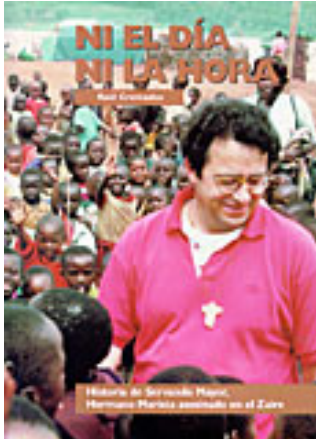


# Living Portraits of Marcellin Champagnat

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Br Jeff Crowe, MSA Conference, July 2013



Youtube: **Maristas Martires de Bugobe** (first minute)

The voice of Br **Servando Mayor** from a refugee camp of Rwandans in Zaire/Congo in October 1996. He was making an appeal over a satellite telephone to a radio journalist in Spain. New military activity in the area had caused panic among the 100,000 plus refugees who had consequently fled into the forests.

The voice of a Brother, Servando, murdered the day after this interview. It was an extreme sacrifice in extreme circumstances. He was mid-forties, formerly deputy provincial and school principal. A book about this tragedy was given the title, "Amaron hasta el final" - They loved until the end. For Servando and his three Brothers who suffered the same fate, the choice to stay and be ready to serve the refugees was a matter of love not of ideology or political bias. These desperate people were their brothers and sisters, ones who had asked, "Will you also abandon us?"

None of us will, please God, have to be in such a situation or face such a choice. Servando and his three companions did not choose to die, any more than Br Henri Vergès, killed by Islamic radicals in the Casbah of Algiers. They had volunteered for a mission to be the "instruments of God's love" in the way of St Marcellin in places of high risk. They have been described as "martyrs of love".

I start this reflection with this recollection because they were our contemporaries, because I was there as a background figure in their story, and because "extremes" help us to focus on essentials. Champagnat-figures make sacrifices, putting the well-being of others before their own.

Also these events occurred in the years immediately preceding the writing and publication of the text, "In the Footsteps" on our Marist vision of education. Lives and deaths such as I have mentioned influenced the vision even if the text does not contain the passion. These men, like Champagnat, were deeply moved by the circumstances of others, by the desire to be more than spectators of the dramas of our time, and by the story and power of Jesus as God-among-us.

So we come to the article in the text that speaks of school and ministry leaders.

### All called to be leaders

#163. In a special way, **our school administrators** are challenged to be people of vision: to articulate and live by our core Marist values and lead others in living by them. More than anyone else, they are the Champagnat figures for the school community, leading with confidence and optimism, and modelling Marist apostolic spirituality.

Words are limited in comparison to personal stories in communicating the insight and invitation here. Vision itself is a tricky word: encompassing everything between dreams and inspiration to projects and prophetic action. It is better captured in real life. Who has been a Champagnat-figure for me?



#### Charles Howard

"Be a Champagnat for today!"

This was Charles' message as Superior General on the occasion of the bicentenary of Marcellin Champagnat's birth in 1989.

Each person counted for Charles. His students knew this from his interaction with them in his days as a teacher. He got to know each one and spoke in a caring way that embodied the maxim, "If you want to educate a child, you must love him or her and you must love them all equally." His Brothers knew this as well as did his friends. In spite of his huge list of correspondents across the world, his messages were nonetheless personalised.

As Principal he seized the moment to provide a solid curriculum and to review educational practices in the light of social and cultural changes. He enthused his co-workers, students and families with his vision. He undertook structural change where others balked. Audacity and hope were favourite words for him.

He led Marist educators through post-Vatican debates in a way that did not divide. Later he succeeded in maintaining the unity of Provinces especially in South America that were in danger of dividing over the focus of our mission and the place of the poor. His words were clear and prophetic but his gift was his empathy for all, his humour and his story-telling that defused situations and were parable-like.

He had a great ability to focus on what was essential, particularly when it came to mission and vocation. His love for Jesus was evident. Jesus' mission was his. It was also ours as a Marist community. He spoke of his delight in seeing Lay people take up Marist spirituality and mission as their own. As General he initiated the Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family and the Champagnat Sisters, las Hermanitas.

He commissioned a new painting for the General House by Goyo that captured his vision.



Throughout his life he was serious about his own formation. He read widely. He chose carefully particular programs that strengthened his ability to emerging questions. He placed great value on the practice of discernment, especially the Review of the Day for himself, and in relation to the Signs of the times. He was a great believer in the action of the Holy Spirit.

To the end he was a person of extraordinary thoughtfulness and kindness, a man of deep passion and compassion, a source of strength for those struggling with life.

Charles was no wimp when it came to expressing himself. At the 1997 General Conference of Provincials when the draft "Footsteps" text was being discussed, he told me as editor that he feared that we had risked a mis-reading of Marcellin's charism by not listing "solidarity" or "love of the poor" as one of the distinctive characteristics of Marist ministry.

At this draft stage in the writing, the phrase "especially the least favoured" was addressed in the final chapter dealing with "other social ministries". It could be read as an add-on to the mainstream Marist activity of schools. The Provincials demanded a more central and

integrated place for the phrase in our vision statement. "Especially the least favoured" is not an add-on. It is at the heart of Marcellin's charism, the prompting of the Spirit that impels us as well.

The result was the final "vision statement" of Marist Education in the Champagnat tradition:

**Disciples of Marcellin Champagnat,  
Brothers and Laypeople,  
together in mission, in the Church and in the world,  
among the young, especially the most neglected,  
we are sowers of the Good News,  
with a distinctive Marist style,  
in schools  
and  
in other pastoral and social ministries.  
We face the future with audacity and hope.**

This vision, with its sharpened focus on the "most neglected", is foundational for our future as it has been for our past. Another Australian Marist leader showed us this in a special way.

### **Cletus Read**

One woman said, "When he came I was a cleaner. He taught me and now I'm a teacher." A man said, "He taught me to stand and be proud". Words of grateful people at Santa Teresa, 80 km out of Alice Springs, when Cletus died. Revealing words.

For thirty five years Cletus taught in ten different schools and was Principal of three of them. From 1972-1977 Brother Cletus was the Provincial of the Melbourne Province. If that was not enough, he then began what became 18 years in ministry among the aboriginal people at Santa Teresa.

Along the way he assumed many roles: sportsmaster, dormitory master, choirmaster, and specialist teacher; then leader of Schools, leader of his Brothers. He developed a strong and determined attitude to life during this time, as well as a dry sense of humour. He relished the chance as leader to use his initiative and try out his own ideas. He was a man before his time in many ways and had an interior sensitivity that was masked by a cool exterior. His independent streak gave him the courage to break with tradition where he saw that tradition was no longer relevant.

He described his time as Provincial as a most enriching experience. He saw it as a time of personal spiritual growth and a time when he developed a greater awareness of the limitations of the human condition, primarily in himself, but also in others. It was the time when the local churches were trying to put into action the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council, a time of change and division, a time for courageous decisions. For example, he made a deliberate decision as Provincial to co-operate fully with the newly-established Catholic Education Offices that were being established around the country and appointed a new group of young principals to deal with these new demands in the school scene.



He made a conscious choice to go to Central Australia in 1978. He had a happy life at Santa Teresa. In fact, in 1990 he wrote to the Provincial saying "my thirteen years in the

desert have been incredibly happy and rewarding." But it certainly wasn't a comfortable life by Western standards. He knew that solidarity meant to be with those among whom he had been sent. He loved the people of Santa Teresa, and they loved him. He contributed to the life of the community wherever he thought he could make a difference. It was not long before he was using his skills as a teacher and became the on-site teacher for the Batchelor Institute of Adult Education.

There were times when he sounded like an Old Testament prophet, "It is so easy to be insincere about making a preferential option for the poor. Speeches of indignation: emotional outpourings of sympathy; even prayer calling on God to redress the forces causing injustices. These can be no more than cynical posturing unless accompanied by action. Preferential option for the poor is sincere only when reflection leads to conversion of heart and to action taken to promote the brotherhood of all through core changes in values and in attitude and in behaviour."(Br Cletus Read, September 1994)

Cletus lived a full life and one that was richly blessed. He loved his vocation as a Marist and modelled himself on the boldness of our Founder, Marcellin Champagnat. He had many hurdles in his life - some were put there by others, some were of his own making. Nonetheless, he faced them all head on and never shirked them. That was his philosophy of life.

Adapted from the eulogy delivered by Br Jim Jolley at Santa Teresa on 11 August 1995

## **Being a Champagnat-figure**

So, Charles and Cletus, exemplars of Marist leaders for their times, people who consciously wanted to be Champagnats in Australia. What can we learn from their stories and from Marcellin himself about "core Marist values", about being "Champagnat-figures", about modeling Marist Apostolic Spirituality in our school communities?

They were each strong personalities but each would be quick to say that leadership is more about charism than charisma. Their life focus was more on fidelity to the Spirit and mission than on their own person or attractiveness to others.

- ✚ Be led by the Spirit, for the sake of the Kingdom. You are called to engage in God's mission. Marcellin wrote, "our God God can do marvels with nothing!"**
- ✚ Lead from the front, ready to be the rallying point when the community is in crisis or under threat. When you are "in the swamp", adapt. Transform long-standing habits or assumptions. Bury old hopes. Be prepared to walk on the edge.**
- ✚ Ask bold questions, widen the circle of participation. Imagine and engage with emergent possibilities. Plant seeds of new dreams. Pray, discuss and discern with your leadership team before important decisions. Give people the inner space to 'transition', not just the external space to 'change'.**

- ✚ **Enthuse young teachers with a sense of mission. Mentor and encourage them. Show interest in their personal well-being, their vocation and professional development.**
- ✚ **Identify those who show signs of a Marist vocation. Value them as a gift from God. Actively support their efforts to grow the Marist spirit and charism in your school or other ministry.**
- ✚ **Be a person of practical compassion. Reach out passionately to the isolated, disadvantaged, religiously illiterate youth of today. Take new initiatives so as to be more inclusive of all, to educate in and for solidarity.**
- ✚ **Emphasise learning and formation as the "lungs" of Marist education. Take an active interest in pedagogy itself.**
- ✚ **Be a leader in the local Church. Promote the missionary aspect of the Catholic school for the students and their families. Share our wealth of experience in regard to the evangelisation of youth.**
- ✚ **Be the presence of the love of Jesus within you. Cultivate an apostolic spirituality as a Marist: an abiding sense of God's presence and love; trust in God; love of Jesus and His Gospel; in Mary's way; family spirit; simplicity.**
- ✚ **Hear the words of Marcellin, "Be a saint!" He was! There is only spiritual leadership; all else is management. Forgive, heal, serve, reconcile, give, love. Be the person of trust for all. Live your life to the full.**

Can I introduce you to a contemporary Marist leader who has wrestled with living up to these ideals? Some of you may have met him.

## **Nimul Ouch**



"I really want disabled children to have good chances in life like other children. They do not need pity. They need education. They need a start." Such words define not only the philosophy of Nimul. They define his life's work.

Nimul is currently the leader of the Marist project for disabled young people in Cambodia: 100 in the primary school called Lavalla; another 50 post-primary students boarding at Villa Maria; a network of over 500 young people across the country being assisted in their education or small enterprise; craft and farm activities.

The origins of the project were in the discernment of Br Terry Heinrich in 1998: which group of young people were missing out in the country's re-building after the Pol Pot

genocide of the 1970s? The Bishop and other Church people pointed him towards the disabled. Quite early in the piece, Terry met Nimul. It was providential. They learnt from one another. They became friends. Their common Christian faith gave them hope and pointed in the direction of serving others. Lavalla was born: not just a successful education centre but a community of warmth and bright spirits, a Marist community, predominantly Buddhist!



In 2006, Nimul was supported by the Marist Fathers to establish a service for the Lavalla graduates. He had Terry's blessing. YODIFEE was born and thrived. Nimul, now married with three children, proved a wise mentor for these young people especially in developing talents but also in dealing with inevitable setbacks. He learnt to be leader of a staff that includes two Brothers, to be a business manager, a planner, a reliable partner to funding agencies, adept in public relations and communication, an advocate for disabled people, an advisor to church and government bodies.

2011 saw the coming together of Lavalla and YODIFEE as a single project under a local Board, Marist Solidarity Cambodia, and a single Khmer leader, Nimul. It was time. The foundations had been laid, a spirit caught. He had been head-hunted by other agencies but he chose to remain with us.

Nimul is on a contract. He will probably one day leave the project or maintain a different connection. He identifies strongly with the person of Marcellin Champagnat and the Marist charism. This identification will remain.

## **Conclusion**

In an entry in his personal journal, 20 Feb 1841, the day when the portrait of Marcellin Champagnat painted by Ravery arrived at The Hermitage, Br François wrote, "Be a living portrait." Michael Green notes that this must have been an expression to which François gave some currency because at the end of the Memoir of Brother Sylvestre, written in 1886-87, we find this sentence, "May all the Little Brothers of Mary be always and everywhere authentic and living portraits of our Venerable Founder".

In the General House in Rome on a wall heading to the main dining room, there is a portrait or rather a dual portrait: Marcellin and François – it depends on which way you are looking at the portrait. This captures François' idea in visual terms. I have taken some liberty with the idea to produce this new version. You may like to do something similar. But even more, you are invited to be a "living portrait".

Thank you, in the name of the Australian Marist Community, to each one of you for your inspiring leadership for the young people of our time.