

New Marist Wineskins: The Evolving Role of the Marist Brothers within a Broader Ecclesial Community

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The Marists were one of the ecclesial families to emerge from the extraordinary spiritual and missionary renewal currents flowing through the nineteenth-century French Church, and more specifically its Lyonnais fervour.¹ Their founders imagined a new way of being Church, one that was self-consciously Marian both in its intent and in its character. They saw themselves sharing in the eternal ‘work of Mary’, as they called it, of mothering Christ-life to birth, of nurturing its growth in themselves and in others, and of standing with the Church as it came to be.² Their spirituality emphasised the mercy of God, which they sought to incarnate in affective, relational and immanent ways. They wanted especially to go to people whose circumstances caused them to be furthest from the knowledge of God and the care of the Church and, taking the *Magnificat* as their charter, they were fired to make real for them the closeness of a loving, faithful and just God. They imagined themselves as a broad movement of people—lay, clergy and religious—structured in a fairly non-

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1. The Marists comprise an extended family of religious institutes and lay groups that each traces its source to the Society of Mary founded in Lyon, France, in the first half of the nineteenth century. Among the founding group were Ven. Jean-Claude Colin and St Marcellin Champagnat, both Marist priests. For the purposes of this article, discussion will be mostly focused on those who are associated with the branch of Marists connected with St Marcellin. This was originally the Marist Brothers (or ‘Little Brothers of Mary’), a religious institute of teaching brothers devoted to the Christian education and care of youth. In more recent times it has included various groups of lay faithful who are connected, both formally and informally, to Marist communities and Marist institutions.
2. Institute of the Marist Brothers, *Water from the Rock: Marist Spirituality Flowing in the Tradition of Marcellin Champagnat* (Rome: Marist Brothers, 2007), no. 11. See also no. 26.

hierarchical, complementary and interdependent way. Disappointingly for them, however, the Vatican authorities of the time did not warm to their proposed sense of *communio*. But now, two centuries later, in a post-Vatican II context, Marists are being afforded the opportunity to be creatively faithful to their founding vision.

A New Ecclesial Context

As they have discerned their own priorities for ministry and community, the Marist Brothers have come increasingly to focus on what should be their specific contribution as consecrated members of this broader Marist ecclesial family. In a watershed circular that discussed the growing role of lay people in Marist life and mission almost a quarter of a century ago,³ Br Charles Howard, then Superior General of the Marist Brothers, posed this question to his confreres: if the Institute were not experiencing such a downturn in the number of Brothers in some parts of the world, would it be so concerned with fostering the vocation and involvement of lay people? As someone enthused by Vatican II, he answered his own question with a decisive YES! The Council's defining teachings on the universal call to holiness and the essentially missionary nature of the Church meant that groups such as the Marist Brothers should never accommodate an arrangement by which lay people are positioned to the side in any kind of auxiliary, second-rung, or passive roles. Indeed there was really no such thing as a 'lay Christian' or a 'lay disciple'.⁴ Over the last two decades, the Marists have been among those spiritual families of the Church that have been deliberate and strategic in reimagining how their particular spiritual heritage might be appropriated more broadly within the Church as it strives to share in God's mission in the world.⁵ This has allowed the consecrated members of this family—the Brothers, and especially as they have become fewer—to take sharper options for how and where and why they might contribute to Marist ministries and Marist life. Such a development seems consistent with the Church's renewed appreciation of itself as *communio* and its move away from any sense of a pyramid of holiness among its members, a way of thinking that has led to a repositioning of the place of consecrated life in the broader life of the Church.⁶

3. Charles Howard, *The Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family: A Grace for Us All*. Circulars of the Superiors General (Rome: Marist Brothers, 1991).

4. For a more extensive consideration of this, see Michael Green, '“Lay Spirituality”: Would Jesus Have Understood the Concept?' (Paper given at the 'On Sacred Ground' Conference: Lay Leadership in Catholic Human Service and Diocesan Organisations, Novotel Hotel, Brighton Beach, Sydney, 23 September 2011).

5. The term is the one used by the Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful*, 2007. See nos. 28–30.

6. Pope John Paul II's encyclicals *Christifideles Laici* (1987) and *Vita Consecrata* (1996), along with Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*, provide some sharp discussion on the complementary roles of consecrated and lay life in the spiritual, communitarian and missionary life of the Church.

The Marists' Retention and Expansion of Their Existing Ministries

The Marist Brothers were invited to Australia to conduct Catholic schools. The capacity of the school to be a privileged place for the evangelisation of young people is something that remains deeply rooted in the psyche of the Marists. Their principal ministry in the Church continues, therefore, to be in Catholic education, with some expansion to include youth welfare, youth ministry, advocacy for the rights of young people, and overseas solidarity projects associated with young people in need. There has been a discerned choice by the Marist Brothers, as part of strategic and pastoral planning exercises over several decades, not only to retain but also to grow their corporate educational and welfare ministries, while at the same time being alert to new opportunities to serve young people in particular need. Because this has occurred at a time when the number of Brothers has become fewer, two questions have presented themselves: (1) what is needed in terms of staff formation for these works to continue as authentically Marist ministries? and (2) how should the Brothers be positioned with respect to them?

The spiritual formation of those involved in Marist ministries has been a key strategic priority for many years now. No other activity has been more resourced. This direction has been founded on the conviction that the basis of Marist schools and other ministries is not a characteristic cultural style or a distinctive pedagogical approach but, rather, a particular path of Christian discipleship, a graced way of the Gospel, and one that can be taken up broadly by people in ways that are appropriate to their state of life. The most fundamental challenge for any spiritual family, and arguably the most telling litmus test of its integrity, will be its alignment with mission, God's mission. In the sense that Bevens and others propose God *as* mission,⁷ this essentially means alignment with God. To share in the life of God—God, who is love—is to encounter Christ, who reveals this love.⁸ This is the heart of mission because this is where the reign of God is rooted. Spiritual families such as the Marists are called to be before all else, therefore, schools of spirituality. They will be also schools of community and schools of mission, but first of all they need to be graced spaces in which people can be schooled in Christian discipleship. People encounter Christ there, personally and profoundly. They experience conversion of heart. In such spiritual families, people can become prophets and mystics. Indeed in the best of these families it is prophets and mystics who are the recognised holders of wisdom and authority.

It is a misunderstanding of the Church's spiritual families—including those associated with the so-called 'apostolic' religious institutes—to begin with what

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7. See, e.g., S. B. Bevens, 'The Mission Has a Church', *Compass* 43, no. 3 (2004): 314; S. B. Bevens and R. P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004); S. B. Bevens, 'A Theology of Mission for the Church of the Twenty-First Century: Mission as Prophetic Dialogue', in *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. S. B. Bevens and K. Tahaafe-Williams (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).
 8. See the opening three paragraphs of Benedict XVI's 2005 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* for a sense of this Christ-encounter.

they do, or to focus on their works as their *raison d'être*. That is not the essence of the mission they undertake. While the personal charisms of founders have invariably been associated with addressing pressing human needs, there is a deeper way of understanding what they have been about. All founders of the great spiritual traditions of the Church have acted out of a prior and intense God-encounter in Christ. A core challenge for any ecclesial movement is to have ways that foster and form its members in discipleship of Christ. It has been the Marists' experience in Australia that the various formation programs offered to teachers and others who share in Marist ministries have become increasingly Christocentric and faith-focused. In particular, there has been a growing emphasis on Marian-style contemplative prayer.

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Marist education has been a by-product rather than the starting point of the Marist movement. This is important because it points to a fundamental principle for how the formation and association of today's Marist educators is being undertaken in Australia, and the place of the Marist Brothers within this. 'Marist education' is simply how and why Marists do Catholic education. While it has developed its distinctive features and characteristic emphases—and without undervaluing their evangelising and educative effectiveness—it would be a mistake to see these as the essence of Marist education. Its essence is to be found, rather, where all charisms born of the Spirit have their source: in *missio Dei*. For someone to be a genuine Marist educator, that person needs to be Marist. And to be Marist is to have a conscious sense of being caught up in God's mission in the world, and of living this out through the graced way of Christian discipleship first introduced by St Marcellin and later enriched by successive generations of Marists, and as part of the Church. Formation and ways of being associated are more and more designed, therefore, to be attempts through which the members of this Marist spiritual family can grow collectively as Christ's disciples and become Christian communities of mission.

The evolution of this thinking has led the Institute of Marist Brothers—both in Australia and internationally—to begin to reimagine how a wider group of faithful who feel themselves to be vocationally Marist might be able (1) to be associated formally, and to be led and supported in their journeys of faith, and (2) to take co-responsibility for the development of Marist spirituality and Marist ministries. The way chosen for this to occur is to establish a public association of Christ's faithful to be called *The Marist Association of St Marcellin Champagnat*, with its members known simply as *Marists*. Its membership will be inclusive of Marists broadly, with the Brothers inevitably forming a relatively small proportion of the whole. That is, without compromise to the integrity of the Institute itself or the consecrated identity of the Brothers, there will be a new paradigm for how Marists exist in the Church. In deciding to go down this canonical path, the Marists have opted for a concept of juridical personality that

is different from that being favoured by many other apostolic groups: this new Association will be, in the terms of canon law, an 'aggregation of persons' rather than an 'aggregation of things'. The reason for this is that the Marists are convinced that it will be as a recognised ecclesial movement, with clearly established methods for formation and association, that their particular spiritual tradition will be most effective in the service of the Church.

The Particular Contribution of the Brothers

This new paradigm gives the Brothers not only greater freedom for their own placement but more focused responsibility for their role as consecrated men. The presence of well-formed, theologically literate and professionally capable lay Marists has meant that the Brothers are less required for administrative and leadership roles in ministries. Only a handful of them are now in such positions. Indeed, it is not of the essence of the consecrated life to be in charge. Younger members of the Province typically do not aspire to such positions, ones that would either distance them from active ministry with young people or isolate them from one another by taking on individual apostolic placements. The growing role of the Brothers within the Association and in Marist ministries is akin to that of consecrated persons in the wider Church: to be spiritual guides, to be a leaven of community, and to be exemplars of unbounded generosity in service of God's mission.⁹

As the Brothers have responded to this mandate and this imperative for contemporary consecrated life, they have needed to make some psychological and emotional adjustments. Historically, they have been a community that has been perhaps more disposed to pragmatic action than to be 'a leaven of spirituality and wisdom'. It has meant a change of orientation. A growing proportion of the members of the Australian Province of the Brothers now find themselves in ministries that are more specifically concerned with spiritual formation both of adults and youth, with spiritual direction, with writing on spiritual themes, and with personal accompaniment. Those who are working directly with youth are often involved with those in situations of greater need, and in youth ministry programs quite explicitly concerned with evangelisation.

At the same time, the Brothers continue to place significant importance on living and working in community and on sharing a common life. This has been most strongly expressed by younger Brothers. Although a few Brothers have been asked, from time to time, to work in individual situations because of a particular need of the Church or the Institute, this is the exception and, of these, none lives on his own. In many places, the Brothers are proactive in positioning their community residences to be a focus for building wider Marist community, for example, in the context of a local school or a youth ministry program. They see it as a concrete way of being 'a leaven of communion'. It is also the Brothers'

9. See *Vita Consecrata*, nos. 10, 39, 46–7, 55–6.

preference to be with other Brothers in a shared ministry, and for them to live in ways that promote the integration of, and their co-responsibility for, their personal prayer, their community life and their apostolic endeavours. It can remain a challenge, nonetheless, for a community to develop a pattern of living that promotes this. Tendencies to individualism can be insidious in this regard.

The Role of Religious on the Peripheries

The Second Vatican Council's clarion call for the Church to show a preferential option for the poor, something to which Pope Francis has given compelling impetus over the last two years, provides consecrated people with a particular opportunity. As with other apostolic institutes, this has resonated deeply with the Marist Brothers. Successive general chapters and provincial chapters have called the Brothers to ensure that each province has significant projects and initiatives for working with the most disadvantaged of young people. Like many other apostolic religious institutes, the Marist Brothers were founded especially for people on the margins—in their case initially for children and youth in rural France, and orphans and disabled young people among the urban underclasses. It remains in Brothers' DNA to want to be with and to advocate for young people who are, for whatever reasons, disengaged, disenfranchised and disempowered. The same would be the case for religious in many institutes.

The Christian imperative to go 'to the peripheries' is not, however, the preserve of religious alone, or even principally theirs. While the situations of their lives may mean that they are more readily available and disposed to do so, and they may indeed provide something of a catalyst for others through their example, it needs to be recognised that the call of the Church to attend to those on the margins is directed at everyone. Again, the role of consecrated people may be to be leaven for the Church as a whole, and to some extent to be its conscience. But it is together, in *communio*, that the Church should stand in solidarity with the poor. In practical terms this means religious creating opportunities to work together with lay people and clergy. In the case of the Marist Brothers, several initiatives in recent years—in areas of urban disadvantage in Australia, and in overseas projects in East Timor and Cambodia—have been shaped by this thinking.

Conclusion

The rhetoric of the Institute of the Marist Brothers in recent years has involved a call to its members to live a 'new way of being brother'. This is sometimes misunderstood to imply that the consecrated life needs to be somehow reconceptualised or reinvented. It may be closer to the mark, however, to see with T. S. Eliot that all our exploring will lead us to 'where we started and know the place for the first time'. For the Marist Brothers this is being

understood to mean a consecrated life that has Jesus at its centre; that is joyful; that fosters in Brothers a desire to be both mystics and prophets; and that is marked by a common life that is fraternal, simple and generous, and is radically shaped by the evangelising needs of young people. Informed by a postconciliar ecclesiology, it is also a life to be lived in communion with others, especially other members of a wider Marist ecclesial family, and in dialogue with the world.
