



OPENING OF THE XXII GENERAL CHAPTER

Welcome to this house which will be our home in the coming weeks of our General Chapter.

A month and a half ago, while preparing these words, I went to the Archives of the General Administration to read the Acts of the XVI General Chapter that took place in September 1967, that is 50 years ago. Br Charles Raphael, the then Superior General, reminded the capitulants that they were celebrating 150 years since the foundation of the Institute and 100 years since the first Marist 'mission' (at the level of the Institute as a whole), which was in South Africa.

Today we can say that all of us have the privilege – and the responsibility – of participating in the General Chapter of our bicentenary. And that, to celebrate the 150 years since our first Marist 'mission', a new international community will be established in South Africa in these very days when we are in Chapter.

An attitude: At the edge of waiting

Coming here from the four corners of the earth, a great responsibility has been entrusted to us, an extremely sensitive task, one that will demand of each of us great **freedom of spirit**, **detachment** from our own ideas and opinions, a **determination to learn** from others and a constant attitude of **prayer and discernment**.

We are being invited to take a seat in the school of Mary to learn from Her how to adopt a **contemplative way of looking at things**, something that does not happen spontaneously just because we want it to, but rather something to be worked at on our own and with a healthy dash of patience.

I follow on Twitter Carl McColman, a well-known writer on topics related to contemplation. Last June he surprised me with one of his tweets:



In the reflection developed by McColman on his own website, the Irish word for describing contemplation is *rinnfheitheamh* (RINN-eh-hev). The first part of the word means *border* or *edge*, as in the cutting edge of a sword; the second part of the word means *waiting*. Hence the literal translation of *rinnfheitheamh* would be **at the edge of waiting**. There could not be a better image to describe contemplation.

When applied to our own situation and the work ahead of us, I believe that we are being asked to engage in something as finely-balanced as standing *at the edge of waiting*.

The edge of contemplation is sharp, like the cutting edge of a sword, enabling us to distinguish the voice of the Lord from all the other voices coming from our ego; to cut through our attachments, our unreal fantasies, our fears... to bring us to greater inner freedom. What a wonderful ally contemplation will be in our discernment!

We have in front of us some six weeks of life together and of work at the service of the Institute, considered as a global body. We know that really important issues are waiting for us and that our time is limited. This reality may cause a degree of anxiety and angst in some of us, along with the desire to move matters along as fast as possible.

The Portuguese theologian, José Tolentino Mendonça, in his beautiful book, *Pequena teologia da lentidão (A short theology of slowness)*, quotes Milan Kundera, *When things happen too fast, nobody can be certain about anything, about anything at all, not even about himself*. He goes on to say,

In our haste, we become forgetful. We pass by things without getting involved, we speak with others without listening to them, we accumulate information that we will never process. Everything takes place at a noisy, aggressive and superficial pace. Truly, the speed that we are currently living at prevents us from living. One possible alternative would be to recover the way we relate to time. Little by little, step by step. This is not possible without inner relaxation. Precisely because the pressure to make decisions is enormous, we need to take our time to protect ourselves from jumping from one thing to another without thought, from blindly compulsive actions, from parroted and banal words. Precisely because we find ourselves obliged to split ourselves in two and be everywhere at one, we need to relearn the here and now of presence, we need to relearn to be attentive to the whole, the complete, the heart of things, to oneness.

If during the Chapter, then, there are moments when we feel impatient because answers are not appearing or anxious about what is not under our control... it may be good to remember this fine balance of trying to stand *at the edge of waiting*, in an attitude of expectation and curiosity.

A task: Towards a New La Valla

In the Letter of Convocation of the General Chapter I tried to remind us all of what is the heart of our work starting today and during the weeks to come: **to listen closely to the Spirit, to ask ourselves what God wants of us, to make La Valla relevant today...** This is what I wrote:

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.

A task as important and sensitive as this is not an invitation to focus on ourselves and to go round and round over what we assume to be our needs. I believe that, at this historic moment, the Spirit is reminding all of us in the Church that He wants us to be in *a permanent state of mission* (EG 25), and that we have to overcome any form of *ecclesial introversion* that puts *self-preservation* first (EG 27).

So, my image of the participants of this Chapter is not that of an emotionally-torn Hamlet, asking himself *To be or not to be* ... but rather that of a passionate Champagnat on his way from Bessat to La Valla, after his encounter with the young Montagne. May the inner fire that burned in the heart of Marcellin light up ours as well!

Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat!" (Mk 6:37). (EG 49)

Give them something to eat! This phrase offers us an excellent perspective for our search during this Chapter. It is the needs of others that should move us more than our own. Our main task during these weeks, then, is not to produce beautiful documents but rather to try to respond to questions that matter, with a compassionate heart like that of Champagnat. **Where does the Church need us most** at this beginning of the 21st century? In which places around the world are the most vulnerable children and young people, and how should we be serving them, as a global body? ...

A Community: parable of fraternity

Throughout the Chapter, part of our task is also to form ourselves into a **community of life**, like *a new La Valla*.

And, when we speak of La Valla, our imagination soars towards that small house where 200 years ago Marcellin Champagnat began to give shape to the Marist dream. In Greece, an icon has been painted in memory of this event; in it we can see Fr Champagnat seated at the table along with the two Marist candidates. The similarity of this icon with that of the Trinity by Rublev is striking, perhaps suggesting that every community is called to be a living image of the Trinity, where *diversity* is not an obstacle for *communion* but rather a *condition* for it.



Inspired by the Trinity, we want to make visible the miracle of universal brotherhood. We want to proclaim in a prophetic way, with our lives, that it is not only possible for a community to be made up of people from different cultures, backgrounds and ages, religious and lay, men and women, but rather it is desirable and enriching. In this sense, the small fraternities that we are going to set up will be a privileged space for sharing life and faith, a gift for each one of us, and a living and life-giving cell of this community of life that our Chapter assembly is. Over these weeks, paraphrasing Gandhi, we will try *to be the change we want to see in the world*.

In my Letter of Convocation of this Chapter, I said that one of the symbols that has persisted among us coming out of the last General Chapter of 2009, and with a connection to our house at La Valla, is the *table*. Round tables, to be more precise, around which the whole General Chapter took place. Even though it was not explicitly intended, these tables became a powerful visual image of the value of *fraternal dialogue*.

In these moments at the start of the XXII General Chapter, we are being invited again to take our place around the table and to take up the conversation of topics that are of great concern to all of us.

In 2009 the capitulants had the audacity to employ a methodology and process that they had no experience of, and by the end of the Chapter I believe that the majority recognised that this new way of proceeding corresponded better with our experience and life together as brothers. Many provincial chapters, assemblies, and meetings have followed the same process, and today, 8 years later, it is hard to imagine things happening in any other way.

This, then, is what we can see in two of the documents that we have received in recent weeks: the *Methodology for the XXII General Chapter*, and the application of this methodology to the new Rules of Procedure of the Chapter, now called *Chapter Process*. The commission that prepared these documents did really well in bringing these texts together, since it has to be stressed strongly that what is at stake is a **much deeper commitment** at the level of values than any simple change in methodology.

Earlier I said that we want to learn how to adopt a **contemplative way** of looking at things, from Mary who *treasured all these things in the depths of her heart* (Lk 2, 51). We can speak, then, of setting our minds and hearts in motion towards a new consciousness: a **new way of seeing and being** that will assist our discernment, given that **contemplation**:

- ✓ invites silence which supports slowing down, reflection, and deeper conversation
- ✓ centres all that we are, and all we desire to be on the movement of God's spirit
- ✓ supports a "flexible shaping" and integration of prayer, reflection, dialogue
- ✓ enables any conversation to become a spiritual experience rather than being about mere "business" or problem-solving
- ✓ assists a group in moving from "I" to "We"
- ✓ allows for creative possibilities, emerging options, and peaceful resolution

Contemplative dialogue is one way of expressing this new consciousness. It is dialogue as an authentic artform, something that will demand learning, effort, time, constancy, and patience. *We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an **openness of heart** which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders* (EG 171).

Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God (EG 272). This is why the Pope is such a promoter of the culture of encountering, in a context that favours a *throwaway* culture, a culture of standoff and fragmentation. Dialogue, authentic dialogue, is fundamental in promoting this alternative culture and also for the future of humanity, as Zygmunt Bauman reminds us:

*Pope Francis does not only preach the need for dialogue but puts into practice himself. Authentic dialogue, between people with explicitly opposing points of view, communicating in order to understand one another... For the future of humanity, in a world that is irreversibly multicultural and multi-centric, engaging in dialogue is a **matter of life or death**.*

We take up the invitation of Pope Francis to the participants at the Extraordinary Synod on the Family (2014) to **speak clearly and listen with humility**... because, he said, *we can frustrate the plan of God if we do not allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit*.

One Word: *Magnificat!*

From the very start of this Chapter, on this feast of the Birthday of Mary, we want to join her in saying *Magnificat!* for the blessings showered on our Institute throughout these 200 years.

Our hearts are full of thanks for the tenderness and the presence of Her who *has done everything for us*.

Our thanks as well to those, across the five continents, who have taken part in the preparation process of the Chapter, entering into the process of *transformative conversations* and offering their contribution for the future of the Institute.

Thanks to the Preparatory Commission who, with the assistance of Mr Mathieu Daum, have completed an enormous task, of high quality and great sensitivity.

Thanks to each of the commissions who have been at work to facilitate our discernment over the coming weeks: the commission on the Constitutions; the commission on Rules of Procedure of the Chapter; the commission on child protection; secretariat of laity...

Thanks to the Province of Norandina for their welcome with open arms and for their logistical support from the very first moment.

Thanks to the various groups who have been working discreetly to ensure a smooth start to a gathering of this size, and who will continue the process throughout the Chapter in their different areas of responsibility: technology; ambience; liturgy and animation; communications; translations and secretarial support; general services...

Thanks to the members of the committee for verification of powers and the provisional committee of the Chapter, responsible for the first steps of this Chapter.

Finally, thanks to each one of you, participants of this General Chapter. We are being called to form an international **community**, as a parable of brotherhood. We have the **common task** of making La Valla relevant for today's world. We want to do all this with a **contemplative attitude**, *at the edge of waiting*. The openness and commitment of each one of us will allow the Holy Spirit to take us by the hand, leading us to **a new beginning**, as in our day we embark on the third Marist century.

Magnificat...