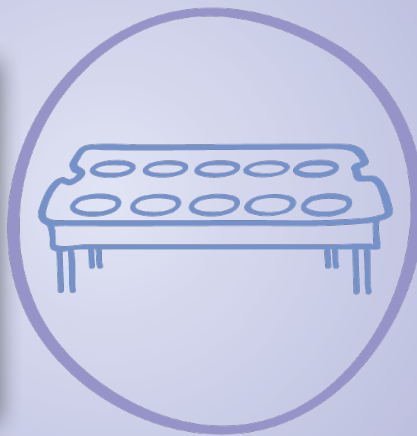


# La Valla: the lighthouse



Letter of the  
Superior  
General

25  
March  
2017



## Dear Marists of Champagnat,

On 2 January this year we celebrated as a family the 200 years since the foundation of the Marist Institute. The celebrations have continued over the months since and will, I am sure, continue until the end of 2017.

The General Council itself decided to mark this occasion in three special moments:

- The **2nd of January**, connecting us to the past, found us celebrating in various places in the Marist world, highlighting **the international character of the Institute and the continuing relevance of its mission**. Members of the Council were present at La Valla, Nairobi, Lujan (Argentina), in Sri Lanka, in Rome... I myself was in Bangladesh, opening an intercultural, inter-religious school to serve particularly the sons and daughters of tea plantation workers.
- On **6th June**, in Rome, we want to celebrate who we are today in **communion with the whole Church**. On this day we will launch the *History of the Institute* in three volumes as well as a photographic display on the Institute today.
- On **8th September**, the General Chapter will begin at Rionegro, Colombia, bringing together representatives from every Province and District in the world. It will be a wonderful occasion for **giving thanks, asking forgiveness**, and, above all, for **committing ourselves** to the future.

This year 2017  
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**Champagnat House in La Valla is not only the home of Marcellin and the first Brothers but also Mary's home**

In this way we will complete the three years dedicated to deepening the three fundamental dimensions of our lives: in the first year we let ourselves be challenged by the young *Montagne* (mission); last year we reflected on the meaning of *Fourvière* that invited us to a revolution of tenderness (community); this year 2017 we want to understand better, from the hands of Mary, what it means to be **contemplatives in action** (mystical dimension).

Champagnat House in La Valla is not only the home of Marcellin and the first Brothers but also **Mary's home** for it was here that our religious family, bearing her name, was born. It is the house of our origins. And, as such, it holds a tremendous symbolic power for all Champagnat Marists. It synthesises the three dimensions we have been working on over these past three years:

- The top floor reminds us of the community of apostles, gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. This is the area dedicated to **mission**. *Go and make disciples of the whole world ...* A large, well-lit place, open to the world, it reminds us of the *Montagne* Year, and the call to go to the frontiers and margins.
- On the floor below there is the famous table from our origins, representing **community**. Around this table sat Marcellin and the first brothers. Today this table is being enriched by the presence not only of Brothers, but also Lay Marist men and women, called to build up a Church with a Marian face. This was the theme for the second year, the year of *Fourvière*: gathered for the sake of Marist mission.
- In the basement of the house there is a small space that you have to go down to reach. This symbolises that inner space where Mystery dwells in each of us. It is the space of interiority, of the **mystical dimension** of our lives.

The home of Champagnat and of Mary becomes for us a **lighthouse**: a reference point in the middle of the darkness by which to navigate and reach a safe harbour.

In this house our first Brothers filled their eyes and hearts with light. They let themselves be invaded by a light that filled their lives with meaning and lit up the pathways of their life's pilgrimage. Today the house of La Valla continues to be a source of light for our spirituality. **It points out the pathway for us to follow**, a road that each of us is invited to walk along in our own unique and original way. More than that, along this road we are called to become each one of us a lighthouse for others.



The more deeply and harmoniously we live these three dimensions, the more transparent we will be of the light that dwells in us, as the Lord himself said:

*You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket. It is set on a lampstand where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, **your light must shine before others**, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Heavenly Father (Mt 5, 14-16).*

Following on from my previous letters, *Montagne: The Dance of Mission* and *Fourvière: The Revolution of Tenderness*, this letter intends to round out the reflection we have begun, concentrating in a particular way on the call to become **men and women of God**.

## Elijah: God was in the gentle murmur of silence

If La Valla is our lighthouse, then we are called to be *children of the light and children of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep as the rest do, but let us stay alert and clear-minded* (1 Thes 5, 5-6).

As St Paul says so well, the first thing we have to attend to, if we want take our vocation as God-seekers seriously, is the invitation to maintain a state of being **alert and clear-minded**, or, in other words, of being **awake**.

Continuing with this symbolism of light/day (waking) and darkness/ night (sleeping), the author of the Letter to the Romans insists,

*It is the hour now for you to **awake from sleep** for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed; the night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. (Rom 13, 11-12).*

We are not of the night or of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep as the rest do, but let us stay alert and clear-minded.

Pope Francis has also made frequent use of this image, inviting us to ask ourselves, **Has my life fallen asleep?** (13 April 2014). Further, he defined religious as men and women **who can awaken the world** (30 November 2013).

The image of awakening has been used by widespread religions such as Buddhism (Buddha means the Awakened One) and ancient Greek mythology where Athena, the goddess of wisdom, was represented by an owl (the technical name of which is *Athene noctua*). With its eyes always opened, it communicates a state of vigilance and complete attention, including during the hours of darkness.



Why this insistence on being **awake, alert and clear-headed**, as St Paul counsels?

Because, as Tony de Mello said,

*The great tragedy of life is not so much what we suffer but what we miss out on. Human beings are born asleep, live asleep, and die asleep ... We never wake up. And **this is precisely what spirituality tries to do: to wake us up.***

Judging by the constant invitation to stay awake throughout the history of humankind, we could say that **being distracted** has been a feature of human life since our origin. But I believe that we can affirm, without the slightest doubt, that it has reached epidemic proportions in the XXI century.

In September 2016, Andrew Sullivan published an article in the New York Magazine, entitled, *I Used to Be a Human Being*, in which he explained his own experience of being addicted to the Internet. And how, after 15 years of life *online* or virtual life, he decided to opt for **real life**, engaging in a kind of detoxification program.

In this article, he spoke of a study conducted in the United States among young adults. These young people used their cellphones on average five hours per day, on 85 separate occasions. Similar to what happens with most addicted people, they were not aware that they were spending so much time on their cellphones. Yet the truth is that, whether they were aware or not, a new technology has taken control of approximately a third of the hours that these young people are awake.

The arrival of Smartphones has gradually changed the way most of us behave, also mostly without our realizing this. You only have to look around to note the number of people bent over their cellphones while walking, driving, playing with their children, or taking a break in a restaurant... So much so that in Bodengraven-Reewijk, a Dutch municipality, they took a rather extreme decision: since people are not going to stop looking at their phones while walking, they have inserted a strip of very bright red LEDs in the footpath to indicate to those looking at their phone, and, hence bent over towards the ground, that they are approaching traffic lights or a pedestrian crossing.

**being distracted has been a feature of human life since our origin. But I believe that we can affirm, without the slightest doubt, that it has reached epidemic proportions in the XXI century.**

*This new epidemic of distraction is our civilization's specific weakness. And its threat is not so much to our minds, even as they shape-shift under the pressure.*

*The threat is to our souls. At this rate, if the noise does not relent, we might even forget we have any.*

Andrew Sullivan

The objects we use  
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by the day ...  
Could it be  
that we too are  
becoming lighter,  
more shallow?

Back in 2010, Nicholas G. Carr published a book, the basic thesis of which was described in its long title: *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. But it is not just our brains that are changing. The philosopher Lipovetsky maintains that we are in **the lite-civilisation**. Starting from the growing tendency to make technological objects ever and ever lighter (I am writing these words on a computer-tablet that weighs less than 800 grams), being light or *lite* has become a value, an ideal, an imperative in a multitude of domains: things, the body, sport, food, architecture, design. The objects we use are becoming lighter by the day ... Could it be that we too are **becoming lighter, more shallow?**

Obviously, we are not talking about turning our backs on technology which provides such marvellous services but rather of becoming conscious of **how we are relating** to new technology and in what measure this is affecting us and conditioning us to live our lives **permanently distracted**. This becoming conscious is only a first step; what is important, of course, is to take the necessary measures to be able to live **life to the full**.

In a number of meetings with young people I posed the question, **Are you really living or simply surviving?** It is a question I also ask myself since the risk of living **asleep** or **in a shallow way** stalks all of us constantly. For certain, many of us can remember the words of Thoreau made famous in the movie *Dead Poets' Society*:

Are you really  
living or simply  
surviving?

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*

Bronnie Ware, an expert in palliative care and terminal illnesses, in her book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing* gathered the honest and frank confessions of people on their deathbeds regarding what they would like to have done or not done.

*I made a long list of regrets, but in the book I tried to focus on the five most common. The main regret of many people is 'if only I had had the courage to live the life I really wanted and not the one that others expected me to'.*

As we said above, St Paul invited us to awaken from our unconscious state and allow ourselves to be enlightened by Christ and so live **life to the full**, and not as a living death!

*Awake O sleeper,  
and arise from the dead,  
and Christ will give you light  
(Eph 5, 14).*

In fact, the Lord himself reminded us that he had come not only that we might have life, but **life to the full** (Jn 10, 10). Frequently, however, we hear the complaints of many who are living at a very fast pace and in a crazy manner, not giving time to what they consider as really important, in a type of existential schizophrenia. Is this what life is all about?

*Part of the problem, is that everyone is in such a hurry, Morrie said. **People have not found meaning in their lives**, so they are running all the time looking for it. They think the next car, the next house, the next job. Then they find those things are empty, too, and they keep running...*

*Mitch Albom, Tuesdays with Morrie*

**Go outside  
and stand  
on the mountain  
before me;  
I will be  
passing  
by**

The biblical episode of Elijah in the cave on Mt Horeb can enlighten us in our interior search for fullness. In Chapter 19 of the First Book of Kings it is said that Elijah lived through a period of profound fear and personal confusion. So much so that he wanted to die. In the depth of his despair he heard the call of the Lord to go on searching, to head out, and this he did over 40 days until he reached Mt Horeb, the mountain of God. The Lord told him, *Go outside and stand on the mountain before me; I will be passing by*. The narrative goes on to tell us that the voice of God was not to be found in the howling wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the raging fire, but in **the gentle murmur of silence**.

Cardinal Martini, in his commentary on this passage, said,

*Silence opens the heart and the mind to listen to **what is essential and truthful** ... Today it is a must for anyone in a position of public responsibility to have extended times of silence throughout the day. The greater the responsibilities, the more extended these times should be.*

Elijah can be a symbol for all of us who are seeking peace and meaning in our lives. God-Seekers. From Elijah we learn that **God is encountered in interior silence**, something that was as difficult to live in the times of the prophet as it is in our days.

In Italy there is an icon of Mary, the Madonna of Silence, in which she is portrayed with a finger over her mouth, inviting us to be silent, while she blesses us with the other hand and encourages us to enter into ourselves so that we may encounter the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.

Pope Francis received a copy of this icon in May 2015 and had it placed at the entrance to the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican. When he blessed the icon he said, *May all who enter this Palace always speak the right words. **Be quiet so that you may listen. Listen so that you may speak wisely.***



*Holy Mary,  
Mother of silence,  
guide us to the fountains of peace.  
Free us from being drowned in words,  
our own, above all,  
but those of others as well.  
As children of noise,  
we believe that we can hide  
the insecurity that bedevils us,  
trusting in our own interminable idle talk.  
Help us realise that,  
only when we finally keep quiet,  
can God speak.*

...

*Preserve us from the morbid seductiveness of news,  
that renders us deaf to the "good news".  
Make us practitioners of an ecology of acoustics  
that gives us back a taste for contemplation  
even in the whirlwind of city life.  
Convince us that  
the great things of life mature only in silence:  
conversion, love, sacrifice, death.*

Don Tonino Bello

Introducing silence into our daily lives is a basic condition for becoming **more human** and bringing **quality and depth** to our lives. Without silence, it is very easy to waste our lives on trivialities, to be pushed and pulled by life's circumstances, to take decisions precipitately. Without silence, how do we give of ourselves in authentic encounters with others or with the living God?

*Everything great in this world is shot through with silence: the stirring of love, a falling from grace, the rising sap, the light of dawn filtering through the closed blinds in peoples' homes ...*

Jules Supervielle

It certainly is a first step in our **inner journey** but one that cannot be skipped over. The Book of Wisdom puts it in a very beautiful, and poetic way: *When peaceful stillness compasses everything, and the night in its swift course was half-spent, your all-powerful word from heaven's royal throne bounded ... into the land.* (18, 14).

## Jacob: The Lord is in this place and I never knew it

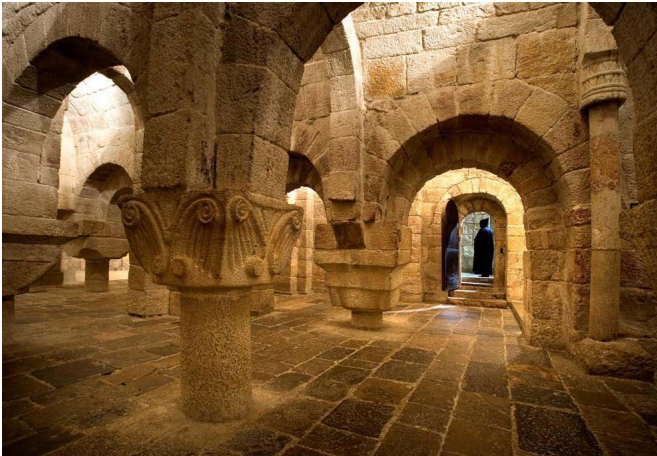
Placing God outside ourselves is the norm for many believers. When we say God's name, many of us point upwards: God is in the heavens, far away and beyond, distant and external to ourselves. This image is very negative in the way it places God outside the world.

Placing God outside ourselves is the norm for many believers. When we say God's name, many of us point *upwards*: God is in the heavens, far away and beyond, distant and external to ourselves. This image is very negative in the way it places God **outside the world**, external to human beings; remote from them, more like a spectator, watchman or police officer of the world.

This image also has serious consequences for our relationship with God. If God remains remote and outside ourselves, then we come into contact **only from time to time**, through people, places, things, rites, prayers, that have something sacred about them. God is and seems far off. It takes a prayer to get heard.

Consequently, our relationship with God could be likened to when we are going to visit someone important. I am going to speak to God. And, often, this happens in church, in the sacraments, in *visits to the Blessed Sacrament*. This is when I remember God and encounter God. For the rest of my life, God runs the risk of remaining outside, external to my life.





At the end of 2016 I had the good fortune to visit the Monastery of Leire (Navarra, Spain). I was really taken by the crypt which dates back to the XI century. As in other Romanesque churches, the positioning of the various columns and arches makes you feel as if the whole architectural complex flows around a central point: where earth connects to heaven, the **axis mundi or the axis of the world**, as the ancients used to call it and as historians of religion still call it.

By the use of symbolic and religious language, the faithful were invited **to discover the divine**

**centre in themselves**, not in ideas and theories, but in their vital core: that living centre of each one's being that shapes who we really and truly are.

The God who is within
   
 and not outside,
   
 who is present
   
 in every reality
   
 and everything that
   
 is, who embraces us
   
 inside and out,
   
 we name as
   
 Holy Spirit

The evangelist John, in his well-known farewell discourse of Jesus (Jn 14,17), reminds us that He will not leave us orphans, but rather will give us a protector, an advocate, a permanent companion: *the Spirit of truth whom those of this world cannot receive since they do not see or know the Spirit*. He goes on to make the remarkable and surprising statement, *You, on the other hand, do know the Spirit since the Spirit dwells in you and is in your midst*.

The God who is within and not outside, who is present in every reality and everything that is, who embraces us inside and out, we name as **Holy Spirit**. So, there is nothing outside of God; nothing happens outside God. We are never far off or outside but rather always before, in and with God.

In any case, we must remember that all language about God is limited, and therefore we use metaphors. When we say that God is within and not outside, we want to avoid any perception of God as distant, but we do not want in any way to encapsulate God in the realm of subjectivity and interiority. St Augustine said that the presence of God was **closer to us than we are to ourselves**. At the same time, however, he stressed that in no way can we possess or capture God for ourselves. Hence he added that God was *greater or more transcendent than anything we possess*.

## God is presence

St Teresa used to say that we are an inhabited castle. St John said exactly the same: we are God's dwelling place. If God is not outside but within us, embracing and lovingly penetrating all of reality, prayer changes a lot. It is no longer a question of speaking to Someone outside, distant, but of opening myself, being attentive and listening. Or, simply, **to stay** with this Presence living in me.

*Silence is that space in which God is not invoked but is simply present.*

Giovanni Vannuci

Being still and listening are, then, basic. It is a question of cultivating attention, the opposite of distraction. St John of the Cross and Simone Weil used to speak of **loving attention**. Whoever is lovingly attentive to the present, enables an encounter with the mystery of life, an encounter with God. *Indeed He is not far from any one of us. For 'In Him we live and move and have our being.'* (Acts 17, 27-28).

A similar idea has been passed down in the rabbinic tradition in the Hebrew word *shekînah* which refers to the presence of God and God's closeness to people. So, if we live in the *shekînah* of God, if God is present in the here and now, we do not have to go around looking for God elsewhere. As St Augustine said of his own experience, "Lord, You were within me, but I outside, and it was there that I searched for you ... You were with me but I was not with you."

Etty Hillesum, killed at Auschwitz in 1943 when she was 29 years old, said,

**God is present in the here and now, we do not have to go around looking for God elsewhere.**

*There is a very deep well inside me. God abides in this well. Sometimes I succeed in reaching it; often it is covered over with rocks and sand: then God is buried. You then have to dig God up again. I imagine that some people pray with their eyes fixed on the sky, seeking God outside themselves. There are others who bow their heads deeply, hiding them in their hands. I think they are looking for God inside them.*

Father Champagnat, according to the testimonies of our first Brothers, lived steeped in the **presence of God**. It was a topic dear to his heart since it appears all throughout his life, from his personal resolutions as a seminarian, up to his Spiritual Testament just before his death. The topic came up frequently in his letters, his talks to the Brothers and his sermons. *Perhaps you may wonder why I insist so much on this topic, he said in one of his talks. Simply, because it is the basis of the spiritual life.*

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His **profound attention to the presence of God**, which made such an impression on those who knew Fr Champagnat, allowed him to *keep himself recollected and united with God as much in the streets of Paris as in the woods of the Hermitage.*

In accordance with this simple way of putting oneself confidently in the hands of God, our Founder taught his Brothers to **pray without words**, to contemplate, as we can read in the biographies of Brothers Jean Pierre, Louis and Dorothée...

From the hand of Fr Champagnat, we too are invited, in the midst of a world full of

noise and distractions, to engage in **contemplative prayer**, focussing our attention on the God who dwells within us.

*For the Lord abides in our most intimate depths, provided that He encounters us at home and that the soul has not gone out with the five senses*

Meister Eckhart.

In the Christian tradition, there are various ways of practising contemplative prayer but attention plays a decisive role in all of them. The three most important are: prayer based on focused attention, prayer based on open awareness and moving prayer.

In the Christian tradition, there are various ways of practising contemplative prayer but attention plays a decisive role in all of them. The three most important are: prayer based on focused attention, prayer based on open awareness and moving prayer. In each of these, one tries to be **open to a wider state of consciousness** through practices that help to take the focus off oneself.

The Fathers and Mothers of the desert (monks, hermits, and anchorites who in the IV century abandoned the cities of the Roman Empire after the Constantine peace to live in isolated spots in the deserts of Syria and Egypt) were clear in stressing the importance of prayer based on **one-pointed focus**: the repetition of a phrase or *formula* as John Cassian used to call it. However, in the writings of Evagrius Ponticus, the teacher of Cassian, we find not only this first way of praying but also the second. Here we are invited to become aware of our sensations, feelings, thoughts, desires and actions and the causal relationship between them. The recommendation is to live the present moment intensely, becoming aware of every aspect of our being. This second type of prayer is today known as **mindfulness** but it had been a significant part of the teaching of Evagrius, as an essential ingredient of the path that leads to personal transformation through self-knowledge and self-acceptance.

We also find the third type of prayer, **prayer in movement**, in the Desert Tradition, where the body was very important in praying. Deep bowing, kneeling, or full prostration were ways of expressing humility and reverence through the body, although standing was the norm, frequently with arms extended and the palms of hands facing up, as is depicted in Paleo-Christian art.

As we can see, contemplative prayer goes back to the origins of Christianity and had different forms, yet they all tried to ensure that prayer did not revolve around oneself: my words, my sin, my interests, my successes, my worries... In order to open oneself, in an attitude of listening, to the discovery of our God who is so much **more than we could ever think or imagine**.



For this very reason, when we speak of attention we are not referring to an intellectual exercise but rather to what is better described as a **stilling of the mind**. As St Teresa said,

*the best use of the soul is not in thinking a lot but in loving a lot ... And so, she proposed recollection, which she defined as follows: It is called recollection since the soul collects together all its powers and **enters inside itself** with God, since it is very important not only to believe this (that God abides in one's soul) but to come to understand this **from experience**.*

No words can replace personal experience, and this is available to everyone. It is not reserved to a select group but open to anyone who wants to advance along the passionate path of seeking God, as far as being able to exclaim like Jacob, **waking from his sleep, Truly God is in this place and I never knew it!** (Gen 28, 16).

Following on from the Fathers and Mothers of the desert, many others in the Christian tradition have proposed methods of contemplative prayer. I am sure that many Brothers have entered this type of prayer through the Rosary which is based on the repetition of the same words over and over, without the need to think much, but simply to adopt a serene and trusting attitude, *like an infant in its mother's arms* (Ps 131).

How wonderful it would be if all of us, Champagnat Marists, were capable, at this beginning of the XXI century, of setting aside a time of silence in our lives each day and of cultivating some type of contemplative prayer that opens us to experience God beyond concepts and learnt categories. Related to this, I remember very well the impact produced in all the members of the General Council by the question posed by Br Philip Pinto, then Superior General of the Christian Brothers (Edmund Rice), **What do you know about God that you have not learnt from a book?**

How wonderful it would be if all of us, Champagnat Marists, were capable, at this beginning of the XXI century, of setting aside a time of silence in our lives each day and of cultivating some type of contemplative prayer.

**The Eucharist is a privileged moment of prayer and ecclesial communion**

In this letter, I have concentrated mainly on personal prayer since experience tells us that many of us find difficulties in introducing the habit into our daily lives and persevering in it. This does not mean, however, that community prayer is not important. While personal prayer is above all silence, community prayer is the appropriate means for expressing our corporate character as a community in communion with the whole Church. It can also be a good support for personal prayer, when we pray in silence together.

The Eucharist is a privileged moment of prayer and ecclesial communion, combining, as it does, community prayer with personal prayer, and also offering the opportunity to listen to the Word of God and let it sink in.

For those who want to delve further into the practice of contemplative prayer, there are some resources available on [www.champagnat.org/lavalla](http://www.champagnat.org/lavalla)

## God is Word

Personal prayer is of the greatest importance for progress along a spiritual path. It was not in vain that Fr Champagnat called it the **key factor** and invited the Brothers to dedicate time and whatever else they might need to it. Br Avit collected these words of Marcellin, "*Prayerful Brothers are precious people whose value we should never underestimate. The more of them we have, the more will the Institute flourish and the more will it be blessed by God.*"



In the main chapel at the General House in Rome there are two beautiful ceramic images situated on either side of the sanctuary. The image on the left depicts an Angel inviting us to silence, and in the other we see Mary in an attitude of attentive and profound listening to the Word of God.

The Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, written by Pope Benedict XVI at the end of the Synod on the Word of God, spoke of Mary as: **Virgin who listened**, who lived in complete harmony with the Word of God, who kept in her heart the events of her Son's life, piecing them together as in a mosaic (cf Luke 2, 19, 51).

In the Gospel, Jesus points out the true greatness of Mary in saying that "My mother and brothers are those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice" (Lk 8, 21). In reply to the shout of a woman in the crowd praising the womb that bore him and the breasts that suckled him, Jesus points to the secret of real joy:

**"Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it"** (Lk 11, 28).

Inspired by Mary, we too listen closely to the Word, aware that *our personal and community relationship with God depends on our growing familiarity with the Word of God* (*Verbum Domini*, 124).

In order to facilitate this *familiarity with the Word*,

may I dare to suggest that we introduce the habit of using **lectio divina** personally as well as in our religious or lay communities.

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to the Word

*Lectio divina* proposes a method of gradually approaching a biblical text. It dates from the Fathers of the Church (around the year 300), who, in their turn, took their inspiration from rabbinical use. The patristic method is quite simple, involving three steps: **reading, meditating, contemplating**. Today there are a number of methods that can be used according to the needs of a group or an individual.

During the meeting of the Plenary of the Vatican Congregation for Consecrated Life last January, a meeting in small groups took place. One of the topics we shared

on was our experience of *lectio divina*. I was most impressed by the testimony of Cardinal Gérald Cyprien Lacroix, archbishop of Quebec (Canada). Over time he has been introducing this methodology into his archdiocese and today it is their habitual practice in almost all meetings, with fruitful consequences. *It is a joy, he said, to see people arriving at meetings with their Bible tucked under their arm, for they know that they will have an extended time dedicated to praying and sharing on the Word of God,*

Thanks to the generosity of Archbishop Lacroix we have at our disposal the material used in his archdiocese, available in various languages, which can be downloaded from our website: [www.champagnat.org/lavalla](http://www.champagnat.org/lavalla)

## Job: knowing God by word of mouth or by encountering Him

Religious circles today have one outstanding feature in common: a strong desire to seek a **direct experience of God**. This seems to be common to all religions and confessions. Combined with this, we are hearing the voices of significant religious people, committed to their own experience of God and to helping others in this process, who are pointing out that a religious change is taking place. A change that is, in their opinion, profound and radical.

According to them, it concerns a new step in the evolution of religious consciousness. It is a new axial time or turning point, described by some as the initial phase of a step forward from mental, cognitive consciousness to transpersonal or mystical consciousness.

This change at the mystical level is said to be driving a quite fundamental religious change today. Not only Christianity but religion itself is going down this path of transformation. This was recognised by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in 2012, when speaking of a **cultural and religious tsunami**, of a *metamorphosis which may make it difficult for us to recognise ourselves in the near future*.

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to seek a direct  
experience of God

The Jesuit William Johnston published a book entitled *Arise My Love: Mysticism for a New Era*, with a subtitle that suggests where this profound change is heading: *From dogmatic theology to conversion of the heart*. What matters is gaining **wisdom** as distinct from mastering theological concepts: *going beyond reasoning and thinking, beyond imagination and fantasy, beyond a before and after, until one enters timeless reality*. In other sections of the book, echoing the unrest in the Catholic Church related to the rigidity of the norms of the Vatican Curia and the stagnation of the spiritual life, he points to the need to recuperate the dimension of an **intimate experience of the mystery of God** and of the experience of oneness with God.

E. Biser would say that the attitude that has predominated until now can be compared to standing in front of a grandiose facade, such as a Gothic cathedral, but not crossing the threshold. A good number of believers appear to be outside, entertained by the doctrines, morals, laws, and rites but with little or scarce depth or conviction. The result is a religiosity which is merely skin-deep, very external, and which has not penetrated to the depths of each believer.

*The hour is coming when the signs of these times will be better understood. I foresee that an immense intellectual and religious effort needs to happen to get out of the modes of thought, the ideals, the untested and implicit 'facts' that currently feed our intellectual life, our constructs and our judgements. We must not become too settled. What is needed is a religious and intellectual deportation, an exile that people in former times sought in the desert, a change of situation that people sought before by simply taking off. We are terribly settled in our lives; the privileged circumstances of a public servant; sure of our daily sustenance; our family; our old age; our social standing; our class; our country; our epoch .... All these things are sources of stability which often turn to stagnation. Nothing big, new or creative can be produced by those who are incapable of living here below as deportees.*

Marcel Légaut

**Truth is to  
be found in the  
depths**

The deep transformation that religions are experiencing calls for a shift towards interiority, to living as one with this Ultimate Reality that encompasses us and that we call God. Seeking this oneness is the core business of all religions. In this sense, it is a religiosity that passes and transcends all religions and confessions. As Paul Tillich said, truth is to be found in the depths. This opens up the possibility of an interesting encounter with other religions not based on discussion of theology or doctrine but about ways of going more deeply towards the Centre or core that all religions target.

The Anglican Archbishop Rowan Douglas Williams was invited to address the participants at the Synod on the New Evangelisation. He made a deep impression on me by the depth and beauty of his reflection which clearly reflected this shift towards interiority, something he invited people to cultivate:

*To be contemplative as Christ is contemplative is to be open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts. With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow ...*

*Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.*



Undertaking this experiential path is to participate in something that is both **gift and task** at the same time. All religions recognise that people do not reach God through their own efforts, and, in this sense, they only encounter God as a **gift offered to them.**

In Ryōan-ji, a Buddhist temple in Kyoto (Japan), there is a sink carved out of rock into which water gently flows without ever pausing. It is a *Tsukubai* which could be translated as *a place where one must bow*, given that to drink the water one has to lean over, a gesture that communicates both prayer and reverence. In this *Tsukubai* four Japanese characters are carved which can be translated as: **Everything you need, you already have.**

Indeed, the water reaches the *Tsukubai* and is freely offered to all, as a gift. But each person has to lean over, take the water and drink it to quench his or her thirst. It is, then, a gift which must be welcomed. A gift which demands that a task be done.

The Book of Job tells us the story of a *blameless and upright man, who feared God and avoided evil* (Job 1,1). A good man but one who had never really met the living God. As we know, a large number of misfortunes

happened to him, one after the other, which obliged him to question the meaning of his life and his image of God. He lived through a process of purification and detachment until finally one day he could say to the Lord, *I had heard of you by word of mouth but now my eye has seen you* (42,5).

In a similar way, we are all invited to undertake our own journey of spiritual growth - which is both gift and task - until we can say to the Lord, like Job, that what we know of Him is not because of what we have learnt from others but because of what we have experienced.

Marcel Légaut (1900-1990), French writer and thinker, said of himself,

All religions recognise that people do not reach God through their own efforts, and, in this sense, they only encounter God as a gift offered to them.

*I was a maths lecturer at the university until I was forty-two. Then, I changed profession in a rather rushed way. I became a shepherd and continued as such over three decades, at 1000m above sea level ... I moved from my job as university lecturer to work as a shepherd because I was feeling that not only was it necessary for me to plumb my own depths, **my full development as a person**, but because, if I had refused this option, - which meant taking a leap in the dark - something in me would have remained wounded.*

Légaut went the whole way in his spiritual search as a layperson, and discovered, from his own experience, the importance of responding to the demands that were arising in his inner self so as not to stagnate and to continue moving forward, since, as St Teresa said, *If you don't grow, you wither.*



*An important element in my spiritual work is the conviction that one only truly begins to discover what the spiritual life is when, in each of us, demands arise that are sufficiently ours and ours alone that others do not know them. In such a way that these demands shape who we are as persons and make us distinctive not because we want to be shaped or distinctive but because, if we do not follow the demands, we would be denying our very selves. For me, then, the spiritual life begins at the moment - there is a particular time for each of us - that each one of us discovers, within him or herself, those demands that are one's own and are not deduced from doctrine, ideology, discipline or any imitation. We are dealing here with something very personal and unique, so much so, that those standing at our side have no way of understanding these demands in the same way as ourselves.*

Another way of referring to these inner demands spoken of by Légaut would be the word **discipline**. All who would like to develop as an artist, be it in music, painting, poetry, dance, sculpture etc. know that they are responding to an inner gift but that, at the same time, they have to go through a demanding process to be able to bring out the best in themselves.

Frequently, learning is given at the hands of a master, and this is why the word discipline comes from *disciple*, and this in turn comes from the Latin verb *discere*, to learn. It is impossible to learn without discipline, without habits, without rigour, without willpower. We learn through study and practice. We learn as well by getting in touch with our feelings.

Creativity, genius, and innovation are integrated into a process that goes **from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence** in four steps:



1. Unconscious incompetence: we do not know that we do not know. We are ignorant.
2. Conscious incompetence: we know that we do not know. We lack the know-how.
3. Conscious competence: we know that we know. We are apprentices.
4. Unconscious competence: we know and we act with great competence without effort. We are masters.

The road to travel from the first to the fourth level is arduous, requiring effort, renunciation and commitment. The process is not easy but leads us to fulfilment, transformation, and finally to joyful commitment to others. And the fundamental ingredient in this pathway is discipline.

This should not, then, be understood as some disagreeable demand. Without discipline, there would not be habits, nor skills development, nor mastery, nor art, nor culture. Discipline leads to **creative freedom** because it shapes our consciousness, our sensitivities, our capacity for helping others grow.

All the great mystics mention, in one way or another, that gifts are received along the way. If one wants to reach

one's objective, one has to advance decisively. St Teresa used to say that in order to succeed in drinking from the fount of living water,

it takes **great and very determined determination** to persevere until the end, come what may, whatever happens, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don't have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses. People will say to us time and again: "It is dangerous", "So-and-so was lost through doing this", "Someone else got into wrong ways", "Some other person, who was always praying, fell just the same", "It is bad for virtue", "It is not meant for women; it may lead them into delusions", "They would do better to stick to their spinning", "These subtleties are of no use to them", "It is quite enough for them to say their Our Father's and Hail Mary's."

The Spirit,  
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so that throughout life  
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what gives us life  
and reject  
what drains us  
of energy  
and vitality.

Discipline, or better, the inner demands that arise in us, refer not only to certain spiritual practices, but to one's **entire life**. *Ethics is a precious stone inscribed on the bottom of my heart*, says the Buddhist author of *Shadoka or the Song of Enlightenment*. The Spirit, from the depths of our hearts, keeps on offering us signs so that throughout life we can choose what gives us life and reject what drains us of energy and vitality.

*I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live ...heeding the Lord's voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you. (Dt 30, 19-20).*

The fruit of going down this path is **personal transformation**, as St Teresa explains so well in the book of *The Mansions*, also known as *The Interior Castle*, through the image of the caterpillar which is transformed into a butterfly. It is a very powerful image since in the butterfly, an insect with wings of fascinating colours, absolutely nothing remains of the ugly caterpillar. Its DNA is totally different to the DNA of the caterpillar. It is the only example among all living creatures of a total change in genetic structure. It is not a matter, then, of the caterpillar evolving into the butterfly, nor even a transformation properly speaking of the caterpillar into the butterfly, since death is complete for the caterpillar. The butterfly is, to use a Pauline expression, *a new creation*.

This personal transformation is the basis of and authentic an enduring **social transformation**. The Letter from Taizé for this year 2017 puts it this way,

*Peace on earth begins in the heart of each person. It is first of all our hearts that have to be changed, and this change involves a simple conversion—allowing God's Spirit to dwell within us, welcoming a peace that will spread out and be communicated little by little. "Achieve inner peace and thousands around you will be saved." (Seraphim of Sarov, a Russian monk, 1759–1833.)*

This inner, mystical revolution is no enemy of social or political engagement. Nor should it be said that internal transformation is more important than action for justice. The two calls are inseparable: **the call to prayer and righteous action**, in the words of the Protestant martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from his prison cell in 1944. *True prayer purifies the motive; true justice is the necessary work of sharing and liberating in others the humanity we have discovered in our contemplative encounter* (Rowan Douglas Williams).

**This inner, mystical revolution is no enemy of social or political engagement.**

## Noah: build yourself an ark

At the end of the Sixties, Fr Giovanni Vannuci, Servant of Mary, founded the hermitage of *San Pietro alle Stinche* near Florence, with the aim of **building an ark of silence** to be a counterpoint to today's flood of words.

Like Noah, we have received an invitation from the Lord, "Build yourself an ark" (Gen 6, 14). We will need it to navigate across oceans that are sometimes placid and sometimes turbulent. We will need it to *cross to the other shore* (Mk 4, 35-41), to discover the new things that await us there, *going from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that never end*.



Like Ulysses on his journey to Ithaca, we will come across beautiful sirens who will try to trap us with their marvellous singing. Maybe we will then try to block our ears or tie ourselves to the mast as Ulysses and his sailors did, so as not to be drawn towards them. Or better still, we could act like Orpheus who played music more beautiful than that of the sirens, leaving them dumbstruck. So, the more we find our **own inner melody** and let it rise up in full harmony, the more possibilities will there be of overcoming our difficulties with joy and reaching port successfully.

Like Ulysses, we too know that it is a crossing worth spending our lives on.

*As you set out for Ithaca  
 hope the voyage is a long one,  
 full of adventure, full of discovery.*

...  
*Hope the voyage is a long one.  
 May there be many a summer morning when,  
 with what pleasure, what joy,  
 you come into harbours seen for the first time;*

...  
*Keep Ithaca always in your mind.*

*Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.*

*Ithaca gave you the marvellous journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you will have understood by then what these Ithacas mean.*

Constantine P. Cavafy

In our journey, we keep La Valla as our point of reference, our lighthouse that shows us the way. Will we have the **necessary courage** to enter our ark of silence and set sail for unknown lands? Are we ready to pay **the personal price** of this marvellous adventure?

**Why not start right now** to set aside a time of silence in your life, opening up a contemplative space before the One who is Presence?

*Like the silence of the world at dawn  
when the waking of light is heard  
or like the woods totally attentive  
to the nightingale singing in the night:  
so we too keep silent,  
feelings and thoughts stilled, in silence,  
may our hearts be the cloister of God,  
where the Spirit prays on our behalf.*

David Maria Turollo

May Mary, Virgin of Silence, woman attentive to the Spirit, ever listening to the Word, walk with us and bless us so that there will truly be a *new beginning* in the heart of each Champagnat Marist.

Your brother,

