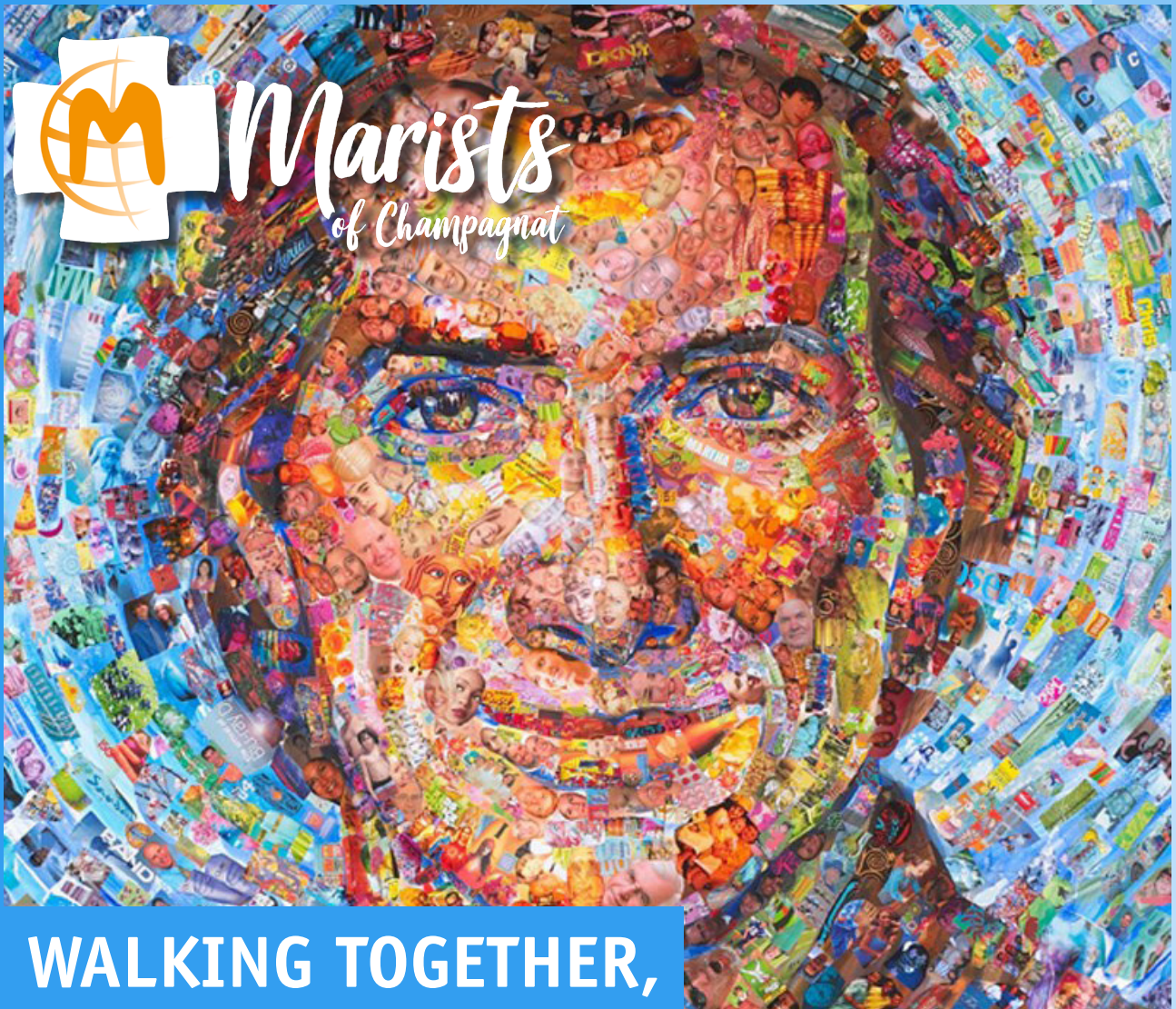




Marists
of Champagnat



WALKING TOGETHER,

TAKING THE BEST OF

OUR MARIST DNA WITH US



Message of Br. Ernesto Sánchez Barba, Superior General, on the occasion of the celebration of the feast of St. Marcellin Champagnat - Rome, 6 June 2020

Dear Marists of Champagnat,

This year, June 6th promises to be a slightly different celebration in honor of our Founder, probably simpler and more private, but with no less depth and joy. Today, the realities caused by the Covid-19 pandemic challenges us to honor him from a more reflective perspective.

We have been deeply saddened by the resulting loss of a number of Champagnat Marists - Brothers and lay people - as well as some of our close relatives and friends. We have also felt the pain of not being able to hold their hands in their final moments, nor of celebrating the gift of their lives during their funerals. It has been the same for others as well who have died from other causes during this time.

On the other hand, it is encouraging to know that most of the cases of contagion close to us have recovered. We are grateful for the dedication and personal attention of all those engaged in health care and for the work carried out by people in the various support services during this period of pandemic and lockdown.

At the same time, all of us in Marist communities and in our families have experienced long periods of quarantine. This has meant coming face to face with both the best of ourselves as well as our personal limitations and vulnerabilities. We have rediscovered the importance of our family spirit and related good practices. While there may have been moments of anxiety, sadness, loneliness, and inevitable misunderstandings, it also has been a time for closer communication and for appreciating one another more; a time for each one of us to delve into our inner selves, into what moves us from within, what motivates and sustains us. For many, it has become a space of deeper encounter and contact with God.



We appreciate the generosity and dedication of so many Marist educators who are creatively carrying on with their educational work online and of groups of Brothers and lay people who have put themselves at the service of the neediest in very poor places, where people may be dying, perhaps not because of the pandemic, but because of hunger. We are also aware of so many other initiatives and actions that reflect our Marist brotherhood and solidarity, such as support for our local communities, care for the elderly, service to neighbors, distribution of food, donations, and collaboration with Caritas or the local Church.

However, in several places we have had to close our schools, unable to continue our service because there is no easy access to on-line resources. In many places, the economic impact is starting to be increasingly felt, and we are looking for the best possible ways to respond in a spirit of solidarity.

During this time, I have often thought of Marcellin. I am not sure if he experienced anything like a world pandemic. Probably not. But I dare say that he must have experienced something similar, or even worse, such as the aftereffects of the French Revolution or other times of acute difficulty in his own life or in the first years of the Institute.

What was it that moved Marcellin to not be paralyzed by fear, or to not remain indifferent in his comfort zone? Among others, I would like to highlight three of his personal qualities: his confidence, his boldness, his brotherhood.

- **Confidence.** I believe that Marcellin, even in the most difficult times, did not doubt for a moment that his life and his mission were the work of God, the work of Mary. He never held himself up as the lead actor or the one “calling the shots” ... rather, he pointed to the Lord, giving praise and glory to God, understanding himself, like Mary, to be the Lord’s servant.

He always lived under Mary’s maternal protection and had frequent recourse to her. In moments of crisis, he used to say to her: *Mary, this is your work... if it perishes, it is not our work that fails but yours, because you have done everything for us. We count on you, then, with your powerful help; we will always trust in you.* (Cf. Life, p. 96). His trust in her was not limited to feeling her maternal protection, but it



led him to imitate her, to seek to respond to God in Mary's way. In my greeting of last March 25th, I said: *Mary, the one who said 'yes', encourages and accompanies us. Like her, in the face of uncertainty and fear, we need faith, trust, and a passion for God and for humanity, as solid bases for moving forward.*

- **Boldness.** Marcellin was a man with an acute awareness of God speaking through the events of life. He learned "to read the signs of the times". And in prayer, searching deep within himself, he responded with courage. We know that he was not always understood by everyone, being criticized more than once. Yet, he was bold enough to devote himself to the education and evangelization of young people, giving priority to the most abandoned, and to found an Institute at their service. He encouraged the first missionary Brothers to go beyond their borders even to very distant countries... Simplicity, solidarity, and attention to the poorest and neediest were characteristics that were reflected throughout his life. His boldness led him to be open and flexible, to find fresh answers without getting stuck in pre-determined schemes. As always, he was inspired by Mary, always ready to respond and serve as she did at the Visitation and at Cana.



- **Brotherhood.** Marcellin, experiencing himself as deeply loved by God and called to carry out God's work, never wanted to walk alone. So, he always created a community around himself. From the very beginning, he had the intuition that the witness of a group is more powerful than that of an individual alone. He took the bold step of inviting and training the first brothers, as well as choosing to live with them, giving up the more comfortable life that was open to him as a priest of the parish.



He launched himself into building the Hermitage with very few resources and worked alongside the brothers and masons. He believed that mission is more effective and sustainable when it is carried out in community. So, he passed on to us a wonderful family spirit. Our *Rule of Life* tells us that "*Marcellin's vision of fraternity invites each of us to*

cultivate a family spirit... "and challenges us to "... Make it visible by adopting an open heart, and a willingness to provide help and support, in community and in ministry. Strive to create an environment wherein each person receives the nourishment and encouragement needed" (Rule of Life, 55). He often repeated that we form a family around Mary, our Good Mother, as the apostles did at Pentecost.

Faced with a situation like the one we are living today, what then might be some key features of our Marist DNA that could help us move forward together? What do Marcellin's confidence, boldness and brotherhood say to me today? We could reflect on this personally as well as within our community, fraternity, or family.

Now we have a tremendous, even unprecedented, opportunity to question ourselves about the call behind what we are living through and to respond accordingly. Are we capable of listening to the cry of the world? Do we feel co-responsible for responding to its social, political, and economic challenges that we face today? Do we want to build "a culture of encounter" and no longer indulge in "a throw-away society"? Do we commit ourselves to an 'integral' ecology, one that understands the care of the environment and the human development of all as being inseparable?

On May 14, Pope Francis invited us to unite in prayer with people of all faiths. In his homily, he said: *"In November last year, we did not know what a pandemic was: it came like a flood, it came suddenly. Now we are beginning to wake up. But there are many other pandemics that are causing people to die without our acknowledging them; we look the other way. We can be somehow unaware of the tragedies that are happening in the world around us right now. (...) Yet there are many! The pandemic of wars, of hunger and many others."*

This June 6th, along with making time for reflection and prayer, let's celebrate Marcellin's life as a community, as a family. Today, it is possible to gather in communion, as a global family. Virtual platforms can help us connect and share our joy in creative ways.

May the celebration of Saint Marcellin Champagnat encourage us, as an Institute, to walk together, hand in hand with Mary, and learning from the Founder himself, the best of our Marist DNA.

Fraternally, Br. Ernesto

