
A YEAR OUT FROM THE GENERAL CHAPTER – WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH THE INSTITUTE

Message of Br. Ernesto Sánchez, Superior General



Rome, 12 December 2018

I would like to send my warm greetings to all Marists of Champagnat as we journey together as a global family.

Even though there have been many messages destined for various groups, today I have the pleasure of addressing all Champagnat Marists one year out from the General Chapter.

I remember well the words I spoke at the closing of the Chapter that “the new beginning has already begun”. There are many signs of this. I would like to share five of them with you, based on the Chapter calls.

1. Beacons of hope, Br Henri Vergès

Over these days, we are giving thanks for the life and witness of our brother Henri Vergès who gave his life to its tragic end in Algeria, along with 18 other Religious and a Bishop. This witness of faith even to death has been recognised by the Church and they have been beatified or proclaimed Blessed.

Br Henri was just 64 years old when he died as a martyr, having spent 25 years in Algeria working with young people.

What a joy and a grace for our Marist family to be able to count among us such great witnesses of faith and dedication across the five continents. Their gift of themselves to the point of martyrdom was underpinned by their generous and faithful commitment over a lifetime, living out their consecration and dedicating themselves to mission.



2. Building bridges from the viewpoint of the General Council, over the year since the Chapter

As I look back over the past year and a bit since the General Chapter in Rionegro, Colombia, I give thanks for so much happening in the Institute by way of responding to the Chapter calls and how this is generating life and hope.

At the same time, I ask myself how we might respond better, personally and as an Institute, to these calls in the years to come.

Looking back, I am very grateful for the way the General Council has begun its life together, looking for ways to strengthen our life as a community and as a workteam, together with the animation and management groups within the General Administration, all of us at the service of the Institute as a whole.

We have set out to be present in various parts of the world, through contact visits, and I hope that by June 2019 we will have made at least a contact visit to all Provinces and Districts.

The new Constitutions has been another long but joyful task that has taken up our time. We are now in the phase of final review and gaining approval. The draft Rule of Life has also been completed as well and we hope to formally approve it in February. We want to make use of these texts to shed light on and inspire our way of life, especially that of the Brothers, as we seek to respond better to what God is asking of us.



3. Responding to what is emerging in our world, the new strategic plan

We have tried to internalise the calls of the Chapter and have come up with a plan intended as a guide and direction-setting for the coming years. This plan was developed in dialogue and consultation with the Provinces and Districts.

We adopted an image for inspiration, that of the steps taken by Marcellin and the first Brothers from La Valla in 1817 to the construction of the house at the Hermitage that was inaugurated in 1825. This period of 8 years corresponds to our 8 years as a General Council. In 2025 we will celebrate the bicentenary of the house at the Hermitage.

In the light of the main call of the Chapter: JOURNEYING TOGETHER AS A GLOBAL FAMILY, we have initiated three broad programs:

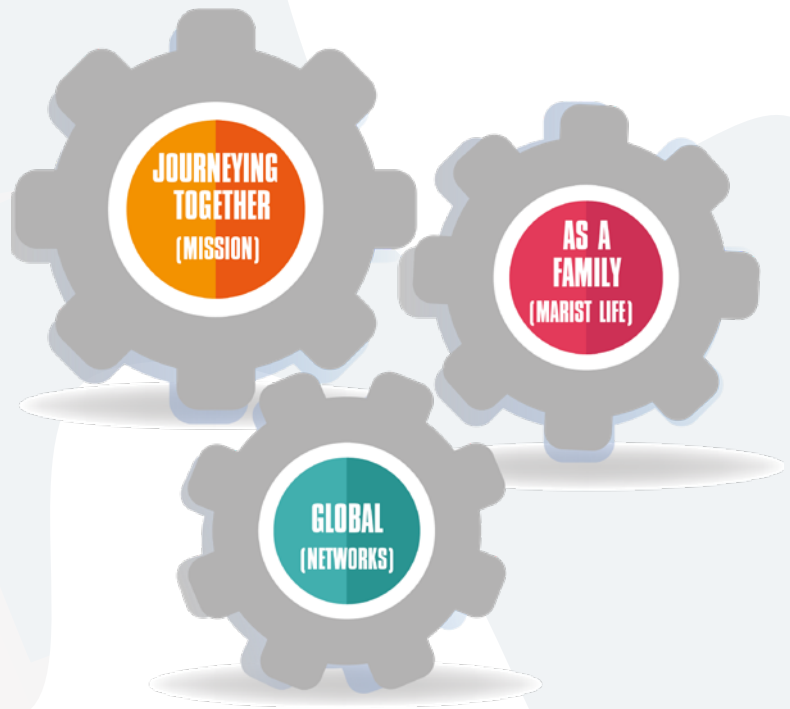
We want to be more determined about **journeying** with marginalised young people and continuing to give a bold response to the emerging needs of our world. This is our mission program: journeying.

We want to strengthen our sense of being a **family**, of belonging, as brothers and laypeople, all of us Champagnat Marists, through projects that are formative and that generate new life. Thus, our program for Marist life is called, “As a family”.

We want to increase our practice of networking and this on a **global** scale, through a program designed to strengthen various types of networks, aimed at greater synergy and connectedness, as a congregation and with other institutions.

Coming back to the image of the construction of the Hermitage, we can imagine and remember the different moments they lived through, the evolution and transformation that took place in those early years. We can imagine Champagnat and the first Brothers in their tiny house, and so their need for something bigger, until they were finally able to have what we now know as the house of the Hermitage.

May we have the same courage, daring and strength of Champagnat in those initial years, a combination of brotherhood, commitment, first steps in ministry, the construction of a house, the building of a family. May this same spirit be ours today.



4. Faces of mercy, MDA, Lavalla200> and other ventures

Speaking of our global family, I would like to mention one aspect that keeps coming up strongly in our Institute. This is in relation to our global availability for international mission.

I want to link this with being faces of mercy and the need to listen to God and to be filled with God's Spirit. The Chapter invited us to a new and deeper spirituality, one that integrates our lives and is down-to-earth. Only when we are filled with GOD'S mercy will we be able to be faces and hands of mercy for others.

- Since its origin some 12 years ago, brothers and laypeople have committed part of their lives to a new Mission begun by the Institute in various countries of Asia. Originally, it was called “Mission Ad Gentes”, nowadays the Marist District of Asia. Last August, all of us on the General Council made a contact visit to these countries: Bangladesh, India (West Bengal), Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. We were full of admiration for the journey they have undertaken, sometimes facing difficulties and challenges, beginning with learning a new language and inculturation. Some have dedicated 3, 6, 9, 12 years of their lives in these places. We were also happy to see that their mission is directed at those most in need and that new vocations are appearing in some of these countries.

- Also, 4 years ago we began an initiative in the Institute to form “international communities for a new beginning” which have been given the name, “Lavalla200>”, in recognition of the Bicentenary. A good number of brothers and laypeople have attended the formation program for this initiative and are currently members of 7 communities spread across the five continents: Syracuse (Sicily, Italy), Moinesti (Romania), East Harlem (New York, USA), Tabatinga (Brazil), Atlantis (Cape Town, South Africa), Mount Druitt (Australia), and the latest to start soon in Cuba. They are communities drawing their resourcing and support from the Marist Regions. We greatly appreciate the commitment of this group of brothers and laypeople who are sharing life and mission as Marists in the service of the most needy. We have learnt a lot along the way. Real life has revealed both positive aspects and challenges as they feel their way forward and we need to evaluate and improve the initiative. Last June, at the Hermitage, I was witness to a group of 16 brothers and laypeople who generously made themselves available to join these communities. They are a gift to the Institute.



- Besides these projects I should mention our presence in South Sudan over the past 7 years where today we have two brothers in an intercongregational project.
- Also the “Fratelli Project” which we started in Lebanon 3 years ago along with the De la Salle Brothers. There, brothers and laypeople from both congregations are involved day after day in a project serving refugees fleeing wars in the Middle East.
- There are other places as well where Marists are involved in international collaboration for mission in a variety of ways, as short-term volunteers, engaged in formation houses, or other forms of service.
- Among these places, there is the international community of Brothers and Lay people at N.D. of Hermitage, in France, formed in 2010 when the Marist Places were renovated. They share life and mission at the service of pilgrims who want to get in touch with our origins and revitalize their Marist spirituality.

I believe that such experiences and projects are a visible expression of what we Marists want to see more of, as we strive to be a GLOBAL FAMILY.

Maybe you, brother or lay, hearing these words, feel an attraction within, a call to be involved in international mission in one of these projects for 2, 3 or more years... Have you thought about it?

I invite you to listen to such a call and discern what this inner voice is saying. We need more Marists in such international projects. God could be touching your heart and inviting you to be His hands of mercy. If this is how you feel, do not hesitate to speak to your Provincial or District Leader to express your feelings and follow through on how you may want to respond.

At times we may think that we have to be super-heroes to launch out into such projects. Rather, I think that what is needed is to be someone *with a passion for Jesus and passion for poor young people, someone who*

wants to live with integrity on a daily basis, someone who is open to learning and walking alongside others. It involves accepting that success in intercultural and international living comes from being really open and forgetting oneself ... and that the experience is one of constant growth.

When I call to mind our Blessed Brother Henri Vergès, so many other martyrs and so many missionaries throughout the history of our Institute, I ask myself what was the main source of their strength as it was for Champagnat. I believe that it was *their passion for Jesus and their passion for poor young people*, their commitment, their forgetfulness of self.

The same can equally be said of so many brothers and laypeople who give devoted service every day to children and young people in Marist schools around the world in the really important work of formal education, in all kinds of social works and non-formal education, and in so many other activities. Champagnat Marists bringing the Institute to life wherever they are.

5. Journeying with young people, the Synod



I would also like to share some thoughts on my experience during the whole month of October at the Synod on “*Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*”. It was a beautiful experience of Church-as-communion, with the Pope, young people, Bishops, Religious and Laypeople. I am happy to say that as a Church we want to renew our commitment to be WITH youth, to stand alongside them, to make our way together.

The Synod confirmed a number of our Chapter intuitions, and certainly affirmed our charism and mission among young people. The Synod Document will be available soon and will be very enlightening for us. I invite you to develop processes for reflecting on key points from the Synod and their application.

At one point the Document states that “the participation of young people has contributed to ‘revitalising’ the synod process, an ‘essential dimension of the Church’”(N. 121). That is, being open to journeying WITH young people,

with all the various groups with whom we constitute the Church, and above all letting young people take the lead.

The Synod discussed faith and vocational discernment. I think it created a great opportunity to examine how well we are accompanying each young person in his or her own search for meaning in life and his or her personal vocation, and especially how we are accompanying and welcoming those who feel an inner call to live out the Marist charism as a brother or layperson. And always welcoming such movements of the Spirit as a gift.

Conclusion

We have just begun the season of Advent and the first image that comes to mind is that of Mary pregnant, waiting, full of hope. She continues to be our inspiration.

Champagnat frequently said, “Mary, this is your work”. From the moment I was elected, I have felt very much at peace in the knowledge and sense that our Institute is the work of God, the work of Mary.

There is no need to be afraid to embrace the new, as Mary did. No need to fear leaving behind whatever may be stopping us from moving forward, tying our hands, or slowing us down. Her heart was full of the fire of God and for this reason she was capable of saying “Yes” to the call of the Lord and embracing the new.



May this time of Advent be a time of renewing our yes to Jesus Christ, with all its risks, as She did.

As the General Council, we would like to wish you all the best for Christmas and the New Year.

May we together find the model for building our Global Marist Family in Jesus, Mary and Joseph. May our God who became human like us be our “home, light and bridge” in 2019. And may we find him in poor young people, and in the peripheries of our world.

For now, with a thankful heart, I wish each of you a Happy Christmas and a Happy 2019!

Many thanks,

Ernesto