The forthcoming General Chapter will inevitably have to grapple with numerous issues concerning the ways in which Marists associate with one another at local, provincial and international levels. It will use words like “community”, “mission”, “corporate”, “works”, and so on. Such a discussion necessarily implies an underlying understanding and even theory about how human beings associate. There is, however, more than one such understanding available and where people together in one conversation give meaning to their words on the basis of different understanding confusion necessarily results.

Understandings and theories of human association vary greatly. Differences are to be seen between those addressing the ideal and those addressing the real, between theories worked out in different ages, between understandings of association as it occurs in different cultures, between the ways in which different philosophers or social scientists articulate their understandings and theories.

What I wish to do in this article is to examine one aspect of Australian culture at the present time and to draw out the implications of this cultural and historical reality for how Australian Marists can understand the way in which they associate with one another as Marists. What I say may well apply in some degree to other English-speaking first world provinces, but it is better that I leave them to speak for themselves, because what I am about is recognising differences of understanding in the different cultural regions of the Society. I would be most interested to hear from other provinces how the culture of their part of the world affects the ways in which they understand human association.

Australia as a Liberal Society

 Australians belong together with a number of other English speaking countries to the English liberal tradition. We have made our own developments to that tradition, which distinguish us from countries like New Zealand, England or the United States of America, but they are of lesser importance to the argument of this article. This tradition is not like any on the Continent, which has its own liberal traditions, and it certainly bears no resemblance to medieval theories of society or community. Belonging to this tradition has long brought us into conflict with the Roman curia and even [400] with the present Pope, who likes to rail against individualism without showing any great understanding of its context or its real problems.

At the heart of the English liberal tradition is the protection of individual freedoms by limiting the ability of government, various authorities or other individuals to infringe upon these freedoms and by giving government the role of adjudicating difficulties when they arise. It was the English response to the rise of the individual in Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It differs, for instance, from the Hegelian response that looked to some form of actualisation.

In practice, it means two things. First, when we ask who we are, we generally identify ourselves as individuals. Those parts of our identity that relate to our associations with others, be they family, nation, church or congregation, come second. I understand that this is the case also in at least parts of continental Europe. It was not the case, however, in the medieval world or even today in parts of the developing world, where people think or thought of themselves primarily in terms of family or of some other group. Secondly, the role that we give to government or authority is restricted. The role of government is to ensure that everyone gets a fair go and to help sort out conflicts between individuals when they arise. This does not mean that authorities cannot exercise leadership, but it does mean that when they attempt to do so they will be judged on their merits rather than on the mere fact of their authority.

Up until the Second Vatican Council, the Church generally stood in opposition to these movements, which were all seen to be part of modernism. The Council, I believe, told us to embrace modernity and to help sort it out. Some in the Church seem to be doing that. One of the implications of this is that medieval political philosophies, which have for centuries supplied the Church’s official
understanding of human society and community, are no longer adequate. Our understanding of what religious community is has been seriously affected by this change.

In the Australian Province, I believe that we have made great progress, despite our diminishing numbers, in trying to live as modern Australians committed to Christ as Marists. Evidence of this is the long-standing Provincial policy of educating men according to their interests and skills and to the best of their ability. I believe that after thirty years of Provincial Assemblies, which have often been very painful, at the 1999 Assembly, we finally allowed one another to be individuals. That, of course, is not the end. It is only the beginning, but, at least, it is a real beginning. We can now investigate what it means to be a Marist in this day and place, how we can best commit ourselves to one another and to the Society, and what strategies we need to make it all work. [401]

I am not praising this English tradition as an end in itself or saying either that it provides the best form of association that history has thrown up or that the rest of the world should live according to it, too. What I am saying is that it is part of Australian history and of how we are. It is, therefore, from where we, as Australians, start. Our earliest learning about human association and even what we read daily in the newspapers instructs us in living according to this tradition. Gone is the time when Catholics could close their eyes to the world around them and pretend that they lived in some form of ideal ecclesial world separated from the rest of humankind. If we are to bring something of Marist life to the laity, it is even more important that we incarnate Marist values into the society in which we live.

Living in this tradition brings its own problems, some of them great. These are frequently criticised and taken as signs that all is not well, but it seems to me that the real challenge we face is to work out how we might meet these problems. In other words, we need to wrestle with how we as modern Australian individuals can live as Christians and as Marists in rich association with others of like mind, and all of this for the sake of the Kingdom. While we absorb values and ideals from the Gospels and from the founding Marist inspiration, they have to transform how we live, not how some other society lives or how an ideal medieval society might have lived.

I believe that the Australian Province has made some progress in dealing with these issues. While much of the work has taken place in assemblies rather than chapters, the texts of the last two chapters give some indication of how we have moved. These texts lack the elegance and length of those of the seventies but are witness to stages of development in dealing with the challenges we experience. Both chapters avoided terms like “community” or “corporate”, whose meanings have become lost in a multiplicity of meanings. The 1996 Chapter spoke of “forms of common life” and “communion” and the 2000 Chapter spoke of “connectedness”. Both chapters proposed simple and concrete strategies aimed at improving the ways in which we associate with one another.

Some Specific Issues

The demographic face of the Australian Province has changed radically during the last thirty years. Not only is the province aging in similar fashion to most other provinces in the Western World, but we have also withdrawn from large institutional ministries such as secondary schools. This has meant that men are now working in a wide range of ministries and that many live either alone or in small communities whose members are involved in different works. This situation does give rise to the suggestion that, if we [402] were all to get back into large single roof communities and open large corporate works, the problems that trouble us would be solved.

There are many things wrong with such a suggestion, even if we were prepared to acknowledge that, if the world and times were different, it would be a good thing. I will mention two. The first is that it implies an unrealistic assessment of the ministry that is available to us. Our movement out of schools has been due both to the growth in numbers of Catholic lay-teachers, who are funded by the government, and to the further education of Marists, which has prepared them to do other things. It is compounded by the age structure of the province. It is hard to imagine what large institutional ministry there might be to which we could apply ourselves.

My second concern is that the suggestion does injustice to how we actually live. Among those who are geographically dispersed, many make considerable sacrifices for the sake of the life we live in common as Marists. We see this at assemblies, at chapters, on provincial committees, in responses to provincial activities, and so on. We see it in the ways that different men care for one another as Marists and in the way in which they maintain contact especially with those in remoter areas.

The Society is not an enduring corporation in which people come and go but an association of men with a common spirit. It does not make sense to think about it apart from the men who compose it, and so our identities as Marists necessarily include reference to those others who are Marists. How we work this out in practice in particular...
circumstances, at a particular time and in a particular culture is an issue that transcends issues about the size of communities or the nature of works.

**Conclusion**

The importance of these issues for the 2001 General Chapter is twofold. First, unless the Chapter understands the cultural conditions of each Province, it will not be able to make sense of what the Provinces are doing or of where they are coming from. This will almost certainly mean that in making judgements and decisions about activities in the Provinces it will be wrong. At times this may simply be a cause of annoyance; at other times it could be quite destructive. Secondly, the Chapter will not be able to talk to us in language that will make sense to us. For some, its texts will propose great ideals in language remembered from novitiate, but ideals that will, nevertheless, seem always to be frustrated in practice. For others, the texts will sound like pious nonsense and will simply be ignored. None of these situations would be satisfactory, and each of them would affect the life of the provinces badly. On one hand, they would find themselves counselled against taking reasonable courses of action or advised to do things that make no sense in their concrete situations. On the other hand, they would find themselves constantly being measured according to unreal expectations.

The differences that I have tried to bring out are, indeed, cultural and historical, and it is one of the interesting aspects of living in an international community that we have to face them and work them out. It is not surprising, in my view, that the general chapters dealing with the rewriting of the Constitutions were in such deep disagreement for so long. These chapters tried to write universal legislation in contemporary language without, perhaps, sufficiently recognising the significant cultural differences across the Society. It seems to me that now we would be better off to recognise these differences and to make the most of them rather than to assume that there is one universal theory of human association, which applies to each cultural group in just the same way.

[A summary followed in French.]

*Andrew Murray is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Catholic Institute of Sydney.*