

**letter of convocation**

# **Life-giving Leadership**

Fostering vitality in Marist Life and ministry today



Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS  
7 October 2004  
Our Lady of the Rosary

Seán D. Sammon SG

***Life-giving Leadership***

*Fostering vitality in Marist life and ministry today*

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## The Road not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
and sorry I could not travel both  
and be one traveler, long I stood  
and looked down one as far as I could  
to where it bent in the undergrowth;  
then took the other, as just as fair,  
and having perhaps the better claim,  
because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
though as for that the passing there  
had worn them really about the same,  
and both that morning equally lay  
in leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-  
I took the one less traveled by,  
and that has made all the difference.

*Robert Frost*





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## LETTER OF CONVOCATION GENERAL CONFERENCE 2005

7<sup>th</sup> October 2004  
Feast of the Holy Rosary

Dear Brothers Provincial, District Superiors, Brothers, and all who cherish and hold dear the charism of Marcellin Champagnat,

Our habit of meeting together as brothers to discuss our life and ministry and the future direction of our Institute is one that goes back to the days of our founder. His biographers tell us that as early as the time of the vocation crisis of 1822 Marcellin had in place a practice of calling together senior brothers in the community to seek their counsel.

The founder knew instinctively that this type of collaboration would foster a spirit of charity, encourage reflection and sharing, and lead to greater unity. And to see these elements

so visible in the life of his brothers was one of Father Champagnat's greatest delights.

In the same spirit I write today to invite our Brothers Provincial and District Superiors<sup>1</sup> to our seventh General Conference. This meeting will be held in Colombo, Sri Lanka from September 5<sup>th</sup> through 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

Our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* tell us that the General Conference is a consultative assembly with a two-fold aim. First, it offers us an opportunity to strengthen unity within the Institute. And, second, it gives all involved a chance to study questions of general concern and to propose ways of answering them.

## LETTER OF CONVOCATION

This letter is divided into three parts. The first contains a *short history of past General*

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<sup>1</sup> If the District Statutes so specify his attendance.

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*Conferences.* Though Superiors General called groups of provincials and district superiors to Rome prior to Vatican II, the structure that we have come to know as the General Conference is a post-Conciliar phenomenon.

The letter's second part, *Expectations, Challenges, and Signs of the times*, is best described as its heart. Two questions are

*The General Conference offers us an opportunity to strengthen unity within the Institute, and it gives all involved a chance to study questions of general concern.*

posed and answered: *What might you and I reasonably expect of any General Conference?* and *What challenges face our Institute today?*

A final section on *Marist leadership* brings the letter of

convocation to a conclusion. Some practical details that will help you prepare for the Conference and facts about the country of Sri Lanka appear in the appendix.

Three sets of reflection questions are distributed throughout the text. They will help you explore your reactions to what you will read in this letter. Please take the time to jot down your thoughts and feelings; these notes will come in handy during any later discussion you might have about the contents of the letter. With that said, let's begin with a brief history of past General Conferences.

## PART II

### PRIOR GENERAL CONFERENCES

While consultation has always been a part of the fabric of our Institute, General Conferences have not. In many ways the practice first began when Brother Charles Raphael and his



Council decided to call to Rome the leadership of the Institute. They did so twice: first in 1961, and then again in 1965.

With the close of Vatican Council II, meetings of provincials and superiors of districts with the members of the General Administration took on a more structured format. What we know today as the General Conference is a good example of this development. Let's take a look at how that meeting got started and developed into the form that we have come to know so well.

a. In 1971 Brother Basilio and his Council called the first General Conference *per se*. It lasted for 19 days and opened with an address entitled: *The Meditation of a Superior General shared with his Provincials*. It focused on five different ways of understanding Marist renewal.

An intensive period followed. Those assembled participated in a three-day workshop on group dynamics and then studied the five themes present-

ed by Brother Basilio in the opening address. During this gathering the phrase *mission ad gentes* made its debut, and new approaches to formation as well as regional and language groups were encouraged.

As they prepared to head home, provincials were advised to take advantage of the time of experimentation that had been given to consecrated life, and to report back on the outcome of their efforts.

b. Those participating in the second General Conference in 1974 focused their efforts on getting ready for the next General Chapter. As part of ongoing preparations for that meeting, provincials were asked to gather data about the many experiments in community life and ministry underway in their administrative units.

The method see/judge/act was used at an Institute meeting for the first time during this Conference. The gathering ended with two sets of recommendations: one addressed to the

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Preparatory Commission of the 1976 General Chapter, and a second to the Superior General and his Council on the theme of the renewal of Marist life.

c. Our October 1979 Conference ran for a period of two weeks. Those participating concentrated their efforts on assessing the progress of renewal in the Provinces. Looking ahead to the Chapter in 1985 and its work of finalizing a new text of our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes*, the General Council in office at that time wanted to be sure that the practical experience of the brothers during the past fifteen years of renewal would be included in the discussions that were to take place.

Looking back on the work of this Conference, any observer would notice a growing awareness among Conference members of our need to deepen the identity of the Marist Brother today.

Perhaps that helps explain the intense spirit of prayer that

marked this particular General Conference. An hour was set aside each day in the work schedule for personal prayer, and Brother Basilio devoted his closing message exclusively to this topic. In addition, one morning of the Conference was devoted to the founder and another to the theme of Mary.

d. The fourth General Conference in 1982 extended over a period of fourteen days. Participants came together eager to evaluate the period of experimentation that had been underway since the close of the Council and to find ways to revitalize the apostolic spirit that has always marked our lives as brothers. Once again, this meeting was carried out in a spirit of prayer with the first working hour of each day given over to personal, prayerful reflection.

e. The timing of our fifth General Conference coincided with the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the founder and 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. It was





also the first to be held outside of Rome.

Those participating came together in Veranópolis, Brazil in late September 1989. The Conference's theme was "The Marist Brother and His Mission

*We have been an international Institute for over a century, but we have not always acted like one...*

for the Future;" a small group of young brothers were invited and remained in attendance throughout the entire gathering.

f. The sixth General Conference returned to Rome in 1997 and was held in the wake of the assassinations of Brothers Fabien Bisengimana, Gaspard Gatali, Christopher Mannion, Pierre-Canisius Nyilinkindi, Étienne Rwesa, Joseph Rushiga-

jiki, and Henri Vergès in 1994 and the more recent killing of Brothers Miguel Angel Isla, Fernando de la Fuente, Servando Mayor, and Julio Rodríguez in 1996.

The members of this Conference were determined to make some decisive moves aimed at addressing the task of refounding our Institute. Brother Benito's opening address was a passionate appeal to do just that and became the foundation for his first circular entitled: "Walk peacefully, yet with a sense of urgency!"

In summary, four key points emerge from our review of General Conferences since the time of Vatican II:

1. Whether stated explicitly or not, each Conference had at its heart a theme which had a significant subsequent effect on our Institute.

2. Involving the membership of any Conference in the plan-

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ning for the meeting was essential for its success.

3. Five steps were evident in the process of planning and implementing previous Conferences: study, consultation, planning, dissemination of information, evaluation.

4. By giving pride of place to personal and community prayer, and securing the time and the means for informal and fraternal interaction and exchange, those organizing the Conference ensured that its work was accomplished and that its members had a sense that they had been part of a defining moment in the life of the Institute's leadership.

Keeping these four points in mind, let's turn our attention to some expectations about our upcoming Conference and several challenges facing our Institute.

## PART II

### EXPECTATIONS

A year from today, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005, our seventh General Conference will be part of our Institute history. Any future account of it, however, will be shaped by what you and I do today. Please join together with me and the members of our Preparatory Commission<sup>2</sup> to organize a meeting that will be remembered as a defining moment during these important years of renewal in our Institute.

Now, obviously, a General Conference is not a General Chapter. And there are tasks that have been part of past Conferences that will, I am sure, be part of the one coming up: an address on the state of the Institute today, reports from various Council Commissions, and so forth. But nothing stops us from including in our agenda topics more ambi-

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<sup>2</sup> Brothers Luis García Sobrado, Pedro Herreros, Mervyn Perera, Peter Rodney, Jean Ronzon.



tious than a midcourse evaluation and correction.

Contemporary Marist life demands that we do so. Our Institute today faces a number of challenges that do not lend themselves to clear and simple solutions. For example, differences of opinion continue to exist among us in areas such as formation, the nature and focus of our ministry, and regionalization and restructuring, to name but a few.

We should also move ahead with courage because we have been blessed with some unique signs of hope in recent years. For example, since 1997 the number of brothers making first vows worldwide each year has been steadily growing at a faster pace than the number seeking dispensation.

Next, beginning with the Chapter of 1985, a new phase of our Marist lay-partners' movement got underway. Since that time, so many of those involved have grown in their conviction that the charism that came into our Church through Marcellin Champagnat is also their own.

Finally, I received more than 300 responses to my letter written to older brothers. Among those who replied all but two said that, given the chance, they would live their Marist life over again.

## CHALLENGES

These signs of life and so many other hopeful developments throughout our Institute in recent years should encourage us all and give us the strength that we need to face the challenges that are all too evident today.

During past periods of renewal in religious life, time and again, three characteristics were found to exist in those institutes that, with God's grace, were transformed. First and foremost, the members of these groups underwent quite a significant personal conversion. Jesus truly became the center and passion of their lives.

Second, they not only managed to re-capture the charism

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of their founder, but also to free themselves from its historical trappings. And so the group's charism took on a new relevance in the succeeding age.

Third, the members of these groups were fearless in their reading of the signs of their times.

While the first of these elements—being centered in Jesus

*We profess the importance of “mission ad gentes,” and yet this fundamental aspect of our lives has grown steadily weaker in recent years.*

and his *Good News*—is foundational to any process of renewal, the remaining two are equally important. However, during a time like the present, when the very image or paradigm of religious life is shifting, we tend to emphasize our need to read the

signs of the times rather than reclaim the founding charism. The latter is emphasized more appropriately during a time of reform. In contrast, today we are dealing with changes that in many ways can be called revolutionary.

I believe the five calls that emerged from our last Chapter reflect clearly the three elements just mentioned. I believe further that a failure to attend to the five signs of the times discussed below will hinder us in our work of renewal, and ultimately could cause us to betray the spirit of our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter.

## SIGNS OF OUR TIMES

First of all, *we have been an international Institute for over a century, but we have not always acted like one.* Diversity is a natural characteristic of any Institute as widespread as we are. That fact has consequences for our self-understanding and sense of identity, our appreciation and practice of our spiritu-



## Reflection questions

**Directions:** *Please find a quiet spot and take some time to reflect upon what you have read so far. Jot down any notes that you believe might come in handy during a future discussion. Now, turn your attention to the questions below:*

When you look to the outcome of next year's General Conference:

- a. What is your greatest hope? Please explain.
- b. What is your greatest fear? Please explain.

ality, the structure of our community life, our ministry and efforts on behalf of poor children and young people, and our approach to programs of initial and ongoing formation.

With a presence today in 76 countries we encompass a membership made up of many cultures and languages, experiences of faith, systems of law, and understandings of our world. Indeed, oftentimes differences are evident within the same country and within the same culture. Diversity, though, should not be equated with a

lack of unity. Keep in mind, too, that the latter is rarely achieved through uniformity.

Though often unspoken, throughout our world the erroneous belief also persists that some cultures are superior to others. Unfortunately, sometimes this attitude can infect the life of our Institute as well. Then again, prejudice is common in all cultures.

However, it gives rise to misunderstandings and flawed conclusions about the intentions of others. To carry on holding such a view contradicts our spirit of

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fraternity and denies us all the opportunity to appreciate the unique character of each culture and the contribution that it makes to the whole in terms of our Institute.

So we must ask ourselves: Are we willing to risk genuine diversity today believing that unity can be maintained? Can you and I come to appreciate and respect more fully the multicultural nature of our Institute and, more importantly, are we willing to listen to one another free of prejudice? And are we open to doing so when discussions touch upon topics such as ministry, spirituality, lay partnership, formation, the evangelical use of our goods, and life together in community?

An example. The topics of identity and spirituality seized the imagination and captured the hearts of those who participated in our 20<sup>th</sup> General Chap-

ter. They saw also the need we have to give greater definition to both. We will fail in that task, however, unless we are willing to approach these topics from a perspective that not only admits of differences but also respects them.

After all, the word identity can take on different meanings depending upon the culture in which it is used. So, too, our experience of God differs from person to person, across age groups, and as a result of different traditions and customs.

In 1978, during a brief address at the Weston School of Theology, Jesuit Karl Rahner suggested that our Church faces a similar challenge today: moving from a world dominated by western thinking to one that is truly catholic in outlook.<sup>3</sup>

Rahner compared the challenge we face today to the one that confronted our early Chris-

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<sup>3</sup> For further information see Karl Rahner, "Toward a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40(4), December 1979, and "Planning the Church of the Future," *Theology Digest* 30(1), Spring 1982.



tian ancestors when the Church moved from the parochial world of Jewish Christianity to that of the then Roman Empire. This shift was difficult for many yet life-giving for all. May our own journey be as blessed.

Second, *we profess the importance of “mission ad gentes,” and yet this fundamental aspect of our lives has grown steadily weaker in recent years.* Once again, the consequence of this situation is obvious: a waning of the missionary spirit that has always marked our Institute.

Marcellin’s biographers tell us that he longed to be a missionary and that, were it not for reasons of health and obedience, he would have become one. His health was fragile and he practiced obedience in response to Father Colin’s request that he continue to lead and care for the Institute that he had founded. Throughout the years since our foundation, though, we have had many brothers set out from their country of origin to awaken God’s Word in new lands.

At times we have also been missionaries in spite of our selves. The Combes Laws, enacted in France at the dawn of the last century, sent almost 900 brothers out from that country to all corners of our world. An almost equal number stayed home and rebuilt the Institute into an extraordinary resource for evangelization within the local Church.

With that said, however, we must admit that our spirit of *mission ad gentes* needs strengthening today. While in recent years new foundations have been established in Algiers, Chad, Cuba, East Timor, Equatorial Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Liberia, and Romania, a number of these efforts have suffered setbacks. Unprepared for what faced them, some brothers involved have left the Institute; a few became disenchanted. While each of these missions continues at the moment, their future vitality and viability will depend upon the efforts of all of us.

In addition, increasingly, *mis-*

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*mission ad gentes* is taking on an added face within our Institute: there are provinces that will die slowly without assistance. The process of restructuring has been put into place to assist them. But additional aid may be required, including an infusion

*There can be no doubt that we are called to live simply. Likewise, we are called in our day to give preference to persons who are poor.*

of new personnel. Our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* are clear: provinces with resources have an obligation to assist those in difficulty.

Even though an upcoming circular on *mission, the works of*

*the Little Brothers of Mary, and the Jean Baptiste Montagnes of today* will address some aspects of the *mission ad gentes*, I would suggest that this issue is one that warrants further study at next year's Conference.

Third, *though we have discussed and written about the topics almost since the close of Vatican II, simplicity of life and our call to serve persons who are poor continue to need attention.*

In 1993, Chapter members wrote the following in their message to our Institute: *The Chapter asks the Institute to give priority to its commitment to the most needy.*<sup>4</sup> By so doing, they were in fact reiterating an element of the gospel message as well as the words spoken by many popes and contained in innumerable documents of the Institute.

For the last 40 years we have struggled to have a greater ap-

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<sup>4</sup> *Message, 27: Acts of the 19<sup>th</sup> General Chapter. Institute of the Marist Brothers of the Schools, Rome, October 1993.*





preciation of what simplicity of life and service to persons who are poor means in the many and diverse cultures that make up our Institute.

In the process of doing so, however, emotions have often run high. With what result? Some have been left with the feeling that their work has been discounted, while others expressed frustration at their Province or District's seeming reluctance to take decisive—and what they would view as prophetic—action in the areas of ministry and community.

There can be no doubt that we are called to live simply. Likewise, there is little need to amass further evidence that, as religious and as Marcellin's brothers and those who share his charisma, we are called in our day to give preference to persons who are poor. However, we shall not be able to fully ensure that this important dimension of our lives is visible today unless we can engage over time in a full, fraternal and frank discussion about the topic.

As an Institute, and as provinces and districts, we bear a responsibility for stewarding our resources for the sake of mission. This was the spirit that guided the members of our last Chapter as they established the *20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter Fund*. It was this spirit also that gave birth to the *Evangelical Use of Goods* document that continues to be of help to the brothers in many provinces and districts.

In summary, there have been a variety of approaches within our Institute to the issues of simple living and service to persons who are poor. And they have often been shaped by the circumstances of each administrative unit, and, indeed, at times by the circumstances of individual lives. The face of persons who are poor differs from region to region, country to country, and within each country. With that said, we cannot avoid addressing this topic further and, more importantly, continuing to take decisive and prophetic action in dealing with it.

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Fourth, *while many good and helpful initiatives are underway in the area of initial formation, in parts of our Institute differences of opinion and competing ideologies also exist about how to best carry out this important work.*

As I mentioned earlier, for several years now the number of brothers making their first vows each year has been steadily outpacing the number requesting a dispensation. That is good news indeed.

This trend, however, is not present in all parts of our Institute. There are provinces that have not had the experience of welcoming a postulant or candidate for a number of years now. The 12-month period currently set aside to awaken vocations is but one effort in place to change that situation.

At the same time there are provinces where brothers make first vows but leave shortly thereafter. Surely if a young man or an older candidate is approved for first profession, there must be some sense that

he has the potential to be a fine brother. We must identify clearly the reasons for young brothers leaving and take what steps we can to correct the situation.

I also realize that within the Institute today there are various approaches to initial formation. For example, differences of opinion exist about issues such as the most appropriate theological formation for candidates and young brothers, the ongoing influence of the human sciences in the process of formation, and the best geographic location for a house of formation. While such a situation is to be expected, we must keep in mind our overall goals for formation when making any decisions.

To begin with, our primary identity as brothers is a religious identity. As a consequence, the theological preparation we receive in formation should be challenging, contemporary and complete. A good understanding of areas such as Christology, Sacraments, Mariology, Morality, Scripture, Dogmatic Theology, Youth Ministry, Catechetics,



and so forth, cannot be achieved in a series of workshops. Instead we need a comprehensive program that prepares our young brothers to be heralds of God's Word for today.

The role of the human sciences in the process of formation is another topic worth discussing. The disciplines of psychology, sociology, and anthropology have been of assistance to men and women religious throughout their process of renewal.

Formation is fundamentally a spiritual journey. Candidates and postulants, and at a later stage novices and temporary professed brothers, are engaged in a process of discernment. They need to come to understand what God's will is for them and for their life.

It is hard to imagine, however, a balanced process of formation taking place without attention to the psychological dimension of a person. Not only young brothers but all of us are better off with a clear sense of

personal identity, an adequate understanding about the motivations that brought us to religious life and those that cause us to stay, an appreciation of our human sexuality, and some knowledge about how past developmental history can effect what unfolds in life today.

In the past, our lack of understanding about the contribution that the human sciences could make to our formation programs and, indeed, to our way of life has caused untold suffering in the lives of some people.

The location of houses of formation is another topic that has revealed strong differences, often enough within the same Province or District. As a young brother in formation I lived in a variety of communities that reflect some of what is unfolding presently.

My postulancy and novitiate programs were located on a farm in Tyngsboro, Massachusetts. We were kept busy with our formation studies and quite a bit of farm work. To this day I am sure

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that I would have no problem milking a cow, or cleaning out the chicken coop or pigpen.

And though only 40 kilometers north of the city of Boston, we might as well have been on the moon for all the contact we had with anyone but fellow postulants and novices. Rural, isolated, and free of other distractions would be an apt description of the place.

By way of contrast, I spent three of my years of temporary profession as a member of an insertion community located in East Harlem, New York. The area at the time was noted for its drug traffic and the presence of organized crime. Many of the buildings located on our street had been abandoned, stripped of anything of value, and subsequently burned out.

Most of us who made up the community taught in Province schools located in the New York area and also worked with a community group rehabilitating tenement buildings in the neighborhood. One lasting memory of those three years is

that for the better part of two winters we had no heat or hot water, a plight we shared with our neighbors.

So, I do not intend to argue for one approach or another but rather to insist that the time has come for a full evaluation of our

*For several years now the number of brothers making their first vows each year has been steadily outpacing the number requesting a dispensation.*

new program of formation with an eye to building upon its positive aspects, and making adjustments where necessary.

Fifth, *as brothers and lay Marist partners we are moving into a new moment in the history of our Institute and its mission. Many ask, "Where are the*



*new structures and the necessary new vocabulary to help us deal with these developments?"*

A small group of lay men and women served as observers and consultants during the last two General Chapters and the General Conference of 1997. Their presence enriched all three meetings and served as a reminder to those involved about the wider nature of our Institute and its mission.

At the conclusion of these gatherings, evaluations were carried out with the brothers in attendance. The vast majority of them indicated that the presence of lay partners was a positive development. To the best of my knowledge, no formal written evaluation was distributed to the laity during any of the three meetings.

Lay participation in those three gatherings was a good beginning but something more is needed today. First of all, the groups of laymen and women present were quite small and Provincials and their Councils from the various regions of the

Institute chose all participants. Due to the nature of the meeting and the directives of our Marist *Constitutions and Statutes* the role of these lay groups was often limited.

During the Chapter of 2001, some among the laity in attendance mentioned informally that while their presence at the meeting might be judged as a positive development, clearly, new structures were needed if we as an Institute were serious about lay partnership. Their challenge can be summarized in these words: if you want to move ahead, help us to organize in a way that fosters more effective representation and allows for more input from the local level. Create structures that foster dialogue at that level and will result in proposals being sent to international meetings such as the Conference or General Chapter.

This recommendation appears sound to me and, therefore, after consulting with the General Council I decided not to invite a small group of laymen and women to next year's Con-

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ference in Sri Lanka but rather, in preparation for that meeting, to write and ask you to gather information, ideas, and proposals from our lay partners in your local area, using means that are the same or similar to those you will be using with our brothers.

Assemblies that include brothers and lay partners are common in some districts, provinces, and regions. In others, small group meetings and/or questionnaires are used more frequently. Whatever means you decide upon, please come to next year's Conference having consulted previously not only with the brothers of the Province or District but also with our lay partners. In this way I hope to foster wider and more active lay participation in our Institute and in the Conference itself.

Following the same principle, the General Council Commissions for Mission and Laity are planning an International Assembly of Brothers and Laity that will take place in 2007.

These five areas just outlined are offered as the first few

words in a conversation that must take place during the months ahead. They are not necessarily the best words, nor, I am sure, will they be the last words spoken in preparation for the Conference.

*The time has come for a full evaluation of our new program of formation with an eye to building upon its positive aspects, and making adjustments where necessary.*

During the months ahead, as the General Council begins to review its reports of visits to provinces, to assess once again the work that took place during extended General Council meetings throughout the Institute, and to be in contact with you directly so as to understand better concerns commonly held and



challenges identified as most important, I know that the agenda for our meeting will begin to take shape on a firmer basis.

Today, however, I wanted to put before you areas that have concerned me for some time now, areas that I believe are critical to the future of our Institute

and its mission.

We move now toward the last section of this letter. Our General Conference is, as I stated earlier, a meeting of leaders in our Marist Institute. I'll conclude, therefore, with some thoughts about leadership in our Institute today.

## Reflection questions

**Directions:** *Find a quiet spot and spend some time reflecting upon the five signs of the times described just above. Jot down a few notes about your thoughts for later reference. Now, turn your attention to the questions below:*

1. Do you number any of the five items listed under *signs of the times* as a concern for yourself or the brothers or lay partners of your Province or District? If so, what one(s)? Please explain why it is (or they are) a concern.
2. Are there *signs of the times* that you believe are missing from the list above? If so, what are they and what makes you rate them as so important?
3. Among the five *signs of the times* that appear in this letter which two, from your perspective, need attention urgently? What makes you put them at the head of the list?

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## PART III

### MARIST LEADERSHIP TODAY

Harry Truman, President of the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s, once offered this definition of leadership, “A leader is a man who has the ability to get other people to do what they don’t want to do and to like it.” If Truman’s description is accurate, then the most effective leader in our midst today appears to be the Holy Spirit.

I believe that the very same Spirit has had a hand in the election of anyone who is serving as a leader in our Institute right now. So, if you are a Provincial, District Superior, or Superior of a local community, let this be a consolation: God elected you to lead. And you exercised obedience when you said “yes” to God’s initiative. You were asked

to do something for the sake of the kingdom, and in doing so you have shouldered some of the divine burden.<sup>5</sup>

Now with all that said, I would be the first to admit that leadership in our Institute is not an easy task in our day and age. A provincial told me recently that when he listened last year to the expectations that the brothers in his Province have for him, he came to the conclusion that he was called to be both a prophet and a good manager, to be spiritually alive as well as financially astute, compassionate yet also able to make tough decisions, theologically literate, sensitive to issues of justice, to be a man of prayer, and filled with ideas about how to lead his Province and the Institute into this new century. If you ever felt overwhelmed by the demands and responsibilities of leadership today, console

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<sup>5</sup> For further development of this notion see Howard Grey, SJ *Contemporary Religious Leadership*. Review for *Religious*, September/October 1997, 56(5), 454-467.





yourself by admitting that no one has the final answer except God.

Yes, the direction that we offer and the solutions that we arrive at come out of our traditions, our prayer, and our study and consultations. But we know full well that they bear the all-too-human stamp of our limitations and fears. Why should this fact surprise us? As leaders we are called to walk with a God whom we do not see and cannot always find. That is our asceticism.

Jesuit Howard Grey tells a story from his years as a young priest. For me its lesson captures what lies at the heart of genuine leadership.

Grey was asked to give a retreat to an older Sister who was in the last stages of multiple sclerosis. Upon meeting her he found a woman who was witty, insightful, and without an ounce of self-pity. The lesson of the retreat came on its final day.

When the priest went to say goodbye to this older Sister, she left him with these words, "Father, you are a young man and I

am an old and dying woman, so we are both in the right position for some advice. When I was a young nun, I thought that it was important to give God my head, so I studied hard and won my

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Marist partners we are  
moving into a new  
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of our Institute  
and its mission.*

way to the university and to doctoral studies. I saw scholarship as my way to God.

"But then after a few years my community had other needs. I was put into university administration and became the president of a college. Then I thought what God really wanted was my hands, my ability to accomplish great things for the college, to build up this institution.

# Life-giving Leadership

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“Now, here I am. I struggle to remember, and I cannot hold a glass of water. Now I realize as never before that what God has wanted all along was my heart. Give God your head and your hands, but bring your heart along with them.”<sup>6</sup>

And so, I would say that if you or I were to pray for only one grace let us pray for this gift of the heart: the grace to love our brothers. Call it “grace of state,” call it what you will. The true challenge of leadership today is to become, with all its messiness and risk, a more loving man.

For your mission and mine, first and foremost, is a mission of the heart. Yes, we have been called to provide a vision for our brothers and lay partners during this time of upheaval and change. But we are also called to extend mercy and care to them when they have stumbled, to

confront them when they have wandered, and to encourage them when they are feeling overwhelmed and worn out from the journey.

We can do so, though, only if we have come to know and to accept ourselves, with all our gifts, as well as our limitations and sin.

Jesus was able to speak to the disappointed hearts of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus because his heart too had been opened, his faith tested, his hope challenged, and his love broken. Jesus knew firsthand that there could be no Emmaus without the cross.<sup>7</sup>

I must say that I have always been hopeful about the future of our Institute and its mission. Who could ever doubt that the need to proclaim God’s *Good News* to poor children and young people is any less necessary today than it was during the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



days of our founder? Our ministry may wear different faces in various parts of our world today, but at its heart remains the gospel mandate to make Jesus Christ known and loved.

I am also hopeful because of what I see and hear about efforts underway to insure that Father Champagnat would recognize his Institute today

*Give God your head  
and your hands, but  
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along with them.*

should he visit some of its communities. Marcellin loved God surely but he loved his brothers as well. In a letter to the members of one community, for example, Father Champagnat

wrote, “You know with certainty that I love you all, in Jesus Christ; that is why I ardently desire that you love one another, as children of the same Father, who is God, of the same mother, who is the Church; in a word, as children of Mary.”<sup>8</sup>

We should not be surprised to learn that in writing to his brothers Marcellin often raised the issue of charity. And as if to model what he so desired to find among his brothers, the founder filled his letters with vivid expressions of his attachment to all of his brothers. In a circular letter he wrote summoning them to a retreat, we read, “How wonderful it is that in a few days I shall have the supreme pleasure of clasping you in my arms and of affirming with the Psalmist, “Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell in unity.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Letter 168. 5<sup>th</sup> January, 1838: to Brother Denis, director in Saint-Didier-sur-Rochefort, Loire.

<sup>9</sup> Letter 132. 12<sup>th</sup> August, 1837: Circular, concerning the vacations.

# Life-giving Leadership

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But Jean-Baptiste Furet tells us that Marcellin was affectionate not only in word but also in deed. He visited our early

*The true challenge of leadership today is to become, with all its messiness and risk, a more loving man.*

brothers frequently, consoled and encouraged them, and saw to their needs. Yes, the founder's great desire to see charity reign among us caused him to find all sorts of reasons and all sorts of ways to inculcate this virtue.

Let us pledge, then, to come together in Colombo, Sri Lanka, next September carrying in our

hearts the very same spirit of charity. And may our journey to the East be for us a new Epiphany, and our time together there give us even more reason to hope that a new day is dawning for our Institute and its mission, a day wherein the charity that Marcellin so longed for is unquestionably evident, and the fact that the *Good News* of Jesus Christ is being awakened among poor children and young people is never in doubt.

May Mary and Marcellin continue to be our companions today and during the days ahead.

Blessings and affection,



Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS  
Superior General



## Reflection questions

**Directions:** *Find a quiet place where you can reflect upon what you have just read without interruption. Jot down any notes that might come in handy during a future discussion. Now, turn your attention to the questions below:*

1. Can you identify an experience of leadership that led to a change of heart? Please explain.
2. Now, identify an experience of leadership that left you filled with doubt and questions about yourself and your role. Please explain.

# Life-giving Leadership

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## POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND ABOUT THE CONFERENCE AND SRI LANKA

1. Please arrive in Sri Lanka well enough in advance of our meeting so as to adjust to any time change and to be ready to begin our meeting rested. Please also plan on leaving the day after the Conference comes to a close.

2. The climate of Sri Lanka is tropical; please pack accordingly.

## FACTS ABOUT THE COUNTRY OF SRI LANKA

### *Background:*

The Sinhalese arrived in Sri Lanka late in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., probably from northern India.

Buddhism was introduced beginning in about the mid-third century B.C., and a great civilization developed at the cities of Anuradhapura (kingdom from circa 200 B.C. to circa 1000 A.D.) and Polonnaruwa (from about 1070 to 1200).

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a south Indian dynasty seized power in the north and established a Tamil kingdom. Occupied by the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and by the Dutch in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the island was ceded to the British in 1796, became a crown colony in 1802, and was united under British rule by 1815.



As Ceylon, it became independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972.

Tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority erupted in violence in the mid-1980s. Tens of thousands have died in an ethnic war that continues to fester. After two decades of fighting, the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam began a ceasefire in December 2001, with Norway brokering peace negotiations.

*Population:* 19,905,165

*Languages:* Sinhala (official and national language) 74%, Tamil (national language) 18%, other 8%

*Literacy Definition:* age 15 and over can read and write

*Literacy for Total Population:* 92.30%

*Religion:* Buddhist 70%, Hindu 15%, Christian 8%, Muslim 7% (1999)

*Life Expectancy:* 72.89

*Infant Mortality:* 14.78

*Age structure:*

*0-14 years:* 24.8% (male 2,526,143; female 2,414,876)

*15-64 years:* 68.2% (male 6,589,438; female 6,976,487)

*65 years and over:* 7% (male 655,636; female 742,585) (2004 est.)

# Life-giving Leadership

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**Personal notes:**