



Dear Confreres,

Greetings again from Villa Santa Maria in Rome as you receive another edition of “Covid-19”.

As countries and states have closed their borders and so many people can be tempted to close their hearts out of fear of the virus, there is a special need for the freshness of the love of the Holy Spirit breathing life and joy among all of us Christians. An international

Religious Community like ours speaks of open borders, open hearts and unity of purpose. We can offer challenge and encouragement for those whose worlds may be closing in themselves. Our very internationality is an expression of hope as we reach out, carefully but as best we can, to those of our neighbours who are suffering around us.

This newsletter is a further attempt to keep us all connected as one family during these days. We read of what is happening with our confreres in Africa and with those gathered at La Neylière. Since our last newsletter we have received the sad news of the death of Fr. Raymond Lacasse (USA) from the effects of the virus. R.I.P.

Thank you to so many who expressed your appreciation for the recent newsletters, both the one from our formation houses and the Covid-19 of last week. Thank you, too, to our team of translators who is working overtime during these days.

You may remember there were four postulants who had immigration difficulties as they tried to enter the Philippines for the present novitiate. We were fairly confident that we could overcome those challenges until all the relevant offices, both in Yaounde and in Manila, were shut down!

We are grateful to the District of Africa for offering to establish a special “one-off”, one-year, novitiate in Yaounde specially for these four postulants. We are grateful to Fr. Raymond Pelletier for agreeing to be the novice master for this extraordinary novitiate. Every blessing to you all as you undertake this adventure in faith.

Pope Francis tweeted this message recently: “I would like to remind you that on 14 May, believers of every religion are invited to unite themselves spiritually in a day of prayer, fasting and works of charity, to implore God to help humanity overcome the coronavirus.” Let’s be united with each other and with believers of all faiths as we respond to this call tomorrow.

Fraternally,

John Larsen s.m.



People were extra sad when Covid-19 reached our nations. The memory of HIV-AIDS and Ebola is still fresh and haunts the continent. Most epidemiologists predicted chaos in Africa because of poverty and our precarious health systems. The number of patients is increasing and catching everyone's attention. There is some indication that a common medicine against malaria may prevent the virus to spread, and this gives hope that a catastrophe may be avoided.

So far, none of the Marist confreres in the District are sick.

Cameroon is also facing a political crisis, which complicates the management of the Covid-19 pandemic threatening. The District of Africa, and especially the confreres at Obili-Yaoundé commemorated the feast of St Peter Chanel on 28 April by offering charitable assistance to people in difficult situations. Those who were helped are mostly Anglophone Cameroonians, who have had to flee towards Yaounde in recent times, both for political and health reasons. Many families and students in our parish have difficulty in finding daily food. The Marist confreres prepared parcels of some basic foodstuff for over 40 needy youth and their families.



The Marist Obili parish has been a spiritual shelter for many underprivileged students and refugees coming from the ongoing armed-conflict in the Anglophone regions and our confreres continue to provide spiritual and moral support for them.

Colinian Renewal from Ray Chapman



The Colinian Renewal 2020 program at la Neylière got off to a wonderful start and built up a head of steam quickly. The participants were enjoying the experience and seemed to find it relevant and helpful. Everything about the program was going along smoothly. Then we hit a rocky patch!

The confreres had started their 30 day Ignatian-style retreat on 11th March, the day the lockdown began in France. The following week the program hit a serious and significant obstacle:

the presence of the COVID 19 virus in La Neylière! It showed its face right in our midst.

This huge disappointment was followed by another major shock. After Paul Loubaresse returned from ministry in southern France, he went into isolation with 'flu-like symptoms'. It turned out that he had contracted COVID 19! He was transferred to hospital and then put on a respirator. We journeyed with him in prayer, in spirit and fraternal concern for over three weeks.

As Paul lay in hospital, a number of the confreres showed symptoms of the virus and had to self-isolate. Ray Chapman ended up spending six days in hospital. As you can imagine, all this affected the Renewal program significantly.

The decision by the French government for the country to move into lockdown on 11th March had serious implications for the Renewal program. It necessitated some major staffing changes at La Neylière. The presence of COVID 19 in the house further complicated the situation. Staff numbers were reduced. The house was 'closed down'. Areas of the house were "cordoned off". All these factors put the future of the Renewal program on shaky ground.

The participants were forced to change their accommodation arrangements during their retreat on the 9th April because of the shortage of staff. They moved into the main building where each could have access to an ensuite. Further adjustments were made and thanks to the efforts of those responsible for running La Neylière, a catering company was employed to provide meals since the staff were not available (the chef caught the virus too!) A system of room service was initiated. We found ourselves living somewhat like Carthusians – not Marists!



Colinian Renewal (2)

In addition, following the retreat, during which the participants had been informed of major developments, each member of the community was put into isolation and only permitted to leave his room for an hour each day. Even then, government restrictions meant they could not venture more than one kilometer from the property. Each time they left they needed to carry an “attestation”.

During this period, we learned of Paul Loubresse’s death. The reality of COVID 19 and its possible consequences became very real for us!



This period was certainly a very difficult and challenging time. It seemed a possibility that the Renewal program could not continue. But what else could we do?

During the isolation period, we were not able to assemble for any religious or social activities. Eventually, following delicate negotiations, the participants were able to assemble for a series of lectures presented by Jan Hulshof. These had to take place outdoors, in the garden. This gave us

some hope! Maybe the Renewal can go ahead! Jan presented ten extremely interesting talks based on The Reluctant Founder. Each lasted an hour. Afterwards, we retired to our rooms and isolation.

Following further negotiation, we were allowed to celebrate Eucharist together for the first time in many weeks on the feast of St Peter Chanel and to enjoy a social drink in the evening. It marked a significant moment in the resumption of the Renewal program. We were confident it might be possible to continue. Since then we have been able to pray in common each day and meet socially on the odd occasion.

Gaining access to the Grande Salle meant the program would resume. However, it required significant modifications. We now rely on Zoom and Skype for the majority of our presentations. These are not entirely problem free. However, we are making progress and the program’s content is continuing along similar lines to those which were in place prior to the arrival of COVID 19.



Colinian Renewal (3)

At this time, the great spirit that existed among the participants of the Renewal program has returned and there is a deep sense of solidarity. We have been through a lot together! Currently, each member of the community and all the participants of the Renewal program are well and 'COVID 19- free'.



Today marks a new milestone in our return to a familiar pattern at La Neylière. We are able to gather in the dining room and eat our meals together for the first time in many weeks.

As I reflect on the whole experience, I realise how important it is for us as Marists to be able to pray together, to celebrate the eucharist together, to spend time together in community, and to participate in making decisions that affect our lives. COVID 19 has reminded me of how

important these activities are and how significant is our face to face (mask to mask!) daily contact! We so often take it for granted.

The Colinian Renewal 2020 will certainly go down in history as being quite extraordinary. We have walked the journey through challenging moments - together - and I think we are the stronger for it. It has helped us to appreciate more deeply the privilege of being the recipients of Mary's gracious choice and to recognize more clearly her presence among us as brothers in her Society!

Thankfully, Sr Judith Moore, SMSM, who had been engaged as one of the spiritual directors for the retreat, was available to oversee the last few days of the retreat. Her calming presence was greatly valued and appreciated.

We are deeply grateful to all those who have shown us such great care during this difficult time. We press on with confidence.

The Renewal program is due to end on 26th June.