

Marist Bethany Community of Welcome, Brisbane

The Story

The idea of a Marist Community of Welcome in Brisbane arose from the need to provide opportunity for potential vocations to live in a Marist Community following a period of accompaniment. The Provincial leadership, with the support of the Marist Mission Centre, agreed to support the initiative through funding the presence and education of an Oceanian Marist who would bring youth and cross-cultural gifts to such a community. At the same time, the experience of an Oceanian studying in Australia would hopefully be a positive one for the Oceanian province. So the first step was to request the Oceania for such a person. As a result, Fr Chris Ketsore, a Bougainvillian Marist studying at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, came to Brisbane to continue his studies at Australian Catholic University in 2014. For the first year, he lived as a member of the Marist Herston Community.

The second step was to find a suitable residence for the Community of Welcome. In April 2015 a former presbytery, procured in negotiation with the local parish priest, hosted the first community consisting of Frs Gerard Hall and Chris Ketsore – and our first live-in aspirant, Hayden Kennedy (now at Marist Seminary, Auckland). In 2017, we have another young person living in the community (Paulo Rezende) along with a second Oceanian pursuing post-graduate studies (Fr Ekuasi Manu) and another Australian (Fr John Worthington) who moved from the Herston Community. This necessitated the acquisition of a second house which had become available through negotiation with the parish. None of this could have occurred without the ongoing support of Australian and Oceanian provinces' leadership.

The two houses, side-by-side, operate as a single community with the chapel in one house and most meals occurring in the other. The houses are directly opposite the parish church and offices enabling us to be fully involved in the life of the parish. Importantly, the Marist Brothers, who have been in the parish since the 1920s, have been wonderfully welcoming; the interaction between our two communities is a highlight of the “Marist experience”. The community has a stream of visitors passing through, including Marists and others visitors from the Pacific Islands.

What is a Welcome Community?

While every Marist community is no doubt “welcoming”, the specific purpose of our community is to be a place where people of all ages including the more youthful are able to gather for occasional liturgies, shared reflections on religious themes (such as the writings of Pope Francis) and social gatherings. Otherwise, there is the simple gathering for morning and evening prayer and Eucharist as in other Marist communities – but we also actively seek to invite locals and visitors to join us. If there is a particular thrust which distinguishes our community, it is to specifically promote awareness of our Marist spirituality as a gift for the Church's evangelising mission. We consider the cultural diversity and age-range of our members to be an integral component of our Marist life and witness. While we hope to continue to attract young people to discern a possible Marist religious/priestly vocation, we are equally concerned to communicate the Marist way for lay people of all ages.

Our Experience and Hopes

As we seek to negotiate the challenges of living in what Pope Francis calls “a change of era”, we remain hopeful and positive. At the very least, we are able to provide a suitable experience of Marist community for any young person seeking to discern a vocation with us. Secondly, we seek to witness to the vibrancy of Marist life in a way that is inclusive of the wider Marist family. Just now, for example, we are placing a joint vocations advertisement (four Marist Congregations, Marist Laity Australia and Marist Association of St Marcellin Champagnat) in the local Catholic paper. The advertisement includes open invitations to attend the forthcoming Eucharistic celebration for the Brothers’ Bicentennial (12th August), a devotional liturgy to celebrate Our Lady’s Birthday and a Marian retreat day (8th-9th September). We also hope to place these invitations in the parish newsletter. As well as the Brothers and ourselves, a Marist Missionary Sister has offered her services to assist with the liturgy and retreat day. Since all this is yet to occur, it is too early to judge its success. However, it is at least a sign of our energy and focus to encourage people to consider the “Marist vocation” in its many forms and varieties.

The members of the welcoming community are all involved in other apostolates and/or activities ranging from chaplaincy, teaching, lecturing and studying to parish supply work and other priestly ministry. This enables us to keep our focus on Marist mission, which remains important, as we also recognise the importance of monitoring the life and ministry of the community itself. As indicated, we are much indebted to the generosity of both the Australian and Oceanian provinces, and the Marist Mission Centre, without which the community would not be able to function. We also consider our connection with the other Marist branches integral to our life and mission – hopefully something we will further develop in the future.

Importance of a Welcoming Community?

As with any Marist ministry, there are multiple views on its value! Our Australian situation, not unknown elsewhere, is that we are not currently overly blessed with younger members; nor do we have a formation house. Other provinces may well consider they have other, even better, strategies to provide impetus for attracting vocations and promoting Marist spirituality. In a sense, we are privileged to be able to integrate the work of the community with the presence of younger Marists from other regions. This may or may not be a viable option elsewhere. The other aspect, which we are really only beginning to explore, is working with the broader Marist family, including Marist laity. Nonetheless, our emerging model, or aspects of it, may be something that other provinces may wish to consider. Equally, other provinces may have suggestions to help us improve our mission and ministry as a “Welcoming Community”.

Gerard Hall SM

Marist Bethany Community of Welcome, Brisbane

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