SPEECH OF PROVINCIAL SUPERIOR AT THE FIRST PROVINCIAL CHAPTER HELD IN ACCRA – GHANA, FROM AUGUST 9th to 13th, 2021.
BY BR CYPRIAN BANKAKUU GANDEEBO

Br Ernesto Sanchez (SG), Br Juan Carlos Fuertes (Provincial, Mediterranean Province), Brother Capitulants, Invited Guest: Br Oscar Martins and Br Ken MacDonald (General Link Councilors), Br Aureliano Garcia Manzanal (Vice Provincial and Provincial-elect), Br Francis Lukong (Former District Superior, MDWA), Mr. Samuel Adu-Nontwiri (Lay Marist, Ghana), …

Good Morning!

We have assembled here to inaugurate and to give strategic directions to this new Province. With a joyful heart, and gratitude to God, I welcome you all to this special occasion of the launch of the first Provincial Chapter of our new Province.

Even though the Superior General is not here in person, I know he is present with us through his representatives and in his heart. I am grateful to him for his closeness to the African region and, in particular, to our District (now Province).

I welcome, our Provincial Superior, Brother Juan Carlos Mari Fuertes to this auspicious and joyous occasion of the inauguration of the Marist Province of West Africa. In like manner, I thank all the Brothers of the Mediterranean Province for being a caring mother since 2000. You have been of great support and encouragement in our growth journey towards becoming Province. We dreamed together and what we witness today is the fruit of the reflection, support and accompaniment you gave us.

You provided us the opportunity soar and fly like an angle. Except for the appointments of Master of Novices and approval of annual Budgets, the rest of the functions are performed by the District Superior and his Council. In fact, we have always operated like a Province long before this official inauguration. You never allowed us to think that we were merely chickens. Rather, you encouraged us to be eagles and to fly high in the sky. Hence, on behalf of the Brothers of the District, I would like to sincerely thank you for the trust you have reposed in us and for allowing us to function with minimum interference. Thank you, Brother, and feel welcome!

I extend my welcome to our General link Councilors (Bros Ken and Oscar) who have encouraged, supported, and journeyed with us in this process of becoming a Province. We appreciate very much your presence in this function, and I want to thank you both for your friendship and the fraternity you demonstrate to us. On a personal note, I have received enormous support and encouragement from you. You also defied the challenges imposed by global pandemic to come and facilitate our Assembly and today you are here arain to journey with and accompany us in this important chapter. We are very grateful, and we say thank you and Akwaaba!

I welcome Br Aureliano Garcia (Provincial-elect – Mediterranean Province). Br Aureliano is not new to this District. In fact, he is a former District Councilor. He also worked in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana and travelled to many of the countries of the District. We are delighted that you are elected as Provincial of Mediterranean Province. Our joy is that you know and understand our context and you will support our growth journey. Thank you for your presence and support. You are Welcome.

Thank you and welcome, Mr. Samuel Adu-Nontwiri, (Lay Marist from Ghana). You have shared in the Marist mission as true lay Marist. You are a committed Secretary to the MESC and MSBG

as well as the Marist Vocation Team in Ghana. You are available anytime your services are needed. For instance, your presence in Monrovia was not only limited to supervising our building project but you also established a Lay Marist Group, gathered and taught catechism to young people there on Sundays. Sammy, we are most grateful to you for your availability and service. Feel welcome.

I would like to thank my Councilors for their availability, generosity, and collaborative attitude in assisting me to run the District for the past three years. I am also indebted to the Brothers of District for their trust and collaboration. I thank them for the different roles they played to help me animate and govern the District. I thank the Representatives of the District Superior, Community Superiors, Headmasters/Principals, Bursars, Pastoral Coordinators, Formators, Project Coordinators, the Lay Marists, Commissions and Teams, and indeed all our Collaborators in schools and communities.

I also thank the chairman and members of the chapter preparatory Commission for their hard work in ensuring that we have a hitch free chapter. They have worked through thick and thin since their appointment. Thank you, Brothers, may God replenish your lost energies.

In 2017, the Marist Institute gathered in Medellin in Colombia to celebrate the bicentenary of its foundation. That event coincided with the celebration of the 22nd General Chapter with the theme: 'A New Lavalla for a New Beginning'. It was a kind of renewal for the Institute. Today, we gather here also to mark a special moment in the history of the Marist District of West Africa. Today, we celebrate the 21st Anniversary of the Marist presence in the District of West Africa. On this day, though, our District is being reborn – a kind of renewal as well. Like the Institute in 2017, we too celebrate a New Birth – the commencement of the Marist Province of West Africa.

It is worthy reminding everyone that the Marist District of West Africa was created in 2000 out of the former sectors of Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Ghana, Tchad, Equatorial Guinea and Liberia. Now we are only in five countries. The mission in Equatorial Guinea has since been closed down. These sectors belonged, respectively, to the Levante, Great Britain, Nigeria, Norte and Esopus Provinces.

We are grateful to the Province of Nigeria and the defunct Provinces of Levante, Great Britain, Norte and Esopus for their huge contributions and accompaniment of the growth of Marist life and mission in this region. We are indebted to the Marist Mediterranean Province for being our mother for the past 21 years. Dear Brothers, we thank you for the support, the accompaniment, and for the mentorship over these 2 decades. Ayekoo!!

My dear friends, there comes a time in history when a new page is needed to be open, a time when a fresh start is required. A time where things begin anew. As Seneca puts it, "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end". The beginning of the Marist District of West Africa in 2000 was the ending of an era. The District has also ended but another new beginning has emerged.

Our history, as an Institute, is marked by new beginnings and choices. Every 3 or 8 years we begin anew with different choices. But choices they say have consequences. Today, we have made a choice to become a Province! Yes, we are quite aware of the dire implications of such a decision. Nevertheless, we made a choice to hold the bull by the horns. Like Jesus who resolutely took the road to Jerusalem fully aware of his imminent persecution and death we too make this definitive choice fully aware of the challenges of the socio-political crisis in the English-speaking Cameroon and the COVID-19 pandemic. We cannot tell if this is a suicide mission. What is certain, however, is that this is a significant milestone for us as an Administrative Unit. For me, it is a radical process of renewal for us and all of us must make a pledge to embrace it.

A New Beginning always brings with it grieve. I say grieve because we must forgo or leave behind certain things. And forgoing or leaving certain things behind is very painful. This is because when we leave something behind, it creates a hole or space in us. But creating that hole brings discomfort since we are not used to having a vacuum where something else used to be. Brothers, I am simply saying that leaving behind the past is painful. This is true for the Israelites when they were to leave Egypt – when they experienced discomfort, they remembered the onions of Egypt. They bemoaned and wished they remained in Egypt to enjoy their onions and meat.

The theme for this first chapter encapsulates the idea of making sacrifices to sustain the Province – 'dying to self, generating new life'. And St John (12:24) says 'a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die to bear much fruits'. This might be true for us because as our Superior General (Br. Ernesto Sanchez), affirms in his circular, "Homes of Light", 'this is the time when something new is waiting to be born and we are being asked, not only to transform our hearts, but to make radical changes in our ways of being and acting and in our structures and systems, in an effort to create a renewed and different future". Consequently, we may possibly have to go to certain places that we never imagined or take certain directions that we have often avoided or never considered. We may even be required to take certain unusual decisions in order to accomplish our objectives. Our new beginning requires creativity and risk-taking. The future, according to Brain Tracy, belongs to the risk-takers and not the comfort seekers. This our new beginning requires setting new objectives, and new strategies to achieve those objectives. We need to encourage hard work and self-reliance. I would like to cite Very Rev. Fr. Lazarus Anondee, Secretary General to Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference: "we still think we have donors but the reality is that things are changing fast and we need to depend on ourselves as much as possible" (Interview by Sr Elizabeth Mgbaramuko, SHCJ in The Catholic Standard, page 4).

During the 7th District Chapter (2018), Br Francis Lukong unequivocally informed us that "no one can help us without us", no NGO, not Mediterranean Province, not even God can help us without us. To be sustainable, as a Province, thus we must first of roll up our sleeves and work harder, with commitment, transparency, and self-sacrifice for own future.

In 2018, we reflected on the theme: "A New La Valla for a New Beginning" that resulted into four priorities: Community Living, Finance, Leadership and Mission. For implementation we use them to draw up our community life plans. Additionally, we developed a financial management software (v-track & u-school) to deal with financial leakages. We improved the financial guidelines, created an email system, a database for Brothers, overhauled the Commissions and created Teams in order to involve all the Brothers in the animation and governance of the District. In all these, our target has been to augment co-responsibility for our Marist mission. We are making efforts to empower community Superiors and Headmasters/Principals to play and support the animation of the District. The pace is set, and we must journey on, together, so that we can go far.

What do we go with into this Province? I am glad to announce that we are transiting into a province with a vibrant, dedicated and hardworking Brothers and Lay Marists. We run seven Marist owned schools, two (2) Diocesan schools and teaching in a Diocesan school. Altogether there are eighty-four (84) Marist Brothers, a hand full of Lay Marists, and approximately 7,680 pupils and students with close to 450 Staff members.

Despite the socio-political crisis in the English-speaking Cameroon and the Covid-19 pandemic, many good things has happened in the District during the last three years. We were able to send 7 Brothers for further formation (Lebanon (3), Kenya (3), USA (1)). Another group of 5 brothers are about to start their studies in Kenya, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Brothers were also sent for various formation programs: community leaders Course in Rwanda (6); new horizons in Manziana (2), mentoring or accompaniment of young Brothers & formators (5), Formative meetings (30-45yrs), and pathways and Brothers of other ages (45-60yrs). In the coming year we also plan to train more Brothers as formators and also in the areas of spirituality and theology.

There have been several workshops organized for Bursars, Principals and local Superiors, we also launched a District website, designed and implemented Province Financial Management System, and defied the odds to obtain the long-awaited Land Certificate for our Bekoko Land near Douala. We aim to employ accountants in our schools to help provide professionalism and transparency to our financial areas.

Despite these positive achievements, we have also had some sorrowful mysteries: we painfully lost Br Joachim Doua, (RIP), some family and staff members to death. The pandemic also stalled some projects. The interruption of the school system equally impacted heavily on our income. But with the various interventions from the Mediterranean Province, the General Administration, SED, FMSI, Humanitarian Fund of the General Council, we were able to accomplish some of our needs. Thank you all for your generosity and solidarity.

As we transit into a new epoch, I want to encourage all of us to leave behind all forms of bitterness, antagonism, and enmity we habour in our hearts. Nelson Mandela said that, "Resentment is like drinking poison and thinking that it will kill your enemy". Upon his release from prison, he said: "As I walked out the door towards the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I would still be in prison". Brothers, bitterness and resentment imprison us and they cause us various illnesses including depression, alcoholism, excessive smoking, etc. As St John (20:23) and also St Paul (Col 3:13) wrote, "if you do not forgive your brother his failings, what will you do with them? Therefore, forgive each other as God has forgiven you in Christ (Eph 4:32). Forgiveness liberates the soul and removes fear (Mandela). So, let us leave our bitterness and hatred behind and move on into the New Province.

Thank you all for your attention.