



THE MARIST BROTHERS
Real Brothers. Real Stories. A Real Difference.

Provincial Chapter
November 13, 2009
Br. Ben Consigli: Provincial Address

Good morning, everyone. I would like to welcome you all here. In a special way, I would like to welcome Br. Emili, our Superior General. We are fortunate and blessed to have him with us during these days of Chapter. On behalf of the Province, I want to thank you, Emili, for taking the time so early in your mandate to be with us and thank you for your words last night. Please be assured of our support, good wishes, and prayers as you begin your mandate. I would also like to welcome back Sean after 16 years of leadership and service to the Institute. It is very good to have you back home with us, Sean.

I would like to begin my address on a personal note. I want to thank you for your confidence and support in asking me to serve as the Provincial of the Province of the United States of America. While aware of the challenges and opportunities that face us as we move towards the end of this first decade of the 21st century, I look forward to the position with hope and enthusiasm, and with confidence in the guidance of Jesus, our brother, Mary, our ordinary resource, and Marcellin, our model. I also count on your good will and generous spirit as we move forward together.

I also want to take a moment thank John Klein for his leadership of the Province these past seven years. His vision, hard work, energy, and good humor have helped guide the Province of the USA in these foundational years. I have had the privilege of living and working with John over these past years. He, along with former provincials Robert Clark and John McDonnell were, in a real and practical sense, my mentors in becoming Provincial. So THANK YOU, John, for your generosity and your leadership...and God speed to you as you take up your new ministry in General Administration. We will have a formal "thank you" and celebration for you, John, sometime in early March 2010.

As Chapter, we are the elected leadership of the Province. But what is leadership?

Leadership is based on an authority of service...

- We are brothers among brothers, joined in a cooperative effort for the good of all...we are people who serve, listen, cooperate, and care...we meet the challenge of our Constitutions.
- We are also a Chapter...what is a Chapter? Our Constitutions and Statutes state that a Chapter is an assembly of Brothers representing the Province that expresses the participation of the Brothers in Province government. "It suggests the broad outlines of ways to deal with major questions facing the province, the needs of the local Church, and the directives of the General Chapter (Statutes 151.2)." In short, you are the voice of

your Brothers...the Chapter meets, elects a Council, advises, and serves as a voice of the Province.

Some thoughts about us...the Provincial, the Council to be, and the Chapter that is...

I believe if we are to be good religious and good religious leaders, we must

- Know our ROOTS: and foster an awareness of God's presence in our lives, in the lives of each other and in those for whom and with whom we minister. We are sons of Marcellin.
- Have a STRONG FAITH in God and Jesus Christ...and live and act like we do have this faith.
- Examine our MOTIVES...why do we do what we do? Are we reflective? What we do and are about as Brothers has to be about following Jesus Christ...we look to find meaning in our decision to follow Jesus
- Create and implement STRATEGIES for the administration and maintenance of the Province...we need to look at the realities of the Province and take steps to deal with the pressing issues to ensure the charism and this mission of Marcellin continue
- Live with a sense of VISION; recognizing the necessity of handling well the particular needs of the Brothers and our Province, BUT also holding the bigger picture in front of us...

In his circular convoking the General Conference in 2005, Sean outlined three tasks of religious leadership:

1. Proclaim a clear vision for the future
2. Gain cooperation of the Brothers and our colleagues for decision making
3. To effectively gather, include, utilize the group's potential for achieving mission together...put another way, to seek God together in prayer and community---and moving forward together in ministry and mission

Yesterday, John McDonnell led us through some statistics of the Province of the USA. Like most statistics, they can lack the spirit and the life of who we are. I have found the Brothers of the Province to be practical, generous, likeable, hard-working, faith-filled men. The various Province reports on the work of our Strategic Plan covering the areas of senior brothers, finances, school ministries, evangelization, and vocations/formation give much credence to the generous spirit and hard work of the Brothers and our colleagues. The Plan and its implementation has helped leadership to proclaim a clear vision, gain cooperation and input from the Brothers and our colleagues for decision making and has led us in utilizing our potential for achieving mission together.

We must always keep in mind that our purpose for existing as a religious Institute is our mission--- "To make Jesus known and loved, through the Christian education of youth, especially the most neglected." Each one of us is ministering in some element of that statement of mission. Education, in varied forms, is the primary means of ministry for many of us. Others are in ministries primarily focused on evangelization. These ministries include our presence in summer camps, renewal and retreat work, service to those in recovery, parish ministry, spiritual direction, and hospital chaplaincy. There are those of us in "internal ministry." These are brothers in the Provincial administration, those working in the office of Marist education, in vocation and formation, in youth and young adult ministry, and those helping our senior Brothers. Our impact in these areas is quite impressive. There also are Brothers who volunteer their time and who help in local parishes, schools, hospitals, those who help the Province by serving on committees, school boards, or an evaluation team or who serve the community by cooking, cleaning and doing other types of work for the Brothers. We are all dependent upon

the continued prayers of our senior Brothers whose involvement in our mission continues in their daily prayer, their personal sacrifice, and their fidelity. We stand on their shoulders.

I would also like to draw our attention to the material resources of the Province. Thanks to the hard work, good advice and prudent spending, we are presently in decent financial shape...even after the deep world-wide recession from which we are just beginning to recover. I express the gratitude of the Province in thanking Kevin, Paul, Joe Sacino, Frank Pellegrino and our Province Finance Team and Investment committee who have led us in this important area. We are also stewards of 7 educational institutions and two camps. These are important places for us and for those we serve...they are key to our evangelization efforts in the States...and my thanks go to those who administer and manage those institutions.

Another area I would like to focus on is what are the calls and needs of the Province and the world around us as we conclude the first decade of the 21st century. As I have said, our Chapter is situated in a unique time in our history. We are meeting a little over a month after the conclusion of the 21st General Chapter. We are also meeting during a time of war, political and economic unrest, famine and poverty in a number of parts of the world. I remember a conversation I had with Robert Clark concerning his time at the 20th General Chapter. He was at that Chapter when the September 11th attacks occurred. He said it was a surreal experience being in Rome and at a Chapter during a very difficult time. He said that even as the horrors of those attacks went on, the delegates continued their discussions on juxta motem and other parliamentary procedures at the Chapter, he thought of an image Anthony DeMello used in his book, *Song of the Bird*. In this book, DeMello noted the following:

"October 1917. The Russian Revolution is born. The story goes that that very month the Russian Orthodox Church was assembled in Council. A passionate debate was in progress about the color of the surplice to be used in liturgical functions. Some insisted vehemently it needed to be white. Others, with equal vehemence, that it had to be purple. Nero fiddled while Rome burned."

Robert wondered, "What will people say of us---the Marist Brothers---during our time of Chapter?" What are we discussing, what are we worried about, where is our focus as Brothers? These questions are good for us to reflect upon during these days as well.

In his final address as Superior General, Sean stated the following: *"Let us be honest: as an Institute we have spent the last half century falling apart. So it should be a surprise to no one that today we struggle with concerns about our identity, the future of our way of life, the burden of scandal that has been ours to bear in several places."* Religious life throughout most of the world, and certainly in the USA, is in crisis: our spiritual life, our way of living together, even our ministries are all undergoing radical transformations and transitions. The world and our country are likewise in crisis: fear, terrorism, war, natural disasters, famine, poverty, the concerns of children and young people, all of these impacts our life and our work. In this country, we live in a very fast and fragmented society that celebrates individualism and individual achievement, sometimes to the detriment of the larger community. Families are in turmoil, the Church seems abandoned by young adults and youth, the sex abuse scandals and the finance scandals of the Church have demoralized many, and the need for quality religious education seems critical. So, then, what are we to do?

This question helped me to reflect on our 21st General Chapter and the realization of God's fundamental call to us as Marists: "With Mary, go out in haste to a new land!" But what is this new land? It is not necessarily a geographic place; rather this "new land" is an *authentic personal renewal* which asks of each of us a genuine change of heart. So, how does this happen? I would like to share with you my reflections on the fundamental directions laid out in the message from the delegates of the 21st General Chapter.

A renewed sense of consecration firmly rooted in the Gospel, urging us to new ways of being Brother

If by our vocation as Brothers we are called to a consecration firmly rooted in the Gospel, to be vowed men of prayer, living in community, what are the new calls today for our life as Brothers? We will need to respond to new calls of living our vows, of praying, and of living in community in a world that is constantly in flux. I believe that at the heart of all this is a foundational question: Do we believe that by our consecration we are claimed by God? Our response to this question could be the gift we have to offer each other, the young for whom we minister, and the world. To respond appropriately, we are called to a **stance of discernment**—a way of being rooted in an explicit atmosphere of FAITH—to celebrate and live our lives through God...**But** keep in mind: this way of being, living, and acting can be a very dangerous undertaking. It demands sacrifice. I want to share with you a story as told by the Reverend Billy Graham:

A little child was playing one day with a very valuable vase. He put his hand into it and could not withdraw it. His father too, tried his best, but all in vain. They were thinking of breaking the vase when the father said, "Now, my son, make one more try. Open your hand and hold your fingers out straight as you see me doing, and then pull." To their astonishment the little fellow said, "O no, father. I couldn't put my fingers out like that, because if I did I would drop my penny."

Smile, if you will—but thousands of us are like that little boy, so busy holding on to the world's worthless penny that we cannot accept liberation. I beg you to drop the trifle in your heart. Surrender! Let go, and let God have His way in your life.

If we wish to live freely in Christ, we will need to let go of our pre-conceived view of the world, of the Brothers, our lay colleagues, and even of ourselves. We may be called to identify with Abraham, who by faith obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and Abraham set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he received the power of procreation, even though he was too old---and Sarah herself was barren---because he considered God faithful. We may be called to identify with Mary of the Visitation. Everything in the visitation scene is motion and excitement: Mary's haste, her greeting to Elizabeth, John's leaping for joy, Elizabeth's exclaiming with a loud cry and Mary's thanksgiving. All of these actions and reactions are so many showings of the Spirit's manifestation at the dawn of our salvation. The Visitation is not only a scene of transition, of letting go; it reveals Mary as a believer, a woman who has given her total "yes" to God's Word. It is this faith that Elizabeth proclaims: "Blest is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled." Or we may be called to identify with Marcellin who had freedom in his willingness to let the whole project of the Little Brothers of Mary go---something he worked for his whole life--- if it were not God's/Mary's will that it continue.

Brothers, discernment of God's will and our own personal conversions are calls to faith and to courage. As Sean said, "*As men religious who are non-ordained we have a special obligation to be the conscience of the Church. By living our life well, placing ourselves in those situations and locations where it is difficult for others to go, and working to meet needs that are just beginning to be identified, we remind the Church about its true nature...we must commit ourselves to doing the work necessary to clarify the place and purpose of our way of life within our Church.*"

A new relationship between Brothers and lay people, based on communion, searching together for greater vitality of the Marist charism for our world

We must recognize that the Marist charism is for the Church. It is demonstrated not only by Brothers, but also lived and articulated by lay persons, other religious, clergy, adults and youth. In recognizing this, we see that Marist life is bigger than the Marist Brothers, and that our future is shared with those who embrace with us the vision of Marcellin Champagnat.

Marist spirituality is a spirituality that is both religious and lay. John Klein has often reminded us of the *"two lungs image"* that Pope John Paul II used when reflecting on religious and lay life. His image of two lungs was used to emphasize the need for lay and religious, structural and charismatic, to *"breathe"* together to create life.

Our recent history already includes initiatives of shared formation programs such as Sharing Our Call, Embracing Our Call, Sharing Our Mission, the Marist Leadership Institute, Marist Youth programs, and the Marist Young Adult Community. Do these initiatives respond to the signs of the times? We need to reflect on this question as we move forward.

The theme of a shared Marist life and mission was woven throughout the spirit of the 21st General Chapter. In many ways, we do not yet know all the implications of this insight for how we pursue our mission and how we share our spirituality. We should be, however, committed to the journey and willing to learn together with those who embrace the Marist spirituality and mission with us. Can structures be built or opportunities provided which will allow for this deepening of our joint call as Marists? The General Chapter calls us to acknowledge and encourage the vocation of the Lay Marist because the Spirit is inviting us to live in a new communion of Brothers and lay Marists.

As the letter from the 21st General Chapter states, *"We share the responsibility for seeking new Marist vocations. The cry of Marcellin Champagnat, "We need Brothers!" continues to urge us on. May each of us, Brothers and lay Marists, be daring and invite young people to join us and become Brothers or Lay Marists."*

New Vowed Members

That last phrase brings me to another important point. I believe that our future lies in new vowed members. We cannot hand on the charism without new professed members, and we must recognize that new members will necessitate change in us.

As Brothers we must continue our on-going renewal/conversion that I spoke of earlier so that we are viewed by others as vibrant, prophetic, wise, energetic men united in following a common vision. In this way, we can be an authentic presence to young people and to each other, building community based upon a life rooted in prayer. By being living examples of simplicity and authenticity, we can plant seeds to help to continue to sow a culture of vocations within the United States.

We are blessed to have Brian and Chris in our midst. God is good! But our future demands that each of us takes responsibility for promoting all Church vocations and for inviting young men to consider our way of life. In addition, each of us, each of our schools, camps, and communities needs to look at ways in which we can interact with young people. Our presence and our invitation to young men to consider our way of life are key to our future. This takes me to the last directional statement from the message of the 21st General Chapter...

A highly significant presence among poor children and young people

If our call and our statement of mission direct us to be evangelizers and educators for young people, what are the new calls for us today? At the General Chapter, Sean asked us to see the world through the eyes of a poor child. As Marist Brothers, I believe we must pause and pay attention to this new world we find ourselves in, and continue to reflect upon and refine our mission to youth, and especially those most in need. We will need courage to respond both in

our current ministries and institutions as well as be open to **new forms of presence with poor children and young people.**

In order to fulfill our Marist mission to evangelize poor children and young people, each of our schools and summer camps, in a practical way, has been committed to the enrollment of poorer children and has attempted to give financial assistance to those who cannot afford to pay tuition.

To extend this purpose of being among poor children and young people, the Strategic Plan asked the Province leadership to examine how it can participate in the implementation of some alternative model for providing Catholic education to poor children. Presently, the Province is involved in an exploratory process in the Diocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico, to see if a Cristo Rey secondary school could be opened in Albuquerque. Brothers Jim Adams and Albert Phillipp are conducting this feasibility study. The primary objective of this study is to determine if the Albuquerque area has enough students under the poverty line, job sponsors to assist with paying the tuition of the students, community support and “local Bishop support” to open a school. An advisory board has been created to assist with the study and will be working with Jim and Beto over this next year.

One hope of the Strategic Plan was not only to found a new apostolate in an area of need, but, in reaching back to our missionary roots, to implant Marist life in an area where it has not been, with the hope of attracting new vocations. Thus, the community would be composed of Brothers, whose intention would be to live Marist life in a more intentional way. Vocation ministry will be an explicit focus for this community. Through the quality of their lives and explicit invitation, the members of this community will encourage young men to consider vowed Marist life. In highlighting the internationality of this possible project, the other Provinces of the Arco Norte region (Canada, Mexico Central, Mexico Occidental, America Central, and Norandina) are all interested in being part of this endeavor, ministering together. A representative from the Canadian province will be visiting Beto and Jim sometime soon.

A ministry of presence

A word on presence...One of the most important roles of a Brother in a school--or any setting where there are young people—is to be there, present among them! Meals, sporting events, activities or just hanging out in the student cafeteria or center are all great opportunities to reach young people. It is critical for us to develop an identity with young people. They are looking for mentors, role models, men who are captured by something greater than themselves. The "ministry of presence" calls us to communicate the great truth of the Incarnation by demonstrating in a very real way the closeness of God to them. Young people need to see us on their turf and on their time...not just at Mass or in the classroom or in the guidance or administration offices. The young won't always seek us out; we must seek them out (Need I remind everyone who our example is? Jesus Christ did not stand around waiting to be discovered; nor did Marcellin). Appealing to the spiritual hunger of young people, we must look at creating programs that will nurture their spirituality while making connections to their generous willingness to serve others. This ministry of presence may be a paradigm shift for many of us who have found our identity in the “doing” and not necessarily the “being” as a Brother.

Henri Nouwen, when reflecting on a ministry of presence, wrote the following:

“My own desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project is so strong that soon my time is taken up by meetings, conferences, study groups, and workshops that prevent me from walking the streets. It is difficult not to have plans, not to organize

people around an urgent cause, and not to feel that you are working directly for social progress. But I wonder more and more if the first thing shouldn't be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know with words, handshakes, and hugs that you do not simply like them, but truly love them."

I believe this is the heart of the matter and the heart of our mission, and to be true sons of Champagnat, we need to follow his advice: "To educate children you must first love them and love them all equally."

CONCLUSION

Over this weekend and in the weeks and months ahead, it is my hope that we will have the opportunity to continue the on-going conversation---this fraternal dialogue-- that we have been engaged in over the past four years. Once again, we have the opportunity to pay attention together, listening to the God who prompts us and leads us, but towards "results" in His time. The ability to trust in God must first begin with a willingness and a desire on our part to do so. Like the boy with the penny in Billy Graham's story, are we willing to sacrifice what we hold on to? If we are, then God's promise of life is always there for our benefit.

Thank you, Brothers, and God bless you!

