

# MARY .... CALLED AND SENT AS A MISSIONARY OF HOPE

Conference talk by Fr John Larsen, sm in La Neyliere, Penecost 2025.

## Introduction:

The history of the Marist Laity, or Third Order of Mary, is long and complex. It is well traced in the book "Lay Marists", an anthology of historical sources, compiled by the late Father Charles Girard.

Today, we need to be looking afresh at the role of Lay Marists in the light of so many contemporary changes – the call to the synodal church, for example – within the world, the Church and the Society of Mary. Most people I know seem convinced that the Lay Marists have a key, even critical, role to play in any future Marist life and mission but there are many obstacles towards defining how the Lay Marists might develop as a lay group in the Church and its relationship to the other professed and ordained Marists in the Church.

Being invited by the Lay Marists in France to share some quality time with them in La Neyliere this June, 2025, and to reflect around the theme of "Nothing is impossible for God, do you believe that?" (Luke 1:37), has encouraged me to contribute to the discussion about the role of Lay Marists into the future by preparing some reflections. Thank you for the invitation!

I am conscious I am reflecting as the Superior General of the Society of Mary and that the lay Marists have a life and vitality all of your own. I do not want to trespass on your territory. Yet we do share one Marist charism and so I feel I can offer some fraternal reflections that might help us to discern together how best to move forward from here. I appreciate that you are the ones who will decide for yourselves.

## Mary is called by name and given a role in the History of Salvation. (Luke 1: 26 – 38).

Mary is among the "anawim", a faithful and poor daughter of Israel, an unimportant woman in the over-all history of her time and who came from a remote village in a remote Province of the powerful empire. Nor was she religiously of great significance, in contrast, for example, to Zechariah, who is also called in this same chapter of Luke's Gospel. Zechariah was an important priest in the capital city of Jerusalem. Mary was a humble virgin, of no significance.

Yet Mary is called by her own personal name. She is a sign of hope to millions of other people who have lived obscure and unimportant lives and whose names are long forgotten. If she has been called by name, in spite of her insignificance, others of us, equally insignificant, can also be called.

She is given a responsibility: "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus". He is to give the Son of God to the world. Her Son is to be the Saviour of all people.

She questions how this can come about but is told of her special relationship with the Spirit of God who "will come upon you".

She is the woman of faith who believed that "nothing is impossible for God".

## How does Mary's call and her unique role challenge us as Marists?

Lay Marists are also called from our ordinary lives to bear the Name of Mary and enter the society of those who are called by her Name. It is a special call and needs to be honoured as such. It is easy for us to say "everyone is a lay Marist", or that anyone who has a friend who is a Marist or who works alongside Marists is a "lay Marist". If everyone is a lay Marist then "lay Marist" is of no great significance. Lay Marists discern a specific call, a response to a particular grace, and respond. So, it is important that there is a way of calling people to the group and a "naming/commitment ceremony" of some sort, though the practical way of doing this varies in different regions of the world.

When we are called by God to bear the Name of Mary as Marists, it implies a responsibility to share in her work to bring the Word of God into the world. If we commit ourselves as lay Marists and nothing changes in the world around us, then it is an empty call. The call means that we have a responsibility to bring the Good News to our world. Lay Marists need to act as bearers of the Good News. What these actions might be depends on the various circumstances and places where we find ourselves. This calls for discernment about what action is required wherever we find ourselves.

The call to bear the Name of Mary and to continue to do her Work bears fruit in the world around us. I think of some of our schools that were once led by Professed Marists. When the ministry in the school has been continued by a committed lay Marist, or lay Marists, then the Marist charism and spirit is self-evident. You see it in the way the school is run. Everyone somehow “knows” this is a Marist school. When the school is led by people who feel no special Marist vocation it may still be a very good school but something very important – the sense of Mary’s presence – is lost.

There is a very special and life-giving relationship between the Spirit of God and Mary. She opens her whole life, in great faith, to the workings of the Spirit of God even with her questions and doubts. Likewise, the lay Marist movement is rooted in faith in the Spirit of God and great trust in the ways of the Spirit. The responsibility to bring the Good News of the Son of God to our world derives from our life in the Spirit of God. Lay Marists are called, then, to a life of profound openness to the Spirit, a life of contemplative, personal and liturgical prayer. In the early rules of the Third Order, for example the rule of Father Pompallier for the lay Marists of Lyon, were quite specific. These days, it is more flexible depending on different situations, but the call to a deep spiritual life is as vibrant as ever.

Mary is called within the living Tradition of the long history of Israel. Luke’s narrative of the Annunciation is rooted in the calls of the prophets and wisdom figures of the past. Our Marist vocation is also rooted in the living Tradition of the “new Israel”, the Church of God. Our call as Marists is rooted in our Baptismal call, our call to be a Christian. It would be unwise to put our call to be Marist as in any way separate from our call to be a Christian within in the Church. Jean-Claude Colin placed our allegiance to the Roman faith at the heart of our life. Sometimes, I wondered about all this when I was living in Buddhist Thailand and Myanmar. Some of our closest collaborators in mission were wonderfully committed Buddhists. They certainly called themselves “Marist” proudly and loudly. In what sense was that true for them to say they are “lay Marists” if the Marist vocation is a charismatic call within the Catholic Church?

Mary is the woman of great faith who believed that God intervened directly in her life and she changed her way of living in the world because of his intervention. “Nothing is impossible for God”. We who bear Mary’s Name share her belief. God is so real and immediate that we shape our life-decisions on his intervention. In a secularized world it can be difficult to actually believe in the intervention of God who calls us by name and gives us responsibilities to bring the Good News of his Son to the people of today. As difficult as it is for us to believe that “nothing impossible for God”, we live our faith vibrantly in a world often secularized and dismissive of faith as way of being.

Mary was called by the angel Gabriel who was sent from God. We continue the work of the angel Gabriel today whenever we call others to bear the Name of Mary, call them to Marist life. A lay Marist group needs to keep growing and new groups need to keep emerging to continue the Work of Mary in our world. If we always meet the same faces year after year then the Marist vocation becomes moribund. There are endless varieties of Marist groups depending on where we live. In Cameroon a group that had become middle-aged over many years was re-generated when a couple of the members decided to invite university students to form a group. In the times of Fathers Colin and Eymard, there were many children’s groups and also groups for diocesan priests, such as the Saint Jean-Marie Vianney. We need to keep up the work of the angel Gabriel calling people to share the Name of Mary and her role in the Church. This call for Marist vocations extends both to the lay

branches of the Marist family and the other branches of the Marist family, professed and ordained. How are we carrying on the work of the angel Gabriel today?

### **Mary as Missionary of Joy (Luke 1: 39 – 56).**

Mary set out in haste to the hill country of Judah to visit her cousin Elizabeth. These two women are centre-stage for this scene of the Gospel and they are both full of the Spirit of God as Elizabeth's child leaps for joy just as their forebear, King David, had leapt and whirled as he danced for joy before the ark of the covenant.

#### **Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth inspires us as Marists today.**

Mary wastes no time to set out "in haste". The scene is full of energy with a sense of purpose. For us who bear the Name of Mary it is a call to set out from our home comforts in response to a spiritual call. It can be easy for us as Marists to plan and talk and see dangers ahead instead of responding to the urgent needs of our time. Like Mary, we are called to set out *in haste* and resist the call to stay safely in our comfort zones.

She went to the hill country of Judah. Pope Francis was fond of calling all of us to go to the "peripheries", whether geographical or existential. Mary leads to the peripheries and away from our home comforts which can weigh us down.

In the early days of the lay Marists some of them took this rather literally. We can think of women like Françoise Perroton and her companions who went to the islands of the Pacific, from Lyon to Wallis and Futuna. The museum here at La Neyliere reminds us of their journey. Suzanne Aubert also left Lyon to go to New Zealand and it seems more than likely that his lay Marist will be a canonized saint before too long. These women were lay Marists who literally went to the peripheries of the then known world. Françoise Perroton was granted a passage on a ship to the Pacific by another lay Marist who was the captain of the ship.

There are still lay Marists who are offering some time of their lives to go abroad to remote Marist missions and bring the Good News to the people there. This movement of lay Marists on mission is very helpful, especially for younger people or sometimes for retired lay Marists.

However, while the call to go literally to the peripheries of the world is rather particular, we are all called to search out those on the peripheries who are near to us and bring the joy of the Incarnation to people around us. Our towns and cities are full of people who are poor and struggling. They are often "hidden and unknown" by no choice of their own. They are "hidden and unknown" because they are an embarrassment to others, and no-one wants to see them or know them by their names. All of us as Marists – lay or religious – are called to find these people around us and stand in solidarity with them. We become "hidden and unknown" ourselves when we stand in solidarity with these people. Together with them we search for life-giving Word of the Spirit that will bring joy and hope.

I know from my time in the Philippines how powerful a witness to the Gospel it is when Marists undertake a ministry among such people. Most Sunday mornings in the Philippines, for years, a group of us Marists, lay and seminarians and professed, would go to the prison and celebrate Mass with the prisoners there, visiting them and talking with them, singing and praying with them, encouraging them. In the afternoons we would often go the psychiatric hospital – priest and lay together – and again celebrate Mass with the patients. Afterwards we Marists would gather in a restaurant and share our stories and experiences and a tremendous bond of missionary friendship built up between us.

Of course, we can't all go the prisons and hospitals, although in the early days of the lay Marists I believe many lay Marists did just this in different cities in France, starting in Lyon.

Our neighbours who are suffering from loneliness, or the young migrant family who is struggling to live in the host country, are always fairly nearby. Recently I spoke with lay Marists in Passau, in Germany, who have worked for years answering desperate telephone calls of people who are struggling in various ways. Theirs

is a telephone ministry. One such lay Marist told me the “number one problem” in that part of Germany is isolation. Many people live alone and feel totally isolated.

Like Mary before us, we are called to “the hill country”, to places and to people who are isolated.

The theme of this beautiful passage of the Visitation in Luke is that of faith and joy. Mary sings the Magnificat. The child jumps for joy. The women embrace each other. When we reach out to the people who are isolated in our world the characteristic of the Marist is that we bring joy. Joy is an echo of the love of God for his people, as Mary sings in the Magnificat. If there is any sense that we are reaching out because we feel we are obliged to do it, then we make people uncomfortable and they will feel more isolated than ever. There is a saying in English: “as cold as charity”. It is only when faith and love motivate us, as for Mary before us, will we bring hope and joy to the people we encounter.

### **With Mary at Pentecost. (Acts 1: 14, 2: 1 – 13).**

Mary believed “nothing is impossible for God”. She grew in her understanding of her vocation in the passage in Luke’s writings about the time of Pentecost. Mary is gathered with the other women and the disciples in the Upper Room when they were overcome with a strong wind and by tongues of fire which transformed this little group of fearful believers into a community of disciples who were to bring the Good News to the world of their day with great courage. “With Mary at Pentecost” is the theme of the Marist General Chapter this year, 2025, and as we explore the theme we can be inspired by the Spirit of God in our Marist vocation, lay and religious.

How can this Pentecost scene help lay Marists to deepen the understanding of the Marist vocation? Tomorrow we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost.

The scene opens with Mary and the other women and the disciples working together to depth their understand of the meaning of the very recent death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord. They were “devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14) together with Mary. They were considering what they needed to do next and who would be part of their group. They were remembering their own failures and the dramatic failure of Judas Iscariot. Mary encouraged them in their discernment.

This scene highlights the importance of groups of lay Marists gathering together regularly – with Mary among us – to depth the meaning of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus for us in our time. It is important that we gather and pray together and work together to deepen our commitment. To be a lay Marist is to belong to a group, with Mary among us. Where there is no group then we work to form a group so that we can work together to depth the mystery of the grace of Christ in today’s world. Marist lay groups evolve as they adjust to changing circumstances. If they become too entrenched or inward looking, or lose their foundations in the life of Christ, they simply fade away. When, however, they are full of faith and life, flexible and creative, then they contribute generously to the life and mission of the local church.

The mighty winds blasted through the doors, walls and windows of the Upper Room which were all closed because of their fear of the authorities. When we commit ourselves to stay close to Mary in the Upper Room, our fears and our closed attitudes are also blasted away. It is not just that we are called to let go of outdated structures but, more importantly, to try to understand the mystery of Christ among us in more profound and creative ways. This is symbolized in the story in Acts by the image of the disciples “beginning to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability”. (Acts 2:4). As the story of Acts continues, it will be not only their fellow Jews who will be hearing the Good News in their various and foreign languages, but they will come to understand, slowly and painfully, that the Good News of Jesus Christ will enlighten and nourish even the pagans. This is a massive change of prophetic imagination brought about by the Spirit of God. It begins at Pentecost and Mary is at its birth.

Lay Marists, too, are called to be a force for proclaiming the Good News near and far. The Spirit can shape us, too, “to speak other languages, as the Spirit gives us the ability”. The languages of the young, the secularized, of those people fixated on social media, of those who are different from us. Let the Spirit blow a gale!

We need to be looking at structures that serve the life and mission of lay Marists. The heart of the lay Marist vocation is that of Mary. Just as Mary was called and given her role, lay Marists share that call and her role in the community. Just as Mary went out to the peripheries, “the hill country of Judah”, so Marists are called to the peripheries of today. Just as Mary encouraged the disciples to depth the meaning of the Paschal mystery and to let go of their fears to preach the Good News to the people of their day, so Mary encourages us to depth the meaning of our faith and to let go of our fears and bring the Good News of her Son to the people of today. We can let go of structures that no longer serve us well and develop structures that free us to live the life of Mary who believed “that nothing is impossible for God”. This affects everything – our “rule of life”, our age demographic, our relationship with the Society of Mary, our commitment to our prayer life and to our mission.

Thank you for this opportunity to reflect with you on the vocation of the lay Marist today in the light of Mary’s faith that “nothing is impossible for God. Do you believe this?”. Just as Mary was called and sent by the Spirit to the hill country of Judah and to the “devout Jews from every nation” (and pagans, too) so we share her call and mission.

A blessed feast of Pentecost to one and all.

#### **Discussion questions:**

What difference does it make in my life that I am called to participate in Mary’s call by the angel Gabrielle and how could I/we call others to Marist life?

How are we as Marists today called to bring the Good News to the people who are hidden and unknown on the peripheries of our localities?

What would our groups look like if we really implemented more bravely our belief “that nothing is impossible for God”? What changes might we hope for?