



THE PANDEMIC AND OUR MARIST MISSION



MESSAGE OF THE INTERNATIONAL MISSION COMMISSION
TO THE MARISTS OF CHAMPAGNAT



Due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the world is at an historical turning point and is presented with the opportunity for a change in direction. The world is at a crossroad and must make a decision. – to turn one way or another. Continuing down the same path that led to the present disaster is not a realistic or attractive option. The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic are – and will be – defined by choices.

As the rate of infections and deaths subside in some parts of the globe and rise in others and we begin to count the human, emotional, social, and economic cost of the epidemic, we will be faced with some great existential questions with which we will need to grapple and to answer: As a people, will we embrace nationalism, isolationism, selfishness, religious and racial bigotry, and outright neo-fascism or will we choose a more humane, open and compassionate “we-are-in-this-together” global approach to our common destiny? The answers will be found in the choices we make as a global family.

WHERE DO THESE QUESTIONS LEAVE US AS MARISTS?

So where do these questions leave us as Marists? Our history as an Institute has been full of new beginnings and choices. Our *Rule of Life* reminds us that in January of 1817, when Marcellin walked into the house at LaValla for the first time with two uneducated men, he chose to respond to the needs of his time and place (Introduction to *Wherever You Go: The Marist Brothers' Rule of Life*). His early decision to move out of the rectory and move in with the Brothers was a choice that had deep and lasting impact not only on the Brothers of Marcellin's day, but on those Marist leaders who followed him and saw their leadership style as one of close personal accompaniment of the Brothers entrusted to their care. Marcellin's choice to build the Hermitage when he had limited resources and few vocations seems providential today, but in the 1820's, many viewed it as fool-hardy.

Often enough, someone or something else determined the road that the Institute would travel and the destination at which we would arrive. Such was the case at the beginning of the 20th century when our Brothers in France were confronted with a new law on the *Separation of the Churches and State* and faced a similar challenge filled with choices (Introduction to *Wherever You Go: The Marist Brothers' Rule of Life*). If our Brothers in France wished to remain in education and to maintain their schools, they would need to be fully laicized (or at least laicized *pro forma*) or remain as religious, abandon their schools, and go into exile into other countries. Neither option guaranteed security nor an apparent way forward, yet a choice was made. Between 1901 and 1905, almost 1000

Brothers left France and established over 30 foundations in Europe, the Americas, Oceania, Asia, and Africa. When all was said and done, this historic impasse led to a significant turning point in our Institute's ability to fulfill its mission of making Jesus Christ known and loved in new lands with new possibilities.

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Today, we are once again faced with an historic turning point impacting on our mission. A pandemic has now determined the choices before us. With a deepening global economic crisis, the prospect of hundreds of millions of workers losing their jobs and becoming even more impoverished, and tens of millions of children and young people without access to food or schooling and are victims of violence and exploitation, our Marist mission must respond to the current challenges.



AS CHRISTIANS, WE ARE CALLED TO BELIEVE IN AND CREATE A BETTER WORLD

Our Christian faith calls us to be a hope-filled people, neither “gentile nor Jew; servant or free”, but a people united by our inheritance from Christ as children of God. A better world is possible, and the first necessary step in enacting such a world is *to imagine what that better world should look like and what our mission as a people of God must be*. The crises with which we now struggle invite us to rethink the fundamentals of our lives – work, school, economy, government, family, faith, and community, and to re-imagine the kind of world we would like to live in. Some who have begun to frame those questions have done so in both coarse and fine-grained ways, asking grand questions, like what does it mean to live in a society, what are our responsibilities to each other, can humanity survive climate change, as well as

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very specific questions like how do we meet the needs of the hungry, the jobless, the children, and the homeless in our midst?

The pandemic and its aftermath demand that we as an Institute rethink everything and that we come together to confront the challenges that we now face. What are our priorities as Marists on mission? What are the

greatest needs in our community? How will they be met? How do we ensure that the most vulnerable among us are visible and heard? How do we want to or need to reframe our priorities considering the ongoing crises? How has the pandemic shaped our understanding of and ability to imagine what we want and what we need in light of the Gos-

pel and of what is possible and what is necessary? What would we like to replace/change in a post-pandemic world? What needs to go and what ought to stay the same?

JOURNEYING TOGETHER AS A GLOBAL FAMILY!

It is not sufficient for us to ponder these questions individually. We need to be doing this together. As Marists, we have the calls of our most recent General Chapter to guide us as we contemplate these questions collectively. In and of themselves, the calls hold true today as they did three years ago; the difference will be our responses to the calls. We cannot return to the previous “normal”; we need to shape a vision that goes beyond “recovery” from this pandemic.

Looking back at 22nd General Chapter, it is sometimes easy to forget this Chapter was the first to be held outside Europe, broadening our view of

the world from a different perspective. The participants formed a rich and diverse community, gathered from all continents, all Provinces and Districts, Brothers and Lay Marists. Our Chapter was enriched by some very special moments and experiences. We stood with those who, during that time, were affected by the devastation of hurricanes, earthquakes, and violence, and we focused on crucial current and emerging realities in the various parts of the world where we minister. We were challenged to let go of old ways, of comfort and security, and to respond genuinely to new needs (*Journeying Together as a Global Family: The Message of the XXII General Chapter*).

How has the pandemic shaped our understanding of and ability to imagine what we want and what we need in light of the Gospel and of what is possible and what is necessary?



WHAT DOES GOD ASK OF US TODAY?

Marcellin Champagnat was moved by the needs and possibilities of his surroundings and listened attentively to the Spirit, to discover what God was asking him at that point in time. Today, in a similar way, we are challenged to answer the two fundamental questions from our Chapter but now in a pandemic-ravaged world:

Who is God asking us to be in this emerging world?

What is God asking us to do in this emerging world?

The Chapter called us *to be a global charismatic family, a beacon of hope in this turbulent world, to be the face and hands of Jesus' tender mercy, to be bridge-builders so as to journey with children and young people on the margins of life, and to respond boldly to emerging needs (Journeying Together as a Global Family: The Message of the XXII General Chapter)*. These calls continue to contain concrete implications for all dimensions of our life and mission.

Answering those two questions will help us to wrestle with a myriad of others, such as: *How can we best be a global charismatic family when*

How do we make Jesus Christ known and loved in new ways?

national borders are closed, when the irrational fear of the immigrant, of "the other", is running rampant?

How can we be beacons of hope and bridge builders in a divided, and at times, violent world? How can we journey with those on the

margins of life as the margin continues to grow and poverty increases? In a world that professes "me first" and places blame on others, how do we be

the face and hands of God's tender mercy? How do we make Jesus Christ known and loved in new ways?

Our answers to these questions will profoundly impact the course of who we are and what we do as Marists in the years to come.

LEADERSHIP THAT “FORCES THE SPRING”

Father Timothy Healy, S.J., an American priest and former President of Georgetown University and the New York Public Library, believed that as Christians when we are *frozen* in our “winters” of anxiety or past frustrations or helplessness, we must “*force the spring*”—generating a clear vision with courage to reinvent our world. How do we, as Marist leaders “*force the spring*” in our day and time amid a pandemic? It might be by the words we speak and the actions we take. No simple task, but it is what we are called to do.

What kind of leadership works when past norms no longer have meaning or are even possible?

What kind of leadership works when past norms no longer have meaning or are even possible? In these seven-plus months since the virus shut down so many parts of our world, it is clear that leadership requires reading the signs of the times, quick-thinking, prayerful discernment, flexibility, calm, confidence, visibility, communication, moral courage, caring, faith in God, and disciplined decision-making. Leadership matters: it always matters.

Our response as Marists to this pandemic demands that we are *intentional* in the way we exercise the influence and responsibility invested in us. History will judge the impact of our decisions on the legacy of



this virus not just in our communities and provinces, but also in our regions and the world at large.

As leaders we know that it is not time but *intention* that affects change. **Days, weeks, and months may pass, but what do we *intend* to do in this moment, in the time that is given us?** Who can we inspire, touch, or help with our words or actions? **What are our priorities** as we re-imagine our mission considering a changed (and ever-changing) world?

A time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not.

Big change happens when a lot of little changes come together. It is that ripple from the pebble that slowly moves into a wave. So, we need decide on what our intention, our priorities,

our choices, will be for our Marist mission. As Pope Francis has reminded us time and again, the COVID-19 pandemic is a trial but also *“a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not”*. As Marists, we can do no less.

Br. Ben Consigli for the International Mission Commission
December 16th, 2020

