

Marian Lecture 2017
UNDERGROUND CATHEDRALS
Renewal for Our Church

My talk is about how the Holy Spirit, in spite of all appearances, manages to lead us at all times. Even when the established Church as we know it seems to be crumbling, the Holy Spirit is busy in the underground cathedral establishing new ways of serving the Lord.

I am using the situation of the Marist brothers in Australia as a litmus test of this hypothesis.

The Church, as well as everyone else, must understand that the world was hit by a cultural tsunami in the Twentieth Century. We can only humbly begin to pick up the pieces and put them back together again, in constant touch with the Holy Spirit. Only then can this vibrant twenty-first century begin to sing a new song to the Lord.

The Marists were founded to undertake such a task, to share in ‘Mary’s work,’ to sing a new Magnificat, actually to ‘be Mary.’ Their constitutions speak of ‘sharing in the motherhood of Mary . . . of bringing Christ-life to birth and nurturing its growth.’ Every century is a new opportunity for such incarnation, such visits of the angel Gabriel to those who willing to become vehicles for the Holy Spirit. Never was a century more in need of a Theotokos.

When the holy spirit needs to take extravagant and unheard of initiatives to salvage a particularly critical situation can the Holy Spirit rely on you? Mary was asked to become an unmarried mother at a time when punishment for adultery was stoning to death. How

far would you be prepared to go – and what would you be prepared to do – or are there certain no-go areas: limitations, restrictions, caveats attached to your commitment. You are called to be streams of living water in a land almost synonymous with drought.

‘We have come to the sense, Les Murray suggests, which the aborigines had before us, that after all human frenzies and efforts there remains the great land. As George Johnston wrote, nothing has yet happened in Australia which stands out above the continent itself. We know in our bones that the land is mightier than we are, and its vast indifference can drive us to frenzies of desecration and revenge. We know, deep down, that the land does not finally permit of imported attitudes that would make it simply a resource, a thing; it has broken too many of us who tried to make such attitudes fit in. Unlike North America, it is not a vaster repeat performance of primeval Europe, a new Northern Hemisphere continent with familiar soils and seasons into which a liberal variation on inherited European consciousness might be transplanted with prospects of vast success. It is something other, with different laws.’¹

Like everyone else, you have to examine your past in order to evaluate your future. You opened your first school in 1872. Now you have over fifty Marist schools around the country. You could be in a position to act as mid-wives to a Twenty-First Century Christian spirituality. *Australia del Espiritu Santo* Pedro Fernandes de Queirós called it in the Sixteenth Century when he mistook it for another land mass and named it for Spain with all the Pacific region to the South

¹ Les A. Murray, ‘Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia,’ in *The Shape of Belief, Christianity in Australia Today*, Dorothy Harris, Douglas Hynd, David Millikan, [Eds.] Lancer Books, 1982.

Pole. That was the way things were done in those days, when men were men! And you came with the conquerors, which means a change of idiom at this time. Poetic thinking is the way forward in destitute times. In this sense, all art is essentially poetry. There should be a dialogue between artists and philosophers as backdrop to Christianity's way forward in 21st Century Australia, 'to think our way soberly into what the poetry says.'²

Listen again to Les Murray: 'It is hard to resist the speculation that a decline in religious certainty has provoked an upsurge in searching and questioning – and a decline in an odd sort of anti-religious hectoring, which required a firm opponent to batter against. Things have arguably gone too far for that now, and the near total divorce of State from any underlying religious ethic has produced not 'freedom' but a terrifying void against which comfortable old Enlightenment audacities are meaningless. It is generations since an agnostic involved any daring, and atheism tends to put one into coercive rather than generous company. More seriously, whether we believe in the soul or not, neither of these positions feeds it; we feel its hunger as a matter of experience, and have nothing to feed on but our own selves. At bottom, we cannot build a satisfying vision of life upon agnostic or atheist foundations, because we can't get our dreams to believe in them.'³

Surely, Christianity was meant to survive the vicissitudes of whatever century. What can we do, and what should the Church do, to become a vibrant presence in this country and in this century?

² Cf Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, New York, 1971, p. 96.

³ Les Murray (1997), 'Embodiment and Incarnation,' in *A working Forest: Selected Prose*, Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, Pp. 319-22.

David Tacey suggests that ‘despite the unfortunate baggage they carry’ Spirit, Soul, and God, ‘are still the best terms we have for describing the realms of experience to which art, prophecy and our deepest intuitions continue to point.’⁴

The first thing to understand is the real miracle of Christianity’s survival at all. Although 2,000 years is short when compared with the history of the universe, it is still significant in terms of our human history. This Church of ours began in Jerusalem with a small group of disciples who believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So many religions, political parties, businesses, have thrived for a few inspiring and energetic years before collapsing into oblivion. Statistics supplied by sociologists [mostly in America] suggest that 75% of small businesses fail in their first 5 years and 50% of the remainder collapse by their 10th year. Unless your business is big and boisterous, it is never going to endure. And Christianity is no exception. Every large institution that hopes to survive on this planet has to become a sustainable corporation. The Catholic Church [The Greek word καθολικός (*katholikos*) means ‘universal’] has over one billion members living in almost every country in the world and is the oldest religious institution in existence. That is the reason why the Roman Catholic Church became a massive institution over the 2,000 years of its existence. I have written a book called *Dancing with Dinosaurs* to suggest ways of negotiating such a dance partner without getting your knees capped or your toes crushed.⁵ The secret is that the Holy Spirit is the

⁴ David Tacey, *Reenchantment, The New Australian Spirituality*, Harper Collins, 2000, P 38.

⁵ Mark Patrick Hederman, *Dancing with Dinosaurs, A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, Dublin, Columba Press, 2011.

dinosaur's mahout. Guidance from the Holy Spirit allows for genuine development and prevents both ourselves individually, and the church as an institution, from completely losing our way.

In the 300 years or so between the historical life of Jesus and the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, the church focused primarily on survival. Christianity spent those first three centuries as a sometimes outlawed organization unable to possess property or make any great sociological impact. After the ban was lifted by the Emperor, the Church's private property grew quickly through donations from pious and wealthy people. The Lateran Palace was the first significant gift from Constantine himself. From the fourth century for the next thousand years, this became the principal residence. Now, if you go to Rome you will be gob smacked by the size of everything Catholic. St Peter's itself is the very symbol of overly massive Corporate Catholicism. One visitor, asked what he thought of it, replied: 'it's certainly an improvement on Nazareth.' It has markings on the floor to show where St Paul's Cathedral in London would end; and lines sneering at other pretenders in the contest for the heavyweight title of 'biggest church in the world.'

You emerge onto the square which could be a stage-set for further remakes of Ben-Hur. 'You won't find Christ in Rome unless you bring him there with you yourself,' says an Irish proverb.

But this is the Church we've got, and this is what we have to work with. *The Acts of the Apostles* supposedly written by Saint Luke, one of the disciples of Jesus, between 80–90 AD, describes how the first small group began, and how they tried to live the Christian life

as it was intended to be, mirroring your founding father's simple beginnings, as described in *Water from the Rock* [2007] Pp32-35.

The Acts of the Apostles has an interesting passage [5:34]. The disciples were about to be put to death by the authorities, which might have meant an end to their story, but for a famous intervention by a leader of the Sanhedrin. I'll read you the passage: 'Then one of the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, held in high reputation among all the people, and he asked that the apostles be put outside while he spoke as follows: elders of Israel, take great care how you treat these people. Remember how some years ago a man called Theudas, boasting that he was somebody of importance, gathered around him up to 400 followers. These were all slain and his movement came to nothing. Then after him, Judas of Galilee, in the days of the taxing, who also drew many after him. He also perished, and all belonging to him were dispersed. So, I say to you, stand back, and let them alone: if their movement is simply human it will come to nothing; if it is from God, you will not be able to thwart it; and, furthermore, you will be remembered as people who fought against God.' This famous speech has echoed through history, and the law of Gamaliel is this: 'if what is happening comes from God, then do what you like, you won't be able to stop it.'

We are privileged to live in such times. And if the Church is to continue in its present form, or in any other form, it will be the work of the Holy Spirit and no one will be able to stop it. The underground cathedral which has been trying to emerge will eventually break ground and become a home for us. And so, our first and most important task, each and every one of us, is to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. Just as in the Sixteenth Century, the

Jesuits were formed to be soldiers fighting for Christ in the Post-Reformation scenario, your ‘Society of Mary’ was seen as necessary in the Nineteenth Century, when all ‘belief’ seemed to have disappeared. Your founder, Marcellin Champagnat, was born on the day the Bastille fell, in 1789, and the French Revolution began. The Church in France was irretrievably associated with the *Ancien Regime*. Stendhal’s novel, *Scarlet and Black* shows how the social ladders which upwardly mobile French people could climb if they were not born to the aristocracy were the army or the church.

Louis XVI asked to have a priest accompany him to the guillotine, but as any French priest would have been executed with him, he was accompanied by the only English priest in Paris at the time, Mr Edgeworth, who later wrote an account of his adventure. He escaped with his life, much to his surprise, because the executioner was paid sufficiently by the sovereign. Such an anecdote describes the position of the Church as an institution at that time. Rebuilding here would not be the work of soldiers fighting against heresy, but the work of a mother with an ‘unshakeable belief in her children.’⁶ Marcellin was inspired to found ‘a new kind of church,’ one which would be more egalitarian than the one which had been levelled by the Revolution. He was one of the architects of a new church which the Holy Spirit has continued to maintain as an underground cathedral, only breaking ground, so to say, at the Second Vatican Council. Reading the history of his Marist organization we can see that within a hundred years of his inspiration, the Church authorities in Rome reorganized it into a traditional shape, imposing upon it structures which they thought

⁶ Michael Green FMS, *Something New For Our Time*, January, 2016, Pp 3-4.

obvious and necessary. These entailed divisions between men and women, and between clerics, religious and lay people.

[Story of three kinds of ecclesiastical structure represented at Vatican II: Pyramidal; Concentric; and Mushroom varieties].

In still more recent times Marcellin has again been pigeon-holed into the pyramidal structure which the Church of Rome identifies as hierarchy in heaven. Champagnat has moved from being a mere Venerable, to being Beatified, and finally to the highest rank of sainthood which happened at his canonization on the 18th April, 1999. Hierarchy is a paradigm which remains endemic and it will require much ingenuity to remove this brand mark from the identikit of those who follow Jesus Christ in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Underground Cathedral which Marcellin envisaged two hundred years ago can serve as blueprint for a more contemporary design. Australia has been a pioneer in this regard. Here you have recognized that in every Marist Province over 95% of the leadership and work of Marist projects is in the hands of lay people. Among these are many who identify themselves as Marist both in their spirituality and their professional practice. They feel a strong vocational call to be Marist.⁷ Such must surely be the way forward: some recognized structure whereby these admirable people can belong fully, and can exercise full co-responsibility for Marist life and mission. In this you would surely become a pioneering paradigm for the role of all laity in the Church all over the world. Marists, as Pope Saint John Paul II puts it, should have ‘an original and specific way’

⁷ Cf., for instance, the document *Gathered Round the same Table*.

of making visible ‘the presence of Mary’ in the Church today.’⁸ To follow the example of Mary is to disappear whenever appropriate. In the Christian idiom disappearance does not mean failure or proof that something must have gone wrong. It has always been necessary so that the Spirit may come. ‘I am impatient for that loss,’ James McAuley puts it, ‘by which the spirit gains.’ New wine needs new wineskins. 21st Century wineskins will not be three storeys high. The new Marist identity should be as leaven, as that element in the Church that loses itself in the batch in order to promote growth in the rest. Relinquishing all status and self-promotion, they would share the self-emptying of their Lord who became as nothing, to serve the springtime of the world. Where better for the new cathedral to take shape than in Australia, one of the most egalitarian societies in the world. Here everyone from everywhere is a ‘mate.’ Keep going with the movement you have started. Present the fading church with a *fait accompli*. Validation afterwards is easier to achieve than permission beforehand.

[The Church as Montgomery’s governess: the example of cremation].

Our Church is built on the principle of Incarnation. God became one of us and joined us in the socio-political maelstrom of world history. Incarnation today means incorporating ourselves fully into the twenty-first century, not suggesting to our members that they remain ensconced in the Nineteenth. It is as if our world were precariously poised, metaphorically speaking, on two tectonic plates as far as socio-political awareness is concerned. On the one hand, you have the more advanced and sophisticated cultures, such as many of

⁸ Pope John Paul II, Address to the Men and Women Religious of the Institutes of the Marist Family, Castel Gandolfo, 17th September, 2001, quoted in Michael Green, op. cit., p 11.

us in the so-called 'first-world,' where democracy has become the accepted idiom. Then you have the Catholic Church, and many others who, in certain respects, have not yet moved out of the nineteenth century. But, at this time, it is as if these two tectonic plates were on the move. The place where they could meet is called a *plate boundary*. Plate boundaries are commonly associated with geological events such as earthquakes. When previous tectonic plates separated, some millions of years ago, the cliffs of Moher on the west coast of Ireland represented one half of the divide and Nova Scotia in Canada became the other, with the Atlantic Ocean in between. We may have to experience an even greater divide if the two tectonic plates I have been describing collide before the Church realises that such danger is imminent.

We need different strategies, policies, norms and behavioural patterns, to live together in harmony, not just as one island continent and community, but as part of an ever-expanding and, at the same time, interconnecting universe. Our cultures in the past have undervalued and degraded the feminine, both as internal part of each one of us, and as incarnated in over 50% of the human race registered as women. We should no longer allow such stark divisions between two genders but should recognize the continuity in which we all share, in varying degrees. Each of us is situated somewhere along a spectrum of masculine and feminine traits and characteristics, making each of our particular identities as unique and unrepeatable as a finger-print.

The Twentieth Century was a crucible. The world which has emerged from that time-machine is changed, changed utterly. There is no going back; our only way is forward. Discovery of the world of the unconscious; full acknowledgement and acceptance of the

dimension of femininity, both inside and outside of ourselves, with all this implies in terms of gender balance and sexual diversity; recognition of the immensity of scientific discovery; and humble apprenticeship in a laboratory of ever-expanding technology; these are some of the characteristics required for access, capability and survival in the new world we have inherited. Dr David Barker responsible for the 2004 Report of the Church in America, refers to the ‘perceived wisdom that culture change takes 200 years in the church.’ ‘This is no longer an acceptable point of view; it is an excuse for inaction,’ he warns. The Catholic Church has probably five or, at most, ten years before being reduced to a tiny irrelevant minority within our so-called Western World. We would then be categorized as out-of-date leftovers from a previous era, such as the Amish communities in America and Canada who were founded in the Seventeenth Century and steadfastly refuse on principal to move into the Twenty-First. They use horses for farming and transportation, dress in a traditional manner and forbid electricity or telephones in the home. Church members do not join the military, nor do they apply for Social Security benefits. They refuse to take out insurance or accept any form of financial assistance from the government. They value rural life, manual labour and humility, and they discontinue formal education at the age of fourteen. We might be less identifiable and less obvious retros but nonetheless determined to remain behind where the nineteenth century left off.

Let me tell you about myself. In October 2008 I was elected fifth abbot of Glenstal Abbey in Limerick, Ireland. This vote could not be ratified in Rome, however, unless I, who had been a brother monk for almost fifty years, was prepared to be ordained a priest.

Why was this so? As far as I could determine, since the year 1983, which is only thirty years ago, a canon has been added to the Revised Code of Canon Law which stipulates that ‘power’ in the church can only be exercised by those who are ordained priests.

This raises serious problems for the Roman Catholic Church in general. What can possibly have happened as recently as 1983. One explanation is that a theological opinion about ‘sacred power,’ which was not sufficiently debated by theologians, became incorporated into the Revised Code of Canon Law (1983), particularly Canon 129.⁹

This canon specifies that only those who have received sacred orders are qualified for the power of governance, also called the power of jurisdiction. The canon further stipulates that although lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power, they cannot wield it in any significant way because, legally speaking, ‘cooperate’ does not mean ‘participate.’ Such is the view of Ladislav Orsy, expert in Canon Law, who himself attended the Second Vatican Council [which gives you a hint about what age he is]. Where this insertion into the code comes from is not clear; what is clear is that it must be rescinded.

This is a matter separate and different from the question of women’s ordination. What we are talking about is clericalization of the Church we all belong to. Whether priests are men or women, or

⁹ Can. 129 §1. Those who have received sacred orders are qualified according to the norms of the prescripts of the law, for the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction.

§2. Lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power according to the norm of law.

both, we cannot have a situation where only priests can exercise power. This amounts to a clerical oligarchy in which lay people have no say in matters of legislation or governance and no real or effective participation in the running of the Church. So, it concerns not just lay people who might want to become Marists, it concerns the whole Institute of the Marist Brothers themselves. This has to change and any ambiguities about it must be ironed out.

And we have to face another reality: the word ‘Catholic’ has very bad press in the twenty-first Century because of catastrophic revelations of evil-doing by some of its members in the recent past. Certainly, the Church, throughout all its history is human, all too human, and has committed heinous crimes, been guilty of far too many grievous sins, and has made too many very serious mistakes.

Christians must recognize the fact that they have regularly distorted the truth of the faith of Jesus, in various ways and to varying degrees over virtually the whole history of their religion.¹⁰

However, in spite of the aberrant behaviour of many of Christianity’s adherents, the truth which it embodies and which is its direct source and origin, is still the truth that can save us and save our world. And by ‘save’ I mean accomplish for us, in us, through us, the highest form of life possible to imagine, both now and in eternity.

Marists helping to bring about the changes in both the Church and the world which are necessary might concentrate, as they have so often done, on education, a critical way of making a difference to the

¹⁰ James P. Mackey, *Christianity and Creation, The Essence of the Christian Faith and its Future among Religions, A Systematic Theology*, Continuum, New York & London, 2006, Pp 397.

future. Discovery of the ‘unconscious,’ as we have mentioned, was as world-shattering as the discovery of America in 1492. The world had to reinvent its maps. We had been living on the top storey of a house with a vast cellar underneath and had only been given the key to the trap-door leading to these uninvestigated depths. One whole century since we discovered this reality about ourselves and yet, our education systems have hardly changed at all from the times before the discovery was made. There is also a crisis in the area of education which few seem to recognize. Children all over the world are being sacrificed to the economic ambitions of most of our countries. Economic concerns dominate educational policy. Thirsty for national profit, we promote whatever prepares our children to increase economic growth. We ignore or discard talents, skills and areas of learning which promote and enhance the personal development of our young people. We should not harness our children to the business needs, or the short-term economic growth, of our countries. Just because a multinational company is offering payment for a number of jobs to be done, does not mean that our children’s prospects should be tailored to meet this requirement. The job may become obsolete or be done by a robot in a few years’ time, and the child should have been harvesting other benefits. The obsolete factory model of education must be challenged.

When money is tight and budgets are planned the first subjects chopped are religious education and the arts. Science, mathematics and technology are cultivated; imagination is wiped off the desk-top. Education systems have become weapons of mass destruction where imagination is concerned. No wasting time, we have to get ahead! ‘If this trend continues, Martha Nussbaum warns, the world will soon

be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements.'¹¹

From four years of age our children are treated to a bookish commercial education. The United Nations are determined to inflict this myopia on the children of the world in the name of equality of opportunity. In Europe it is known as the Lisbon agreement of December 2009. The European Union set itself a strategic goal: 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.' Punishing study regimes imposed on children affect their health, their welfare, and their personal development. Cramming heads with irrelevant knowledge to pass examinations is not education. Marist education must be different. Mary is again our guide. As we all have to enter this world through the human body of a mother, so this confusing world has to be mediated to us by a human person. Education means encounter with whoever can unlock that door, without second-guessing or pre-empting the results. Marists know that the Holy Spirit may have plans and hopes for any and every child in our care. And each one should be allowed the time and the space to entertain such a possibility. Two hundred years ago St Marcellin Champagnat responded creatively to the promptings of the mysterious Spirit of God. May he open our imaginations towards something similar in this our own day.

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit, Why Democracy needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, 2010, Pp. 1-2.

