

Just a Tent as the Heart of our Future

Letter of the
Superior
General

28
October
2014

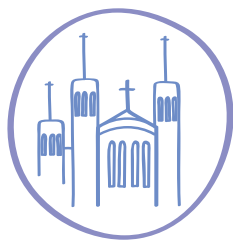
Dear Marists of Champagnat,

On June 6 this year, the message I recorded on video announced three years of preparation to celebrate the Marist bicentennial; each year is represented by an icon reminding us not only of an historical event, but also of a fundamental dimension of our life:



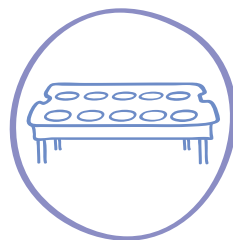
2014|2015

Montagne



2015|2016

Fourvière



2016|2017

La Valla

*May a tent suffice
you
as a shelter from
the storm;
may God return
wandering
to walk through
the streets,
singing the
Psalms of the
desert
with you.*

Giovanni Vannucci

I intend to write a letter on each of these subjects along our way to 2017. The one you now hold in your hands offers a reflection on the global theme of the bicentennial: *a new beginning*.

200 years of Marist stories

Along its two hundred years of existence, the Marist Institute has seen many generations passing the baton on to the next by telling – by a word in the ear, an almost imperceptible whisper – stories about the essence of their life and mission.

From the humble house of La Valla, the stories spread all over the world, and were told in a thousand languages within the most different contexts.

There is a mystical movement in Judaism called *Hasidism*, whose members pass on to each other stories about their leaders, about what they have seen and heard as privileged witnesses. According to them, the words used to describe these experiences are more than just words; they convey what has happened to the next generation with such realism that the very words they use become events in themselves. For instance, by explaining a miracle, it acquires new power; the energy that is activated by telling the story spreads again through the living words, remaining active even after many generations are gone.

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Once upon a time, a certain Rabbi was invited to tell a story. His grandfather had been a disciple of Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. A story – he said – must be told in such a way that it becomes a healing in itself. And he went on: My grandfather was lame. One day people begged him to tell a story about his master, and he described how the Holy Baal Shem used to jump and dance while he prayed. Transported by his own words, my grandfather stood up and began to jump and dance as his master used to do. At that very moment, he was healed of his lameness forever. This is how we must tell our stories!

Each generation of Marists has done its best to keep the flame of Champagnat's charisma alive as a gift for the Church and the world until the present day. They have left us a heritage that includes values, a spirit, ways of living, and traditions. They handed on a story to us, our own story, a narrative of the wonderful things they lived, which were burnt into their hearts for life. Their passionate lives and stories enthused other men, who in turn handed them down to the next generation.

The following Hasidic story is a good example of this.

Once upon a time – Rabbi Rizhyn said – the Holy Baal Shem Tov wanted to save the life of a sick boy he loved very much, so he had a candle of virgin wax made, took it to the forest, placed it on a tree, lit it, and then recited a long prayer. The candle burned all night. By dawn, the boy was healed.

When my grandfather, Great Maggid, disciple of Baal Shem Tov, wanted to obtain a similar healing, he had forgotten the secret words on which he had to concentrate. So he did the same things his master had done, invoked his name, and his efforts succeeded.

When Rabbi Moshe Leib, a disciple of Great Maggid, needed a similar cure, he said: 'We do not even have the power to do the things they did, but I will tell the story of how they did it, and God will help us'. And, again, his efforts were rewarded.

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Thinking about Rabbi Rizhyn's story, which involves three different generations, a parallel with the Marist Institute comes to my mind: we could also speak about three great generations, each one corresponding to a particular century of our Marist history.

A three-generation constant search: the Institute as a tent

Today, as we approach the celebration of the 200th anniversary of our foundation, we would probably say we are living in turbulent or even confusing times. Many of us would wish, after a very long journey, that things were clearer and more evident, rather than feeling, once again, that we are groping for a way to move forward.

Reflecting on the Institute's history, I have the impression that, while we have always clearly known who the recipients of our mission are (children and youth), both the way to proceed and the structure of the institution itself have been changing according to circumstances. This was uncomfortable for those who wanted secure and permanent definitions, but made us swift and flexible to carry out our mission in the manner most appropriate to each historical period.

Bishop Tonino Bello, who dreamed about the Church of the apron – an image that has become quite popular among us in recent years – also dreamed about the Church as a tent:

Both the way to proceed and the structure of the institution itself have been changing according to circumstances.

Should the Church look like a stone that is still, or like a tent that is moving, which is rolled up at sunrise when the traveler hits the road to face a new journey? The image of the tent helps us understand that the Church is a precarious institution that simply proclaims Jesus Christ; it does not place itself at the center; it does not have to do with a Church-centered Christian mentality; it is Christ-centered. Jesus is at the center and the Church pointing outwards to Jesus. The Church is underway, the Church walks along with humanity; the Church should not put down roots and cling to the ground in order to become stable, like an oyster on the rock. The Church must keep moving, and perhaps the tent evokes better this itinerant dimension.



First generation

In keeping with the image of the three generations, let us look at the first, the one corresponding to the first hundred years of our history.

Perhaps we have an impression of uniformity and calm when we contemplate that period of our history, but the truth is that it was quite hectic. During much of that century, the brothers tried to find their identity in the midst of the Church. In this sense, we can see that **they started out as an apostolic group, then grew into an association, and finally became a Congregation.** In fact, we know that the Church recognized as *religious* those who take simple vows – which is our case – only at the beginning of the 20th century. In addition, during much of that period, there were doubts about our place within the Society of Mary, and opinions fluctuated between regarding ourselves as full members of the Society, or as a completely autonomous congregation.

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Second generation

We could use the words *founding* and *structuring* to describe the first-century generation of our history, while *expanding*, *restructuring* and *refounding* would be second-generation words corresponding to the 20th century.

That century began under the sign of secularization. In 1903, the French Government placed the Institute in a difficult dilemma: dissolution or exile. A discussion similar to that of the origins arose again in those circumstances: should they be a teaching religious congregation or a rather well delimited apostolic society?

Due to the secularization laws in France, **the government of the Institute decided to send a large number of brothers abroad**, and this brought about a tremendous international expansion of the Institute. The brothers introduced new forms of government and decentralization, and made the first attempts to adapt themselves to the reality of the new countries where the Institute was being established.

But the word *secularization*, in its broad sense, could summarize our history in the 20th century, since the Congregation faced this process almost everywhere, and even dealt with a permanent and multiform secularism. The basic question was how to adapt to a world undergoing a swift secularization process without losing the essence of our spirit.

This question surfaced openly in the second half of the 20th century with the holding of the Second Vatican Council. Our identity in the midst of the Church was again in question, and the large number of brothers who left the Institute exacerbated the situation. Brother Basilio, Superior General, proposed an **institutional conversion** (1971). Other Superiors General after him asked for *refounding* and *restructuring*. The truth is that, in a short time, the Institute underwent profound changes, in line with the invitation from the Church to return to the sources, and entered on an *aggiornamento* or renewal process.

These were years of destruction and reconstruction, a process that the House of the Hermitage, thoroughly renovated in that period, symbolizes well.

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Third generation

On the threshold of the third centenary, we now speak of **a new beginning** for the Institute. But I wonder if this is not exactly what we repeatedly experienced in the previous two centuries, during which we were almost constantly searching for ways to cope with ever-emerging needs. Why should this request for a new beginning take us by surprise?

Just a tent at the heart of our future: this is how Ermes Ronchi beautifully entitled one of his books. We do not fully know what road our steps should follow but we are happy about it, as we walk under the Spirit's inspiration and encouraged by the Lord's promise, ready to assemble and disassemble our *tent* as often as needed.

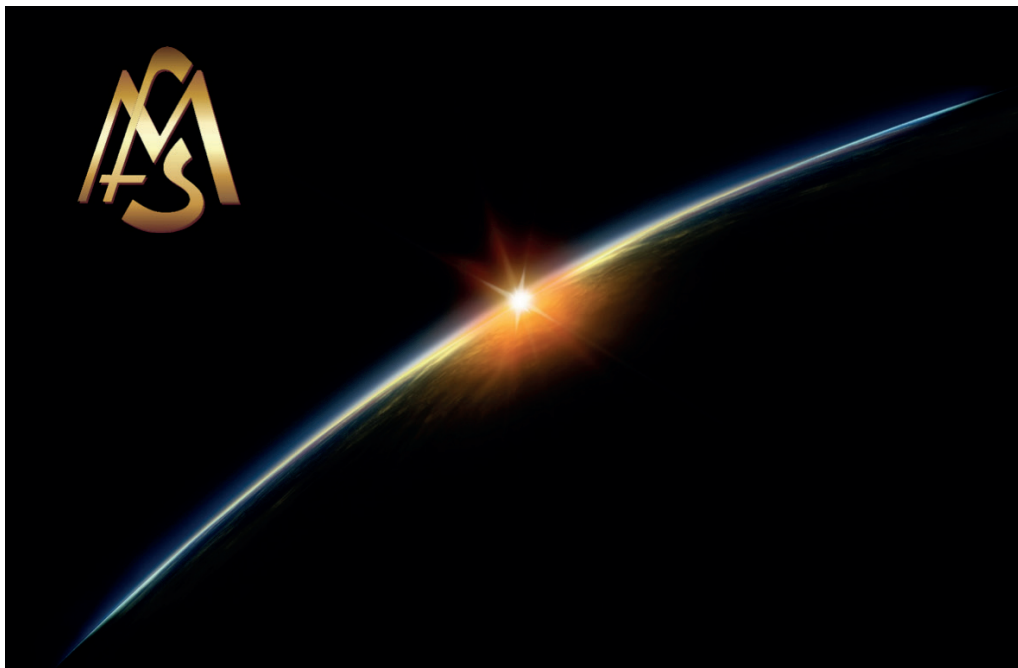
Like Mary, the Pilgrim of Faith, we want impermanence to be our permanent

dwelling, staying put in concreteness, moving on together as we discern the calls of the Spirit. **We do not only imagine the Church as a tent, but also joyfully accept to dwell in it**, fully knowing the implications of its provisional, temporary, adaptable, and unprotected character, but also enjoying its welcoming and relational embrace.

The circumstances experienced by the Church worldwide in the last 50 years make us sense that we, as an Institute, are facing a **new beginning** that is similar to others we have lived in the past.

The General Conference acknowledged this in September 2013, as it gathered under the slogan of "Awakening the Dawn - Prophets and Mystics for our Time". We are at the dawn of a new era demanding imagination, creativity, and innovation. The first part of the slogan, *awakening the dawn*, indicates an active attitude of commitment to the major challenges that the last General Chapters have indicated, which then the words *prophecy* and *mysticism* summarize. We need to **force the dawn to break by believing in it**, as Brother Basilio Rueda used to say, quoting the French poet Rostand.

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*"Sentinel! How long till daybreak?
How long will this night last?"
The sentinel calls back:
"Morning's coming,
But for now it's still night.
If you want to know more,
come back again"
(Is 21:11-12).*

Dawn is breaking, and we already sense the signs of a new day. In the General Conference, we tried to identify some of these signs of the future. One of them, which in my opinion will radically mark the new centenary, is the **emergence of the Marist laity**. It is a great gift from the Holy Spirit, which I am sure we will warmly welcome.

Besides that, I believe the other two very important trends for the future will be the **call to move to the peripheries**, and the attentive care of the **mystical dimension** in our lives.

We cannot – and perhaps should not – do what our ancestors did, but we tell the story of how they did it, and God will help us.

As I said before, I will develop these elements in the three letters I intent to write as a preparation for the bicentenary.

Following the third generation of Rabbi Rizhyn's story mentioned above, we can say that *we cannot – and perhaps should not – do what our ancestors did, but we tell the story of how they did it, and God will help us.*

Heirs of Champagnat in the 21st century, we respectfully welcome the legacy of these two centuries of history, and feel called to enrich it with our own contribution, trusting God's Providence, and abandoning ourselves to Mary, who *has always done everything among us.*

Hope versus optimism: *tantum aurora est!*

How do you feel at the threshold of the Marist bicentennial celebration? How do you stand in front of the challenges we are called to address? Are you perhaps tired after so many changes? Or discouraged because things did not go as we planned? Are you by any chance full of energy, excited by your leading role in a situation you perceive as full of grace and blessing?

I have the impression that, for various reasons, a sort of existential pessimism has taken root in the hearts of some of us. This certainly does not help us live the present moment in a serene and confident way.

Everyone knows about the optimistic and cheerful nature of Pope John XXIII. He thanked the Lord more than once for this gift in his *Journal of the Soul*. It was a matter of *temperament*, he would say, but it was certainly also due to his trust in God's loving Providence. Convening the Council was a proclamation of faith in the future, which quickly spread to many within the People of God. However, I wonder if the situation of the Church and society offered more reasons for hope 52 years ago than it does today. Anyone could probably find reasons for discouragement and reasons for hope both then and today: **it all depends on where your eyes are focusing!**

Gaudet Mater Ecclesia is a well-known speech John XXIII delivered at the solemn inauguration of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962. The Pope wrote the text himself, according to his personal Secretary, Archbishop Loris Capovilla, who was appointed Cardinal by Pope Francis this year. The speech therefore faithfully reflects the state of mind of Pope John, the motivations that drove him to convene the Council, and the goals he sought to achieve. Here is an excerpt that seems particularly relevant today:

How do you feel at the threshold of the Marist bicentennial celebration? How do you stand in front of the challenges we are called to address?

In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin. They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, nonetheless, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former councils everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life, and for proper religious liberty.

We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world was at hand.

*In the present course of human events, by which human society seems to be entering a new order of things, **we should see instead the mysterious plans of divine Providence, which through the passage of time and the efforts of men,** and often beyond their expectation, are achieving their purpose and wisely disposing of all things, even contrary human events, for the good of the Church.*

I remember very well the World Day of Consecrated Life at Saint Peter's Basilica on February 2, 2013, when I heard again the invitation not to give ear to the *prophets of gloom*, but this time coming from Pope Benedict, who presented his resignation ten days later. He invited us, more precisely, to ignore the *prophets of gloom* heralding the end of religious life. I was impressed by his words, which only later I came to recognize as a farewell.

Pope Francis was elected shortly after, and we all know he has been a breath of fresh air in the Church, bringing hope to thousands of people, believers and non-believers, in a very simple way.

I am convinced that we have reasons for hope. Although in our eagerness we would like to enjoy the light and warmth of midday right away, we gladly accept to participate personally in this historical moment of *birth*.

Pope John expressed this rather poetically in the aforementioned opening speech:

*The Council which is now beginning rises in the Church like a day shining with the most splendid light. **It is barely dawn**, but already how delightfully are our hearts affected by the first rays of the rising sun! Everything here breathes holiness and stirs up joy!*

Archbishop Loris Capovilla repeats this whenever he is invited to speak about Pope John: *It is barely dawn! Tantum aurora est* would be the Latin expression, which was the language used by the Pope at that time.

I am convinced that we have reasons for hope. Although in our eagerness we would like to enjoy the light and warmth of midday right away, we gladly accept to participate personally in this historical moment of birth.

Tantum aurora est! The long-awaited day is just beginning. It announces a spring of hope, a leap forward towards the prodigious achievements of fraternity and solidarity, including, of course, the risk of pitfalls, dangers, hazards and failures...

Having learned from Pope John, I venture to suggest that everyone should judge the past with respect and even gratitude; the present, with patience and charity; and the future with confidence.

Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out

The objective data around us could probably leave little room for optimism, but we still have hope, that *small hope* Péguy spoke about. With hope, if we let her lead us, we move forward, for *hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out* (Václav Havel). In other words, we do not work to ensure our expectations will become reality, but because we simply feel it is up to us now to do what we are doing, and that fills us with hope, for we know we are in God's hands.

Like Mary, *Humble Tent of the Word*, we can become people of hope, open to the novelty of the Spirit, who lurks hidden in the folds of our history. Following the invitation of John Paul II to young people, we can become *sentinels of the morning*.



**Hail Mary,
Humble Tent of the
Word,
moved only by the wind
of the Spirit!**

Daive Maria Montagna

The two sons of hope

Saint Augustine said that **hope has two beautiful children: indignation and courage**. Indignation when we see how wrong things are going, and courage to stop them from going in the same direction.

We are indignant when we feel powerless against injustice, violence, power abuse, and the marginalization of millions of children and young people who have no future. But we know well that indignation is not enough to change the situations we

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dislike. For this reason, Saint Augustine speaks of a second son: courage, derived from the Latin word *cor*, which means *heart*. Having courage means having heart! The first test of courage, therefore, consists of daring to listen to our heart, and rebelling against impotence. Courage means *letting our heart take the lead*, not the rational calculations of our mind nor any ancestral fears.

Marcellin Champagnat was indignant at young Montagne's situation, knowing there were many others like him, but was able to transform this indignation into courage almost immediately. Indeed, he allowed his compassionate heart to lead him beyond all his fears and false prudence, and as a result we, the Marists, are now present in the Church.

Father Luigi Ciotti, an Italian priest with a strong social commitment who is very active against the mafia, has received public and repeated death threats. He often says that

*an overdose of prudence can also kill
you, so we must take the risk!*

I am sure that our Founder would very much agree with this brave statement!

Hope, anger, and courage are precious in this time in which we have the privilege to live. Would you dare to assume these attitudes? Would you dare, like Champagnat, to take the risk of *a new beginning*? What *concrete* risks do you feel you are called to assume?

I wish you a joyful preparation for the Marist Bicentennial. May the next three years be, for you and all the Marists, a time of grace and creative fidelity to the Spirit of God.

Fraternally,

Luigi Ciotti

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