

## National Director's Address to open the 2015 MSA Conference

[Introductory remarks of welcome]

Let me set the scene for these days. To veterans of such events, there is much that is familiar about this conference, but other aspects that are quite different. The familiar Marist elements we immediately recognise: the warmth of the welcome; our down-to-earth way of relating; the calibre of the content and our work together; the attention given to the quality of our prayer and worship and done in a Marian way – that listens before it speaks, that is attentive before it is joyful. All that we expect. But notice the differences: no sponsors' booths to ambush us as we leave hall and satchels not bulging with commercial handouts (but I do rush to acknowledge gratefully the support of our family friends at CCI and the CDF), no flash five-star hotel as a venue, no passive listening to long keynote addresses, then a smorgasbord of workshops of varying appeal – none of those tired old features of the corporate convention. We have cast this one differently. I invite you to engage with it prayerfully, openly, and critically. We hope that its content and its dynamics will enhance your appreciation of what it means to you to be a Marist today, and that it will inspire our collective and ever deepening commitment to that graced way of sharing in God's mission.

First, a few comments on our conference theme and the person who will be breaking it open for us. Some have raised a question about the amalgam of phrases we have grouped into the theme: *They have no wine: John's gospel, Marist spirituality, abundant life*. For a window into the links among these phrases let's turn to Brother Sylvestre – that little practical joker and lively character who was one of the first generation of Marcellin's Brothers. From Sylvestre we know that the Founder was given to describe St John as the "first Marist". The first Marist was John. It is a revelatory piece of knowledge, that, but hardly a surprising one if we know the spiritual bloodlines from which Marcellin's experience of God grew.

If you wanted to trace those bloodlines, you would need to go back not just one or two generations but actually to the earliest Christian times. Those who have been on Marist pilgrimages, or other programmes at which I have presented, would have heard me on some of this before, but I think it is crucially important for us as Marists to know this story, because it is of our deep story; it's what has given life and shape to the spirituality that we call "Marist".

The first Christians to come to France – to what we now know as Lyon and Vienne – were from Asia Minor, particularly from the region of Ephesus and Smyrna. Their leader, about whom we know little other than he died as a martyr in the year 177 during the persecution of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, was Pothinus. About the person who succeeded him as Bishop of Lyon, however, we know a lot: Irenaeus – one of the giants of early Christian theology, and notably Marian theology. It is not surprising that he was a Marian theologian if you know that he was a student of Polycarp (as was Pothinus), and that Polycarp was a disciple of John. A marble plaque in Lyon Cathedral – the Cathedral of St John – commemorates the story of those first Christians' bringing with them a Marian icon. Mary came with them. An ancient tradition has it, as we know, that it was to the Johannine community near Ephesus that Mary went sometime after the death of Jesus. While much of what actually happened has long been misted by time and legend, at least we can be certain that the place and role of Mary was an important part of the theology and the ecclesiology that emerged

from that Johannine community, the same community in and for which the Johannine scriptures were written.

The point is that the foundations of the Church in France, in Lyon where we Marists began two centuries ago in the Chapel of the Virgin of Fourvière, were Johannine, and deeply so. The God who is revealed in the Johannine scriptures – an immanent and indwelling God, a God who is love – was the Gospel that came to France. Fifteen hundred years later, when the Catholic Reformation was attempting to call the Church back from its medieval decadence and its superstitious morality, to where and to whom did the French reformers intuitively turn? To John. The leaders of that movement – people such as Pierre de Bérulle, Jean-Jacques Olier, Vincent de Paul, Francis de Sales – shaped a distinctive style of Christian discipleship that today we usually call the “French school of spirituality”. Its Scriptural bases were in the Johannine and Pauline Scriptures – emphasising Paul’s focus on the kenosis, the self-emptying, of God in Jesus, and zeal for mission; and John’s revelation of a God who seeks to pitch his tent in our midst, a God whom we can come to know intimately and for always, a God who is love, who offers us life in all its fullness, and to whom we respond in practical expressions of love for one another.

These were the spiritual and scriptural emphases in which Marcellin was formed as a seminarian and in which he subsequently nurtured himself as a priest and founder. The Johannine literature became his go-to Scriptures, his at-home place in the Bible. He appropriated them profoundly, immersing himself in them to such an extent that his own writings became indistinguishable from verses of the Gospel and Letters of John. He aligned himself with the Beloved Disciple, indeed we can see him self-imagining himself as the Beloved Disciple. He became wholly caught up in the divine life of God. For him, to have a sense of living in the abiding and absorbing presence of God was the basis of full human life.

To appreciate what it means to be Marist as our Founder imagined it, it behoves us to immerse ourselves in the same Holy Scriptures as he did – pre-eminent among them the Johannine Scriptures – and be affected by them to become an ever more alert, trusting, faith-filled and loving disciple of Jesus. They are central to our spiritual DNA as Marists. There is a lurking danger in a strongly bonded spiritual family such as ours that far too much focus is put on a founder, especially one as inspirational as Marcellin Champagnat. But that would be a huge mistake. We need to go deeper than that. We need to get beyond the simple stories we tell our students, and the easy formulae we use to describe the characteristics of Marist education or Marist spirituality. To be authentically faithful to Marcellin’s path of Christian discipleship, to allow ourselves to be schooled by him as a master of the spiritual life, we can’t settle our attention and energy on Marcellin, but rather we need to allow him to guide us to what shaped and fired him. Read his Spiritual Testament to see that. Read his letters – particularly the Circulars of 1836 and 1837. Read what Brother François – Marcellin’s closest disciple – said about how best to cultivate Marist spirit: begin, he said, begin with a frequent and prayerful reading of Holy Scripture.

Ours is a quite affective and mystical spirituality, but one that is also grounded and practical in its expression. One of Marcellin’s favourite spiritual writers was Francis de Sales. It was from him that he appropriated terms such as “presence”, “family spirit”, “simplicity and humility”, and also from

him a deep and defining immersion in the Johannine Scriptures. Let's be affected by what affected him.

To open up the Gospel of John for us we have someone who has been called Australia's leading Johannine scholar – and that accolade comes from a person who should know: Father Frank Maloney. Dr Mary Coloe is a Presentation Sister, and currently the Head of Biblical Studies at Yarra Theological Union which is part of the University of Divinity, Melbourne. Her permanent and sessional teaching appointments have found her at various times at Australian Catholic University (where she remains an Honorary Fellow), Boston College, the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkley and the Ecce Homo Biblical Institute, in Jerusalem, among others. She is a widely read writer in her area of academic specialisation: the theology, Christology, ecclesiology and spirituality of the Gospel of John, as well as Jewish Christian relationships in the first century, and the world and literature of first century Judaism and Christianity. She contributes as an active member of a range of national and international Biblical associations, among them *Studiosum Novi Testamenti Societas*.

It is a privilege and a grace to have you with us, Mary. Friends, can I invite you to accord Dr Mary Coloe a warm Marist welcome to our Conference today.