



A Primer for Marist Contemplation and Discernment?

Editorial Team

You can say many things about our editorial choices in Today's Marists but consistency to the point of persistency could be one of them. This current issue completes two volumes, six issues in all, unfolding one major theme that emerged from the September 2017 General Chapter (a world meeting of the Marists in Rome):

“Contemplation as the energy source, the mystical heart of Marist mission, is intimately linked with our identity as Marist religious. To form a communion for mission, we need to deepen the contemplative dimension of our lives. With Jesus at the center we can, like Mary, be missionaries of hope.” (2017 General Chapter, 30)

This was a significant moment at the General Chapter as we looked at the state of the Society of Mary in its Provinces and Districts throughout the world. **The first Today's Marists issue in Volume 4 (Spring 2018), published after the Chapter, began with a reflection on the topic of contemplation by John Larsen, SM, the Superior General.** This was followed by an article by the 2017 Province Retreat Director, Michael Whelan, SM, of Australia. In his article, “The Marist Way, a Contemplative Way”, he developed the theme of contemplation from the writings of our Founder, Jean-Claude Colin. Another article in this issue, “Mary, Model of Contemplation in Action” by Ted Keating, SM made use of Fr. Colin's view of the contemplative life of Mary as a model for mission and ministry. Marist Postulant Nik Rodewald, while preparing for the Novitiate was interviewed by the vocation director, Jack Ridout. He presented a fresh view of Marist spirituality that drew him to the Marists which was rooted in “breathing her spirit” – interpreted as what leads Marists to living her life, a contemplative life. Brian Cummings, SM, who treats us in each issue to a reflection on a current film for spiritual insight, saw *Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri* as a way of capturing Colin's pastoral insight - that we are not called to “solve people's problems” but to “relate to them at the level of the heart to enter into the mystery of their lives” – a contemplative path.

The Fall 2018 issue (Volume 4, Issue 2) opened with “Marists and the Mysticism of Action” by Ted Keating, SM, a phrase (borrowed from Jesuit Studies and a favorite of Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach, SM, the Superior General of the

Jesuits) reflecting the great work the Jesuits have done in renewing St. Ignatius's original contemplative emphasis. It also captures Colin's personal mysticism evident in his life now shared with us in the new biography of Colin by Justin Taylor, SM. The Centerspread article in this issue focused on three Marists working in prison ministry in the United States. The three Marists chose unusual ways of naming their ministry which conveyed a profound insight into what they were encountering in these locked cells secured by armed guards. Tony O'Connor, SM, working with imprisoned migrants and refugees at the United States border titled his ministry, “In My Prison There are No Criminals.” John Bolduc, SM described the Suffolk County House of Corrections in Boston, Massachusetts as “A Temple Where I Feel the Presence of Christ.” Réne Iturbe, SM, viewed his Marist ministry at numerous California prisons as being, “An Instrument of Mercy” with convicted inmates and immigrants, both of whom he befriended and with whom he formed healing relationships of mercy. Irony, upon irony, upon irony that reflects a mystical sense of life for these three men. They see what is there while at the same time see through what is there. Brian Cummings, SM, writing about the eerie film *Loving Vincent*, reflected on Colin's sense of bringing about a “new Church” in our chaotic world – “Not as we know it” – moving beyond our “comfort zone” and drawn by the freshness of the Spirit into a new reality of a new creation.

The third and final issue of Volume 4 (Winter 2019) took us into the “explosive power of surprising Hope and creativity” that a contemplative life brings to our sense of Mission. A reflection by Ted Keating, SM, “Of Refugees, Pilgrims, and Caravans” – each of these being journeys rooted in hope and only made possible by that hope as a discerned choice over despair and depression in the face of challenges – presented a keen insight into a central aspect of the identity of the United States as a nation of immigrants. Gerard Hall, SM, an Australian Marist theologian, explored the heart of the integration of contemplation and discernment in ministry and mission in his article, “Mysticism at the Heart of Marist Mission.” The dimension of pilgrimage was also demonstrated in the Centerspread article about the new ministry of the European Province on the *Camino de Santiago*, one of the most ancient and famous pilgrimage routes through France and Spain. The ministry there is one of hospitality, counsel, a coffee

or a meal and accompaniment in prayer with “seekers on the road”. Brian Cummings’s movie reflection was on *First Man*, a movie about Neil Armstrong, one of the most famous and remarkable journeyers to set foot on the moon. Yet for all that, both Armstrong and his wife, Janet, come across as examples of people so close to the very heights of human destiny yet who end up deeply human and almost unaware of this “great step” for all humankind.

In Volume 5 we took that natural step from contemplation/mysticism into discernment. If a life of contemplation in Christ gradually fills our hearts, our minds and our imaginations with the Presence of God, that presence drives us to it into the world of suffering humanity. “It is no longer I who live but Christ Who lives in me.” **In the first issue of Volume 5 (Spring 2019) Ted Keating, SM wrote the theme article “Contemplation Meeting Action in Discernment.”** He stated, “The world of mystery, prayer, and faith has to hit the ground in action.” Faithfulness to the God of our heart is the very meaning of discernment, of where the will of God leads us in the world. Mary Ghisolfo, former president of Marist Laity and former principal of École Notre Dame des Victoires, a school rooted in Marist values, wrote “Servant Leadership and Marist Values.” Her article showed the faithful move from prayer and contemplation to service. The Centerspread focused on the formation of our young Marists at the Scholasticate in Rome, Italy, as they are prepared for Marist life and ministry. Brian Cummings’s reflection on the film *Of Gods and Men* described a whole movie of embodied discernment in the ordinariness of daily life - the true story of a Trappist monastery in Tiburtine, Algeria. Their life of contemplation, communal prayer, dialogue and service to the local Muslim community all factored into the very difficult group decision to remain in the monastery during the Algerian Civil War - arriving at the discerned truth that abandoning their surrounding Muslim community could not possibly be the right path. They knew they would likely be murdered by the military and they were. It was one long painful story of the heart of discernment. The seven Trappist monks were beatified in 2018. Finally, in this issue, Jack Ridout, the vocation director, shared the experience of helping many young men through their process of discernment in “Marist Vocational Discernment in Today’s World.”

The Fall 2019 issue (Volume 5, Issue 2), in a striking article by Brendan Murphy, a Social Studies teacher at Marist School in Atlanta, Georgia, shared the critical role of experience in forming the soul for discernment in an article based on his *Bearing Witness* program at Marist School. He opened with a quote from Murray Linn, a holocaust survivor, that came from a letter Linn had written to the students of the program: “It is said that the greatest journey starts at the heart. In the years to come you will have a chance to clear the mirage clouding the views, lift the veil of misconception and serve as a beacon of enlightenment to humankind. You are a gift of history to our legacy.” *Bearing Witness* is a profound program that teaches the students about the Jewish Holocaust in Germany. Brian Cummings reflected upon the movie, *The Children Act*, an adaptation of an Ian McEwan novel. The movie presented a scandal of good intentions with painful results - attempting to let the often-painful role of logic and law, which tries to legislate the “good”

for children, - come to be seen as an evil twin of discernment. Nik Rodewald, while in the Marist novitiate, shared aspects of his discernment about his decision to take vows as a Marist. He reflected upon the “power of narratives” - building a vision out of the stories of which our lives are made, and now looking for God’s ever-present voice for this next step in that story. Kevin Duggan, SM, a Campus Minister at Marist College in New York, reflected on his efforts to help college students make use of their faith for the important life decisions they face at their age combined with a culture that can only distort and confuse a faithful remembrance of what God calls them to in a particular “vocation.” Ted Keating, SM, in his article, tried to unravel the misuse of the word “method” when used with discernment. Discernment is not a method but the surprising finding of a gift of grace from God - unearned but discovered as a gift waiting for us in our lives and histories. “I once was blind but now I see.”

In this issue of Volume 5, we conclude this collaborative effort of communal discernment to explore, develop and deeply reflect on one of the key emphases of the Marist General Chapter. You will find a piece by Elizabeth Piper, a member of Marist Laity, on the ordinariness of day by day discernment in families. The Centerspread looks at what discernment over the course of many years has creatively brought to the life in Leicester Square in London at Notre Dame de France, the French Church of London. Here numerous volunteers, especially many Marist Laity, serve refugees, the homeless, the hungry, and work with large numbers of youth. This was a carefully discerned ministerial effort making good use of one of our earliest parishes. Mark Dannenfelser, the adult education director for Our Lady of the Assumption parish in Atlanta, Georgia describes his work in helping adult Catholics better discern what it means to live in a world more and more in peril as Pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato Sí*. Brian Cummings, SM, brings his skills for faith reflection to the sometimes-controversial movie *Jojo Rabbit*, watching specific acts of love transform the lives of three people under the Nazi oppression. Can humor in the midst of tragedy be an element of discernment?

As John Larsen, SM, said early in this collaborative effort: “One of the most remarkable (and perhaps unexpected) challenges that arose from our recent General Chapter (2017) was the clarion call for all Marists to live a life of contemplation.” We hope we can say that *Today’s Marists* in its own small way heard that the clarion call.