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Title: Safeguarding Women's Leadership: A Theological Imperative for Marist Charism and Mission

Abstract

Women's leadership in Marist schools remains structurally vulnerable. While women make profound contributions to pedagogy, faith formation, and wellbeing, their representation at principalship and executive leadership levels is limited: among the thirteen schools governed by Marist Schools Australia, only two currently have female principals. This points to more than numerical underrepresentation; it reveals a reliance on informal or symbolic inclusion rather than structures that secure women's leadership. Without explicit commitments, leadership remains contingent and easily diminished through changes in personnel, governance priorities, or culture. Such fragility risks narrowing the expression of the Marist charism and weakening the credibility of its mission in Catholic education and the wider Church.

This presentation addresses a contemporary theological question: How does fidelity to the Marist charism necessitate structural justice in leadership? It argues that women's leadership is not an optional concession but a theological imperative. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) provides the central theological framework, particularly the principle of participation articulated in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Evangelii Gaudium*. Participation, grounded in human dignity and the common good, requires structures that safeguard the equal voice of women and men. From this perspective, underrecognition of women in leadership is not only a sociological issue but a theological inconsistency. The Marist charism's call to be "one people, one spirit, many gifts" (*In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat*) underscores this point: marginalisation diminishes human dignity and weakens fidelity to the charism's co-responsible mission.

The Marian dimension of the charism further supports this claim. Mary's discipleship marked by attentiveness, courage, and prophetic presence offers a theological model of leadership embodied by women in Marist education. Yet without structural safeguarding, such leadership risks being reduced to tokenism rather than recognised as integral to ecclesial witness. To remain faithful to Mary's example of fidelity to God's mission, Marist schools need structures that entrust women with enduring authority and decision-making responsibility.

In conclusion, this presentation proposes a framework for assessing charism fidelity through the lens of structural justice. The vision it presents is both continuous and disruptive: continuous, because the Marist charism has long privileged humility, accompaniment, and shared mission; disruptive, because it insists that safeguarding women's leadership is essential to charism fidelity. For Marist schools, the implications are important: governance policies must embed inclusion, and leadership pathways must be intentionally cultivated. Unless women's leadership is structurally safeguarded, Marist schools risk compromising both the charism of Champagnat and the Gospel they profess to serve. This challenge also confronts the wider Church, whose credibility in proclaiming justice and communion depends on treating women's leadership as integral rather than negotiable. While there is growing scholarship on gender and leadership in Catholic education, studies engaging CST remain limited. This presentation therefore contributes a needed theological perspective, situating CST as the primary interpretive lens for leadership and gender in Marist schools.