

Eulogy for Brother Charles Howard, FMS

St. Joseph's College
Hunter Hill, NSW, Australia
24th January 2012

I must confess that during the last few days I have struggled to find just those recollections that would capture the Charles Howard that I and others knew. For we have all gathered here this morning to commemorate a life, knowing full well that a person's legacy is never the message etched into their headstone. No, the true heritage of any one of us is found in the memories that reside in the swelling of the heart. So many of us here have remembrances of Charles; we must search among them for those that speed the blood, for they will stand the test of time.

For a few moments, then, in the name of Brother Emili, our Superior General, and all of us who make up Charles's Marist family, I want to share something of the man who while always our brother and friend, was also our leader as well as a source of inspiration and challenge, and a model of what it means to be a Marcellin Champagnat for today.

He served so well in many roles: as headmaster and community leader, student and teacher, Provincial, General Councilor, and Superior General. He was also a builder and the Director of the Juniorate as well as a writer and lecturer on topics as varied as religious life and its future, justice and peace, vocations, and the essential role of laymen and women in the Church.

Yes, Charles strode across the landscape of life with boldness, courage, daring; he had formidable talents and was gifted by God in so many ways. But in the end he was always Charles, a man of unusual faith, a person in whom you could confide, someone who listened well, was loyal to friends, enjoyed a drink and a conversation, understood human weakness, helped you to believe in yourself, and challenged us all to take some responsibility for the human community.

Charles lived during a time in history that will be described years from now as an age of tremendous change not only in terms of scientific and technological advances but also in a deepening of faith and an understanding of the human person. He had

passed sufficient years in the world prior to Vatican II to understand the need for radical change in our Church and lived long enough to be a midwife to the fundamental transformation called for by that historic gathering. For he was one of those rare men given a chance to help shape the age in which he lived. Never one to do things half-heartedly, he seized that opportunity without hesitation.

Elected Superior General at an age when many men are entertaining thoughts of retirement, he set out, with Benito and the members of his Council, on a journey that would bring about many initiatives that today we take for granted. They were not won easily but came about through hard work, negotiation, and the building of consensus. However, like any true leader he did not search haphazardly for consensus but rather molded it to a vision. And in so doing, he made a genuine difference in the world in which he lived and left a legacy to our Institute that remains evident today.

And, yet, throughout it all he remained always self-effacing. I remember well him telling me once that shortly after writing his last circular letter he received a message from one of the brothers in his Province. The text read as follows: “Dear Charles, I just read your last circular. Not bad. As a matter of fact, I might just go looking for some of the others that you have written and read them.”

Charles was the first English speaking Superior General. Coming from a language group never well-known for its strict observance of the ascetical life, he by word and deed demonstrated what it meant to live a practical Christianity, not unlike that of Marcellin himself. In time he convinced all who would listen that faith in action was also an essential part of the message of that fiery prophet and Messiah who walked the roads of first century Israel preaching a passion for God and for humanity.

What were the events that helped shape this remarkable man, who were the people who formed this brother of ours, how can we appreciate better the faith that nurtured him, the hope that sustained him even in the most difficult of times, the love of his God and of others that was at the heart of all he said and did?

Known in his early years as Brother Elias, Charles was referred to as “the boy” by his students in Adelaide as he took up his duties there in 1945. And it was no wonder for he had just turned 21. Nevertheless, within a short time his gift for leadership

became evident. While Director of Juniors, for example, he invited the parents of his charges to become more involved in the place, established a library, built a grotto, and abolished outdated practices while also bringing new life to many of the essential activities that had characterized this stage of formation for more than a half-century. Charles was a man who respected the past, but also had a gift for anticipating what lay ahead. These traits were to serve him and the Province well during the tumultuous days that followed the close of the Vatican II.

In 1967 and then again a year later he traveled to Rome with Othmar and others as a delegate to the extraordinary Chapter of renewal mandated by the Council. Ever after, Charles described these two sessions as passionate, complex, very rich.

The years that followed were a heady time of change in Marist life, in the Church, and, indeed, in our world at large, filled with new insights and understandings. Charles spent the first part of them as a student at *Lumen Vitae* in Belgium and then later at University College, Dublin. The studies he undertook in both places, combining faith and the human sciences, were to prove invaluable when he returned to the Province. For after a few short-term assignments he was named Provincial in August of 1972.

With the support of his brothers he set about to transform a number of areas of Province life but spent a considerable portion of his time and energy visiting the communities and meeting individually with the brothers. Pastoral work was more important to Charles than ceremonial appearances. He used his time on planes to read and became a life-long learner.

There were difficult moments also for these were years during which vocations began to decline and brothers started to leave the Institute in considerable numbers. Throughout it all he always put the person first: doing what he could to ensure that an honest discernment was carried out, and supporting each man in the final decision that he made.

At the same time, he worked hard to bring together the men and women religious of Australia, and fostered collaboration between all branches of the Marist family in this country, making many friends in the process. These relationships lasted for years and far beyond his term as Provincial.

Nineteen seventy-six saw him back in Rome for another General Chapter. This time, however, he ended up not coming home. The delegates to that gathering re-elected Basilio Rueda as Superior General and Charles as one of his Councilors. Though many in attendance would have known him from the previous Chapter, it was his passion for justice and peace that brought him to the wider group's attention. He had a major hand in writing the Chapter's document on that subject as well as its text on *Prayer, Apostolate, and Community*, and the letter entitled *Today's Marist Brother*.

Charles spent the next nine years traveling throughout a world that was changing rapidly. He witnessed the struggles of many emerging nations on the African continent, as well as the crisis of faith affecting Europe, North America and parts of the Pacific region. South Africa was of particular concern to him and he was strong in his support of our brothers there as they challenged the scandal of apartheid and defied the government's regulations about the separation of races.

Charles was a networker long before the term was coined or the practice became fashionable. In word and by deed he drew people together. Be it through a conversation, or by means of an article that he shared, or as the result of a bold move that he made, he got us to consider points of view other than our own and to look beyond the differences that might divide us and to consider so much more that we shared in common.

Such was his contribution during those years that delegates to the 1985 General Chapter looked to him to take up the mission of Superior General. As he began that work, it was as though all that had come before was a preparation for the eight years that would follow. His skill as a communicator quickly became evident through the many circular letters he wrote and talks that he gave, and in the notes and letters that he sent to so many, always brought to a close with these words, "Union of prayers, Charles."

He traveled widely, had an uncanny ability to remember names, demonstrated his skill as a natural story teller, built centers of formation on the African continent and in the Asia/Pacific region that brought together all of our young brothers in those areas. He became the first Superior General to visit our brothers in the People's Republic of

China, giving hope to men who had suffered imprisonment, hardship, and deprivation for so many years.

He also renewed the Institute's missionary spirit, encouraging new foundations in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, and supported the recently established *Hermanitas*, a group of women who came together to form a religious congregation around the charism of Marcellin Champagnat. He made us so much more aware of our obligation to the poor and reminded us time and again that Marists were meant to be where the Church was not. He was among the first, too, to recognize the importance of lay partnership and did all he could to promote it.

During these years he also came to know Marcellin Champagnat in a new and more profound way. Years later, he said that he began to see founder as a human being with his faults and inner conflicts, griefs and failures, rather than a faultless paragon. "These insights helped greatly," he wrote, "to build a rapport between us; I felt now that he could understand and share in my own problems."

For Charles the founder was a "man of the heart", a person who loved passionately and deeply, a leader who was a friend, companion and father; someone who lived the sufferings and joys, the trials and dangers, the successes of his men. But couldn't the very same have been said about Charles himself? Absolutely, for during his mandate there was never for a moment any doubt that it was Marcellin Champagnat who was leading our Institute.

His love of Mary also deepened during this period; this fact was all the more evident when he brought the 1993 Chapter to a close by reciting a prayer that he had written to the mother of Jesus, the woman whom Marcellin so often referred to as our Good Mother and Ordinary Resource.

After his years in Rome Charles remained quite active, initially sharing his talents and experience with those in the novitiates in Kutama in Zimbabwe and Lomeri in the Pacific. He was also delegated as Vicar for India and did all he could to support the newly emerging mission there. Though no longer a citizen of the Eternal City, his world continued to remain wide and complex: he was appointed as an official observer of

South Africa's first democratic elections that saw Nelson Mandela win the Presidency of that nation.

On finally returning to Australia he initially took up residence at the Province house in Drummoyne but eventually moved to Blacktown in western Sydney. He delighted in living in a place where he could come to know his neighbors, take his turn at cooking, and simply share life with men and women of different backgrounds and faiths. And as we all know, he spent his final day in the care of the community at Campbelltown.

With all that said, for me there will always be three traits of Charles that immediately come to mind: his passion, his love for our young brothers, his commitment to helping restore laymen and women to their rightful place in the Church.

First, his passion. Charles was passionate about so many things in life. He had a heart for the poor, was unbending when it came to issues of justice, believed deeply that those of us in religious life were meant to be the conscience of the Church. He challenged us to live this call in life in such a way that it was evident to all that it was well worth the gift of one's life.

He was also passionate about his God as well as his family, his friends, his brothers. He reached out to one and all. He loved us and understood our imperfection, was tolerant of our mistakes, helped us to face our fears.

Next, his love of our young brothers. Charles had a special place in his heart for our younger men. In fact, he was always at home with young people. They took to him, sensing somehow that he had he cared deeply about them and had their best interests at heart. He never hesitated to provide the means necessary to help our young brothers to grow, to widen their perspective, to come to understand just how much Jesus Christ loved them. And he wrote to them regularly. I remember, for example, visiting a Province in Latin America during the years that I served as Superior General and meeting a young brother who told me proudly that he had received a note from the Superior General. I smiled but thought to myself that I could not remember having written to him. No worry; later that day as I passed his room I noticed that there above

his desk was a note from Charles. For this young man, Charles Howard would always be his Superior General.

Finally, his determination to give laymen and women their rightful place in our Church. Charles was one of those thoughtful Churchmen who truly believed that it was the Holy Spirit who was behind the workings of Vatican II, and he never hesitated to make the work of that Spirit his own. Like John Paul II, he was convinced that this millennium was meant to be the age of the laity and he challenged his brothers to do all in their power to make that belief a reality.

For Charles though, an age of the laity did not mean the end of religious life. No, he saw it as ushering in a new era of collaboration and co-responsibility for mission. To his way of thinking as laywomen and men took their rightful place in the Church, those of us in religious life would also be better able to be who we were truly meant to be.

Having written about the Champagnat movement of the Marist Family and taken steps to foster its growth within the Institute, he made the bold move of inviting a number of laity to our 1993 General Chapter. This had never been done before and Charles knew that their ability to attend sessions of that meeting was actually dependent upon a positive vote on the part of elected Chapter delegates. Perhaps following the old adage that it is easier to ask forgiveness than permission, he took the step of inviting them prior to any vote being taken and depended upon the good will of those assembled to do the right thing. And he was right. Chapter delegates quickly approved the presence of this first group of laity at the Chapter and the practice has continued ever since.

But now Charles, it is time to let you fly away. We have been blessed by the years that you have been among us; we are far richer because of your presence, wiser because of your insights, more aware of our responsibilities because of the way in which you have lived your life. Continue to pray for us, as you always have, and never cease to be among us in new ways: challenging us to be the best that we can be: generous and loving men and women in love with God and on fire with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

And for those of us who are your brothers, assist us in making our own the dream of this simple country priest and Marist Father who is our founder: to do ordinary things exceptionally well and to love with an extraordinary love. Yes, continue to show us what it means to be Champagnats for today: men of faith, with hearts for the poor, ever eager to evangelize young people.

Charles, you number now among the Communion of Saints; you have earned your place with God, and though from time to time you may still have the impulse to write one of your famous notes to one or another of us, may you rest always in that same good God's everlasting peace. Amen.

Seán D. Sammon, FMS