

Marist Brothers Province of West-Central Europe



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Dear Brothers and Marist friends,

You will have heard by now of the death of Brother Charles Howard, Superior General from 1985 – 1993. I am sure that when Brothers heard of his death they began to share stories with each other about his visits to the various parts of the Province, and his interviews and meetings with individual Brothers.

As with Brother Basilio Rueda and other Brothers who have served the congregation as Superior General, a great deal of the good they did will remain hidden, protected by the confidentiality of conversations with individual Brothers. Brother Charles had a remarkable gift of being present to Brothers, particularly those in difficulty. His pastoral sensitivity was one of the hallmarks of his leadership, indeed of the Superiors General whom we have known in our lifetime. Charles was a warm person and Brothers found they could speak to him with ease.

The details of Brother Charles' life are well known, and I will not repeat them here. Suffice it to say that it is clear that he was destined for leadership. He was an outstanding teacher, and had a wonderful gift for weaving his ideas around memorable anecdotes and stories. Many will remember his particular style of line drawing, as he sought to illustrate points he was making.

I remember on one occasion he was giving a retreat conference to the Brothers in Scotland and he told a story about his election as Provincial in Sydney. He asked a group of friends to meet him and to tell him honestly what strengths he brought to the job, and what limitations he had to be aware of. He teased the Brothers in Scotland by saying, "I am not going to share the limitations, but the one point they were all agreed on was when they said, "You love the monks (Brothers)." No one can doubt the truth of that statement, nor indeed his love for the Institute of the Marist Brothers.

Many people have commented on his commitment to social justice, solidarity, support for our Brothers in the developing world, and his desire to increase awareness among the Brothers of the social teaching of the Church. One example of this was the energy and imagination he brought to the Brothers in Africa, who at that time were present in around 18 countries on the African continent and Madagascar. Prior to Brother Charles' time in office, Marist Africa was, to use Metternich's famous phrase, "a geographic expression." There was little or no contact between different countries, whose principal relationships were with the Provinces that founded them. Brother Charles called a meeting in Zimbabwe of the Superiors of Provinces and missions in Africa within a year of his election. The main outcome of that meeting was the decision to set up M.I.C. in Nairobi as a Scholasticate for African Marist Brothers. I remember him sharing on one occasion: "I considered asking Brother Basilio to lead this new and important foundation, but I turned instead to the young novice master in Zambia. The Brother he chose was Brother Luis Sobrado, who went on to become the first Rector of MIC, Councillor General (1983 – 2001) then Vicar General (2001 – 2009), and who is currently the Superior of Mission *Ad Gentes* in Asia.

I remember visiting Cameroon in July 1990 with Brother P.J. McGowan, and seeing the struggles of the young Brothers to achieve professional training. I could not see how we could make progress in this situation. When I returned to Cameroon in 1993 it was already evident that the Brothers who returned from MIC were not only excellent teachers, but also that they were recognised as leaders in the local church. They were qualified, competent and confident. This would not have happened without Brother Charles' drive and vision. Another outcome of the meeting in Zimbabwe and the foundation of MIC (with the subsequent meetings of superiors of Africa and Madagascar) is that the African Brothers have a strong identity as African, Marist, and Brothers. These are significant and important legacies of Charles' leadership.

Brother Charles also had a great sense of appreciation for the older Brothers. When he wrote his letter of thanks to the Institute at the end of his term of office (April, 1993) the first section was devoted to the older Brothers, whom he thanked "in a special way, for all that you are and for all that you have been for our Institute." When he visited Scotland to lead a retreat on the new Constitutions I remember that he added up the number of years of service given by Brothers to the schools in Scotland. It was a wonderful and simple way to acknowledge the contribution of the Brothers in the room to the education of young people. Also, before completing his term as Superior General he made a special trip to France to visit the retirement homes of the French Brothers, to thank them for their fidelity to their vocation and to the Institute.

Many Brothers have read and commented on Brother Charles' circulars. I remember being asked to assist the General Council with retreats in 2003 and 2004. As I prepared the talks, I became aware of the number of times I found myself reaching for one of his circulars to refer to something he had written. I wrote to tell him this and received a surprised, but grateful, reply. Could I suggest that one way we might honour his memory would be to take a copy of any one of his circulars and to re-read it? None of them is very long: it might be a way to remember him with gratitude, while continuing to be open to his message for us today.

You may remember a small booklet that was produced during his time as Superior General on the Vocation of the Brother. The Superiors General of a number of congregations of Brothers produced this booklet as a result of a suggestion made by Charles. I remember, in particular, his use of the striking phrase, "The sacrament of being a Brother (*Le sacrement d'être frère*)," which he found in the writings of St. John Chrysostom. This phrase expresses simply and profoundly Brother Charles' vision of what it means to be a Brother in the Church.

I am sure that Brothers in each part of the Province have their own stories to tell and I encourage you to do so. Telling the stories of the great men who are part of our history is a way to honour them and express our gratitude for their presence in our lives. This also helps to encourage us in our own vocation as Marists.

As I mentioned earlier, Brother Charles wrote his own letter of thanks to the Brothers when he completed his term as Superior General. The themes he chose to write about were as follows:

- Mary, and our Marial spirituality
- Openness to God and openness to the world
- Mary, our model of discernment.
- Mary, Mother of the Church.
- Solidarity – creativity in love.
- Simplicity and love in relationships

I suggest we could all profit from reflecting on these themes that were dear to the heart of Brother Charles.

At the end of his letter of thanks, he described the ending of the film, "Monsieur Vincent," about St. Vincent De Paul. St. Vincent, an old man nearing the end of his life, is talking with Anne of Austria, Queen of France. The Queen detects a certain sadness, and asks St. Vincent, "Do you have any regrets?" St. Vincent replies, "No, Your majesty, I have no regrets, and I thank God for allowing me to work in His service during my long life, but I would like to have done more." Brother Charles knew himself well. To quote Brother Seán Sammon, he had energy and passion for more than one life. We were privileged to share part of his passion, and our Institute of the Marist Brothers is the better for it.

The Requiem Mass for Brother Charles will be celebrated at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill on Tuesday 24 January. The chief celebrant will be the President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the Most Reverend Philip Wilson. Archbishop Wilson is an ex-student of Brother Charles. The eulogist will be former Superior General, Brother Seán Sammon, from New York. The current Superior General, Brother Emili Turú, will also travel from Rome to take part.

In our Constitutions (55.1) we read that each community should have a mass said for the repose of Brother Charles' soul and recite the office of the dead. Could I suggest that we unite ourselves with the Brothers in Sydney and endeavour to have the mass said on Tuesday, 24th January, and recite the office of the dead on that day?

I will pass on the condolences of the Province to Brother Emili, SG, Brother Joe McKee, VG, and the General Council, and to Brother Jeff Crowe, Provincial of Sydney Province.

May Charles, our brother, rest in peace.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Brother Brendan Geary". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

Brother Brendan Geary f.m.s.,
Provincial.