has come to stop tinkering with one or another element in the process of renewal and to give our hearts to

it completely. If we are unwilling to address that challenge, we should be honest enough to say so and to step aside so as not to get in the way of those who believe in a future and our ability, with God's grace, to realize it.

Today we are also more aware that brothers and Marist laymen and women share responsibility for our mission and its vitality. The spirit of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage is a resource to us all in our search for fresh and compelling answers to the new calls we are facing in our Church today as well as our way of life and mission. Arriving at these answers, however, will require far more than simply spending a few days on pilgrimage and then returning to our place of work. A change of heart is never easy to come by. It occurs only over time, and entails sacrifice and self-transcendence. The transformation of our communities and families, our mission and our works will require no less effort.

A pilgrimage to Notre Dame de l'Hermitage is but a first step of a much longer journey, some



moments in a place of initiation that help connect us vitally with our origins. We come away inspired and with renewed energy for the work that lies ahead. Jesus, though, is the only one who can set our hearts on fire, open our eyes, provide us with fresh insight into our life together and our mission of bringing his *Good News* to the poor children and young people of our time and place.

The programs

From time of its foundation Notre Dame de l'Hermitage has carried out the task of initiating candidates into Marist life and mission. And while it has also served as a renewal center at times, its programs of on-going formation were soon moved to alternate sites in France and eventually to other parts of the Institute such as Switzerland, Italy, and Spain.

Beginning in the 1970s and during the years thereafter, the Hermitage became once again the site for short sessions of renewal in Marist spirit and

charism. Participants were almost always brothers involved elsewhere in longer programs of renewal. For the last fifteen years or so, however, their ranks have been complemented by lay Marists coming to the Hermitage in increasing numbers and often enough organized groups.

Many provinces and districts also are making remarkable efforts to further the formation of brothers and Marist lay men and women, with a significant number of programs currently in place aimed at both groups. Those participating come away from these experiences with renewed interest in deepening their knowledge and appreciation of Marist charism and spirituality. A number of those fortunate enough to make a pilgrimage to Notre Dame de l'Hermitage arrive with significant knowledge about the founder and our early brothers. Aware of this situation, the *Hermitage Project* plans to develop and offer programs to visitors that consolidate and further develop previous formative experiences.

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

The programs we are developing for use with those who travel to the renovated Hermitage have at their heart an encounter with Marcellin and his first brothers. At the same time, we must tailor each program so that it is sensitive to the reality of the lives of those who come on pilgrimage. For example, people from a diversity of nations and cultures now visit the center, as well as those of different ages. The time that some have available is limited; while others, perhaps using a period of sabbatical or professional leave, arrive with a more open ended schedule. Some who come on pilgrimage do so for the first time; others are seasoned veterans who know the place and its riches well. A few arrive to do research, others to understand better what is meant by Marist culture and charism. All come to pray in their own way.

To accommodate these inevitable differences, we will obviously have to put into place a team with the capacity to adapt and be empathetic to the different sensibilities and needs of

those who arrive at the center. At the same time, we are in the process of developing a number of what we call *spiritual itineraries*. They vary in content and length but share the same overall goal.

The work of renovation is, in part, influenced by the nature of the programs that we are putting into place. For example, within the historical building the plan of renovation calls for the development of structures that will facilitate different tours for visitors as opposed to those who come as pilgrims. Plans are on the drawing board also to develop further the Champagnat and other walking routes in the region of La Vallée and Le Pilat.

Those making one or other of these pilgrimages will walk in the footsteps of Fr. Champagnat and some of the first brothers as they went about in their challenging work in conditions far less agreeable than we find today. Our plan includes organizing some Marial pilgrimage routes as well.

The vision guiding the *Hermitage Project* also stretches be-



yond the confines of the building and property and includes a well-developed extension effort. It will allow persons, groups, and communities at a distance geographically to have access to the same spiritual itineraries that are available to those able to travel to Notre Dame de l'Hermitage.

This aspect of the program will be implemented in two ways. First of all, by taking advantage of recent developments in communication and technology, and, second, by making available periodically to provinces and districts some members of the new Hermitage community. Their absence from the center itself will have to be planned carefully, though, so as not to disturb the work of welcome, animation and formation that lies at the heart of the program we are developing.

Spiritual growth

Marcellin Champagnat's canonization reminded us all that the charism that came into the Church through him belongs to the People of God and not sole-

ly to his brothers. In embracing that charism we allow the spirit that was so alive and active in the founder to live and breathe in each of us today.

Those making one or other of these pilgrimages will walk in the footsteps of Fr. Champagnat and some of the first brothers as they went about in their challenging work in conditions far less agreeable than we find today.

Marist charism, therefore, is a catalyst for both human and spiritual growth and, more importantly, for our developing understanding of our place in the Church's mission. And herein lies the full meaning and purpose of the *Hermitage Project*. The spiritual itineraries that are so much of the *Project* itself, working to-

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

gether with the experience of touching, first-hand or at a distance, Marist places, routes, and history can only serve to deepen the journey of faith in which so many of us are involved today, and to do so in a particularly Marist way.

In taking leave from the Hermitage, any visitor or pilgrim should carry with him or her the memory of having lived during their time there in a Christian community that is Marist in name and in fact.

Each of us is engaged in a life-long pilgrimage of conversion leading to reconciliation with God, with ourselves and one another, and with the world at large. The fruit of that journey is seen at its best when it is the source of our zeal for apostolic life and radical gospel living.

Like Marcellin and his first followers, over time we come to understand and experience more fully the presence and love of God, give Jesus and Mary important places in our lives, and make the virtue of simplicity our own. Consequently, the expressions Marist identity, Marist apostolic spirituality, and Marist works take on ever greater meaning.

A Center that welcomes Marist pilgrims and visitors

The spirit of welcome that is a central characteristic of the *Hermitage Project* is essential for the effective implementation of what we have in mind overall. There can be no doubt on the part of anyone that Notre Dame de l'Hermitage is a place where everyone is welcome and is made to feel at home. Only in this way will those coming to the Hermitage be able to deepen the experience of Marist identity and spirituality as well as the family spirit that lies at the heart of each and finds its inspiration in the attitudes of



Mary, the mother of Jesus and wife of Joseph.

This welcoming attitude and atmosphere will show itself in the way in which the resident community relates to visitors and pilgrims as well as in the design of the house and its programs. The *Hermitage Project* aims at making sure that everything and everyone associated with Notre Dame de l'Hermitage is touched by a sense of welcome and made to feel at home.

Based on this principle, a number of decisions have been made. First of all, the spaces and facilities that will make up the house have been designed to create an atmosphere in which the presence of the resident team will be evident in a discreet but clear way.

This set-up does not, however, preclude a situation in which a Province or institution, whether Marist or not, comes to the center with its own program and group of animators. Rather our aim is to create an atmosphere that is distinctly Marist, one in which there can be no question that the "style of Mary" is quite evident.

A community that welcomes and accompanies visitors

The *Hermitage Project*, therefore, seeks to create an atmosphere of welcome and hospitality wherein an encounter with Marcellin and our first brothers is possible. A community lies at the heart of this effort and takes responsibility for the tasks of welcoming, accompanying, and animating all who come to the center.

In taking leave from the Hermitage, any visitor or pilgrim should carry with him or her the memory of having lived during their time there in a Christian community that is Marist in name and in fact. And today that means one that welcomes differences in nationality, race, culture, and standards of living. It also means one in which all the members have a passion for mission. For if the experience of spending time at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage is to mean anything, it should send us out on fire with the desire to bring God's *Good News* to poor children and young people. Quite

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

simply, to long as Marcellin did to tell children just how much Jesus Christ loves them.

The specifics

We are planning to appoint a community to Notre Dame de l'Hermitage that is made up of twelve members: eight Brothers and four laymen and women. Fifty percent of the community will come from the Province of L'Hermitage while the other half will have their origin in other parts of our Institute and will bring an international and multicultural dimension to the community.

Those Brothers who belong to this initial community will commit themselves in principle for a period of no less than six years. The laymen and women in the community will pledge a minimum period of two years.

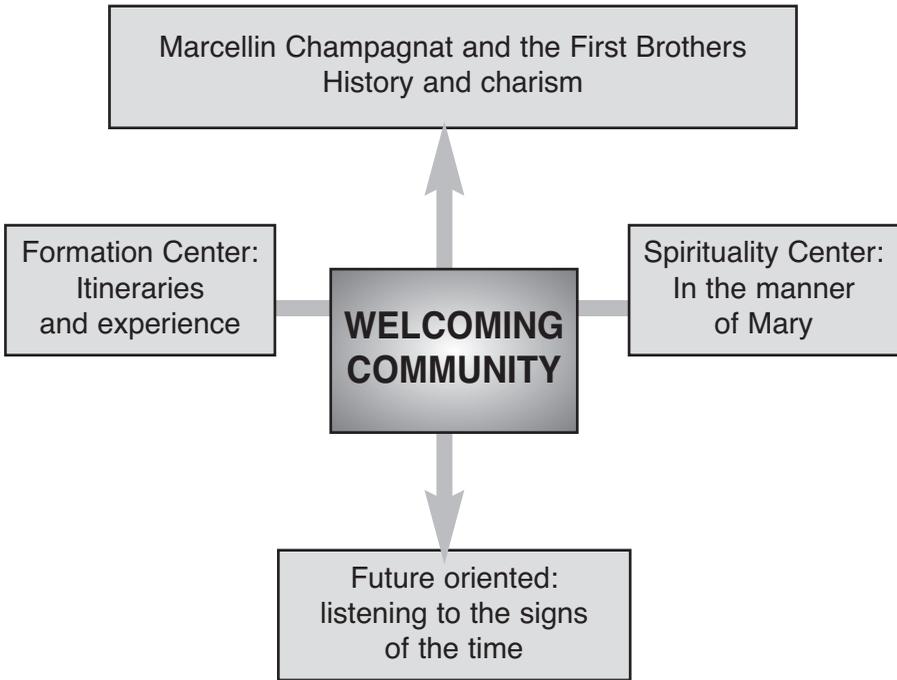
A community finds its life only through the day to day struggle to truly be a community. And that involves falling down and getting up again and doing so more than once! To truly be in communion with one another takes the commitment

of time and honest exchange among the members of the group.

If the new community at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage truly wants to become what Marcellin had in mind – people united in heart and mind – its members will need to take up the methods he proposed for achieving that end: mutual respect, prayer, forgiveness and reconciliation, simplicity of life.

They will also need to take up for themselves some of the itineraries that will be used with visitors and pilgrims. In this way they can foster their own encounter with the founder and the first community at La Valla and later the Hermitage. Quite possibly, the overall effectiveness of the *Hermitage Project* will depend eventually upon the ability of this new community to live Marist spirit and life fully and their ability to communicate to others exactly what this means.

The scheme below summarizes the vision we have for the soon to be appointed community at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage:



A final word about the community we plan for the Hermitage. Throughout the history of the place, from the time of Marcellin and up to the present, we have had one community after another that excelled at meeting the challenges of their time in history and in the history of our Institute and its mission. Perhaps what is new at the present time is the appointment of a group whose sole task will

be to welcome and accompany those who arrive as visitors and pilgrims.

As in the past, we see the community as developing their important apostolate in communion and coordination with the communities at La Valla and Le Rosey. It is my hope, as well, that this new community will open its hearts and its door to small groups of young people seeking to deepen their experi-

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

ence and appreciation of Marist community, life and mission. Some might very well be included in the overall life of the community for a period of time.

PART IV

The work of renovation

In February 2007, after incorporating a number of suggestions from the Provincial Council of L'Hermitage, the General Council gave its approval to a plan for the renovation of the buildings and external spaces that make up Notre Dame de l'Hermitage. During the weeks since some brothers throughout the Institute have expressed their concern that a project of this magnitude might actually take away from the building's simple Marist character.

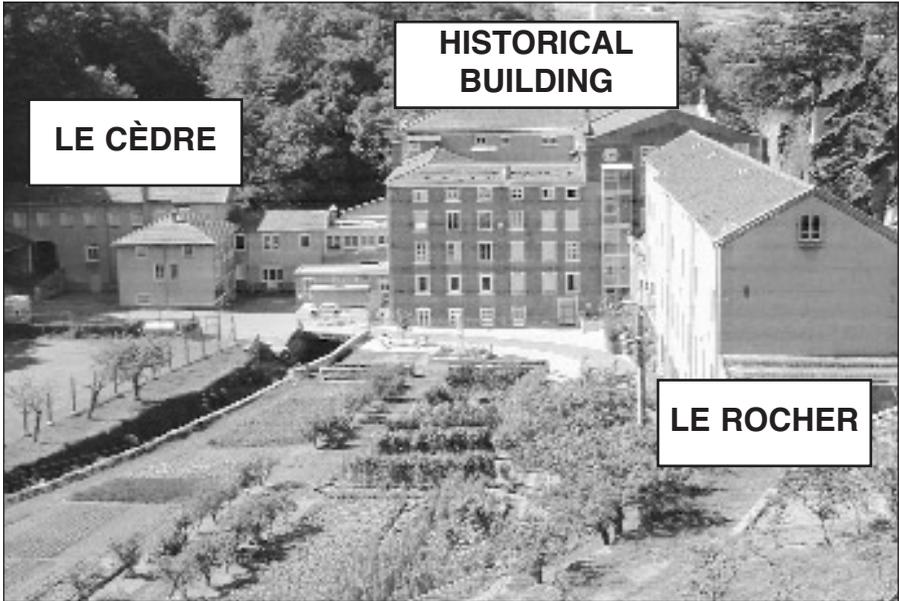
To dispel these fears I will share with you the criteria being used to make judgments as well as the basic plan of renovation, leaving the explanation of more

specific details about the project to the CD and other audio-visual resource materials that you will receive in each Province and District.

As illustrated in the picture above, Notre Dame de l'Hermitage is made up of three sets of buildings. There is the so called *historical building* at the center, the group to the left known as *Le Cèdre* and, finally, in the forefront, *Le Rocher*.

The renovation of the "Historical building"

Marcellin Champagnat was this building's first architect and the memory of his life and work is to be found almost everywhere throughout. This fact inspired the renovation plan that we are about to implement. We are determined not only to keep alive his memory but to actively promote the building as a gift to the Church and young people, while at the same time bringing the facility up to date so that it may serve the needs of today and those that arise in the future.



Notre Dame de l'Hermitage

Five criteria have guided us in our planning:

1. To highlight those spaces that were a part of the life of the founder by restoring them, as much as possible, to their original state.
2. To preserve the building's traditional style while also incorporating those facilities necessary to adequately welcome the increasing number and variety of visitors, (e.g., married couples, families with children).
3. To reinforce the structure overall and correct construction problems where they have developed (e.g., the warping of some floor space and ceilings).
4. To reduce the number of levels that exist on any one floor thus increasing safety and ease of movement.
5. To improve acoustics in the bedroom area and in designated meeting rooms.

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

The building of Le Rocher or the former scholasticate

This building is being renovated with three objectives in mind:

1. To double the number of bedrooms on the property.
2. To have the ability to accommodate two different groups at the same time with programs employing two different dynamics.
3. To have the capacity to welcome adolescents and young adults.

Consequently, the three upper floors will be transformed into bedrooms while the ground floor will be organized in such a way that the needs of groups of young people and adolescents will be met.

The group of buildings called “Le Cèdre”

This group of buildings will be demolished and replaced by a new building designed to provide the following necessary facilities:

1. A reception area where all those coming to Notre Dame

de l’Hermitage will be welcomed.

2. A dining hall with a capacity for 200 people.
3. A fully equipped conference hall with the same capacity as the dining area surrounded by smaller meeting places.
4. A central kitchen.

The plan foresees a simple structure for this new building. It will be of low height and contemporary design, and aimed at enhancing the prominence of the *historical building* while also respecting the local environment.

The entrance to Notre Dame de l’Hermitage and parking facilities will be organized in such way that access to the *historical building* will be from the southwest section of the property. Arriving visitors walking toward the *historical building* will have the steep forest slope and the undeveloped areas on their left and back respectively. The Gier, the vegetable garden, the Chapel in the Woods and the cemetery will be to their right.



PART V

THREE REQUESTS

The work of renovation is scheduled to begin no later than May 2008 and to be completed by May 2009. That 12 month period will be a time of intense activity aimed not only at completing the construction on time but also, and more importantly, finalizing the program of animation and beginning to form the community that will be responsible for that program.

The Brothers and the lay Marists who will make up the membership of this first community will be occupied as well with learning languages, deepening their knowledge of Marcellin and our first brothers, getting to know one another, developing a Community Project and starting to form a true community, becoming acquainted with

the program of animation, formation, and accompaniment designed for those coming to the Hermitage.

My first request to each of you involves an invitation to study and reflect. Joining with those who will make up the first community at the refurbished Hermitage, let us all make a special effort to deepen our knowledge and love of our founder and his early recruits.

You will soon receive some printed and audio-visual material explaining the *Hermitage Project*. I encourage you to use these resources individually and as communities and in your place of ministry. I also invite you to read once again Chapter 12 of the first part of the “Life of Joseph Benedict Marcellin Champagnat” (Rome, 1989) by Brother Jean Baptiste.¹¹

My second request involves an invitation to pray. As soon as the names of those who will

¹¹ Jean-Baptiste Furet. *Life of Blessed Marcellin Joseph Benedict Champagnat*, Roma: Fratelli Maristi, 1989 [Bicentenary Edition], Chapter 12.

Let us reclaim the spirit of the Hermitage!

make up the new community at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage are finalized, I will send a note to our Provincials and District Superiors. Please pray for each of them by name every day personally and in your communities and families.

And finally I count on your generosity in helping us finance these works of renovation and renewal. Together with this letter I am sending a note to each Provincial and District superior with a suggested amount that a Province or District might pledge toward the project. I leave it to each administrative unit to decide how best to raise the money and to involve as many people as possible in the project. I am very grateful for your efforts in both regards.

Conclusion

Before closing this letter, I wish to express my gratitude to the members of the International Commission of Marist Places. Appointed early in 2004, they have dedicated a great deal of time and energy to developing

the project as we now know it. Throughout they were in dialogue with the General Council and the Provincial Council of L'Hermitage and were a great help to both groups in their own task of reflection.

Thank you to: Brothers Jean-Pierre Destombes, Maurice Gouagny, Alain Delorme, Michel Morel and Josep Maria Soteras of the Province of L'Hermitage and to Brothers Onorino Rota (Mediterránea), Javier Espinosa (América Central), George Fontana (USA), José Pérez (Compostela) and Albert André (West Central Europe).

This Commission was succeeded in 2006 by a second group given the name of Central Commission. Their task has been to help the two councils implement the Project. Their work will continue through September 2009.

The renovation plans that are part of the *Hermitage Project* are the result of the hard work of Mr. Joan Puig-Pey and his team of architects from Barcelona. They have listened attentively



throughout to our ideas, our hopes, our suggestions and recommendations. Our relationship has been blessed by the qualities of dialogue, mutual trust and a forthright approach.

The result is a plan that meets the approval of both parties and one that will certainly, we hope, meet your expectations and those of generations to come. To all involved, I express my gratitude and pray that the work of renovation takes place without incident or accident as was the case in Marcellin's day.

Thank you for your interest in this project and for your willingness to share in its spirit.

May the work about to take place be but one more step in our efforts to reclaim the spirit of Marcellin's Hermitage and to make it our own. And may that effort give us his fire and his zeal for bringing God's Word to today's poor children and young people. May Mary, our Good Mother, and the founder himself be our guides in that effort.

With prayers and affection,
your brother,

Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS
Superior General

Ended to print, July 2007

fms