

Reflections for Laity: Becoming a Marist

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The following is the text of a presentation delivered at the Marist Family Weekend, Marist College, July 2008.

According to one of the founders, anyone can be a Marist. Fr. Jean-Claude Colin had been describing his dream of a community that had branches for ordained men, vowed women, and laity to a Vatican official who scoffed: "So is the whole world to be Marist?" Colin (today recognized as the founder of the Marist Fathers) said, "Yes indeed!" And so, this has become a catch phrase: "The Whole World Marist." But what exactly does it mean to be a Marist? How do we enter this reality of being a Marist?

There are many ways to look at this, since the process of becoming a lay Marist varies from group to group. Some have very formal entrance practices, while others are more relaxed. But in general I am not referring to entrance requirements, but rather to the process of how one becomes accustomed to living and being as a Marist. My reflection therefore pertains to a certain change of heart and growth of spirit, rather than to ritual.

How does one become a Marist in one's heart? According to Saint Marcellin Champagnat, one "practices" the presence of God. This was Marcellin's favorite spiritual exercise, and is as open to laity as to his "Little Brothers of Mary" (of which he is the founder). Related to this spiritual practice is what I consider to be the most distinctive Marist virtue: inclusion. Marists are inclusive. After reflecting on these issues, perhaps we can begin to have an answer as to how one becomes, and lives, as a Marist.

The Practice of the Presence of God

Marcellin's favorite focus of spirituality was the practice of the presence of God. I've heard a number of speakers over the years both refer to this and recommend it as a wonderful thing to do, or suggest this practice as an aid to prayer and the spiritual life in general. But I don't recall hearing anyone spend a few words on it, fleshing the concept out. What does it mean to "practice" the presence of God?

In much of what I say here I rely on the *LIFE OF CHAMPAGNAT* by Brother John Baptist. I used the 1989 edition, but it was first published in 1856. It is not a modern biography. The author wants to impress us with Marcellin's sanctity. One could actually come away from the book with the idea that Marcellin was a harsh and

stern person. So I would only recommend the book to those who know the brothers. I think the best way to get to know Marcellin is to get to know these "Little Brothers of Mary," as his spirit still lives among them. At any rate, the book is written in two parts: part one being his life, and part two being a chapter-by-chapter examination of his virtues. Chapter five in part two is an explanation of the practice of the presence of God.

The practice of the presence of God includes the following:

1. Seeing God in God's creatures, with praise and blessing...
Placing our trust in Providence, and expecting from God's Providence the help required in all our difficulties and needs.
2. Taking Jesus as a model in our actions; keeping in mind his virtues, his suffering, his way of dealing with persons; striving to act as he did, or would have done, in all circumstances.
3. Offering all our actions to God and seeking in all things the greater glory of God.
4. Saying short, fervent prayers often during the day and in our wakeful moments at night.
5. Keeping ourselves in the state of grace; watching over our thoughts, words and entire conduct so that nothing is said or done against conscience and offensive to God; combating temptations by the thought: GOD SEES ME.^[1]

According to Br. John Baptist, Champagnat's way of "practicing the exercise (!) of the presence of God consisted in **believing with a firm and real faith that God is everywhere present, filling the universe with his immensity, with the works of his goodness, with his mercy and his glory**" (314). So, despite the fancy language it's really quite simple. Just keep reminding ourselves that God is everywhere, that God's forgiveness and love are everywhere, that every attribute of God is always with us and always in everyone we meet, somehow. If God's love is everywhere, we never have anything to fear. Nothing can harm us if we trust in divine Providence (315). Champagnat recommended this as the basis of our spiritual life.

Actually, he recommended this practice to his Little Brothers. But the more I read about anything Marcellin said, the more I am convinced that everything he said about spirituality can be applied to lay persons as well.

To return to Brother John Baptist's book, there is often a somewhat negative tone to some of his writing. He emphasizes, for example, that the practice of the presence of God implies a flight from sin (of course). But his point is that we will not sin if we remember that God is always watching. He multiplies examples of Champagnat's

use of this idea, saying that forgetfulness of God is the first cause of all wickedness (316). This puts me in mind of God as a frightfully Big Brother, always looking over my shoulder to see what I'm doing wrong. I feel that this is not a helpful way to think of the practice of the presence of God. But included in the list above are a number of positive ways to think about the practice of the presence of God, of living and moving and having our being in God.

The God in Whose Presence We Live

Who is God, after all? Matthew's gospel tells us that our God is a God who cares for us and will give us good things if we ask for them:

Which one of you, if your child asks you for bread, will give him or her a stone? Or if she asks for a fish, will give her a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (7.9-11)

Matthew's gospel also tells us that our God is a God who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the good and the bad alike:

[Jesus says] Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven; for God makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (5.44-45)

In other words, God treats all of us equally well, and in turn directs us to treat each other equally well.

The Virtue of Inclusion

One of the ways we can let our sun shine on all is by practicing Marist inclusion, which incorporates, but is not limited to, hospitality. I think that the real key to acting as a Marist is to be inclusive. This is both an attitude and a way of life, and of course refers to the idea that every person is in some way a member of my (Marist) family.

However, as an attitude of life, inclusiveness can go deeper than this. As human beings we sometimes instinctively operate by excluding, by saying "I am not" rather than "I am," by saying "Thou shalt not..." rather than "I shall..." Our laws tend to exclude, rather than include. We instinctively see problems rather than opportunities. But a change in my attitude may uncover some chance for good that was not previously apparent.

I have three stories about Marist inclusion:

The first goes back many years. My husband Gene and I, our approximately two year old son George, my mother, and Gene's sister Gloria were on our way home from a weekend spent with friends upstate when we found out we had no brakes. One moment we braked to let me out to go to a rest room, and the next, Gene put his foot down on the brake pedal and there was nothing there. We turned out to have a leak in the brake line, and we had used the last ounce of fluid stopping that one time. We were lucky, or blessed, or both, that we weren't killed. At any rate, the Thruway service station diagnosed the problem, taped up the hose, filled up our brake fluid and told us to go to the car dealership in Kingston (NY). The dealership knew how to fix the problem, but needed to order a part, which would not arrive until the next day. They gave us a loaner car, and then we needed a place to stay. Gene said, "Let's go to Esopus, the brothers will put us up." I looked at him as if he were truly nuts. He had not been a Marist Brother for several years and had had little contact with the brothers in general. (I could no more imagine my going to my former community, the Sparkill Dominicans, with such a request than I could imagine my knocking on a stranger's door.)

We did go to Esopus, and of course, they did put us up. They also sat us down to dinner with the brothers, and Brother Henry Charles brought us a six pack of beer for our evening's entertainment. They couldn't have been nicer. It was my first encounter with the idea that once a Marist, always a Marist. But it didn't really sink in.

Later I had a somewhat different, and more personal, experience of Marist inclusion. At one time, after I had spoken up (somewhat out of turn) at a meeting in Poughkeepsie, NY, Brother Luke Driscoll took me aside and encouraged me to keep speaking, to keep sharing. It was a very affirming act on his part, as I felt that I had perhaps overstepped the bounds as a newcomer. (My remarks had not been gentle.) In encouraging me as he did, Luke brought out the best in me, and put me on a course of being more involved in the group.

Later I heard Luke giving the same encouragement to someone else, including that person in his world as he had included me! The best Marists (like Luke) exude a sense of 'being at home' in the world, and invite me to share in that world. They welcome and encourage others to feel as they do.

I also think that inclusiveness is related to compassion. When we make an effort to feel with others, it is difficult to exclude them from our circle of caring.

Recently, I was at a resort on vacation. It turned out to be a rather noisy place, and I hate noise. There was constant music at any of the restaurants, and calling back and forth from friend to friend and from worker to worker. All very friendly; but I felt assaulted by the constant sound. To add to this, six Europeans moved in and

took up their places on the beach very near to us. They all spoke at once – everyone talking to everyone else at the same time – and chattered constantly and loudly. I was in despair.

Then I made an effort to open my mind to them, perhaps to open my heart to them a little. About the third day they were there, I passed them on the path and they were relatively quiet. It struck me that they looked relaxed, finally. At the same time I realized that they had not been relaxed up to that time. I recalled that when I first saw (and heard) them, that they appeared to be *trying* to relax. They did all the relaxed things – sat on the beach in lounges, etc., but seemed ill at ease and out of place. Suddenly I felt for them. What are their lives like? How often do they get a chance to relax?

After that time, I felt better disposed toward them. This was because I had let them into my world instead of excluding them from it, because I had opened my heart to compassion.

Summary:

Of course, all of these ideas are interrelated. Practicing the presence of God in a positive sense – trying to be conscious of living and moving and having our being in God at all times – leads to a positive attitude toward others, because God deals with each of us providentially. Having an open and welcoming attitude toward others implies that we include all in our world on as equal a footing as possible. The practice of compassion and inclusion is therefore in a sense the same thing as the practice of the presence of God.

One final note from one of Marcellin's letters, quoted in that same chapter of the biography: "God accepts our good will and our efforts and does not require success...God considers only the disposition of our heart, takes account of our good desires, and showers us with kindness..."(319)

Questions for reflection:

Why are you a Marist?

In what way do you identify yourself as a Marist?

What attracted you to Marist spirituality?

How do you think you can practice the virtue of inclusion in your daily life?

What is the extent of Marist inclusiveness? Is there a limit to Marist inclusiveness?

Source and references: *THE LIFE OF BLESSED MARCELLIN JOSEPH BENEDICT CHAMPAGNAT (1789-1840), Marist Priest, Founder of the Congregation of the Little Brothers of Mary*; by One of his first disciples (Brother John-Baptist Furet). Bicentenary Edition, 1989; General House, 2 Piazzale Champagnat, Roma, pages 319-20.

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