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SAINT MARCELLIN CHAMPAGNAT AND THE LITTLE BROTHERS OF MARY

*Bernard Beaudin, F.M.S.**

1. Origins of the Marist Family

In troublesome times and during persecution, the Church invokes the assistance of the Virgin Mary. During the Counter-Reformation, members of the Society of Jesus rendered great service to the Church. So, after the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, founding a religious congregation that would offer to the Church comparable services to repair the damage from the "Enlightenment" and the French Revolution was the fervent wish of many. This project was especially associated with Jean Claude Courveille who, after experiencing a miraculous healing at Le Puy in 1809, resolved to begin a new religious order called the "Society of Mary."

The significant event leading to the founding of the Marist Family (Marists) took place at the altar of the "Black Virgin" at the Fourvière shrine in Lyons, where Mary had been venerated since apostolic times. A group of twelve seminarians and newly-ordained priests, together with Jean-Claude Courveille, resolved to begin a new religious order dedicated to the Virgin Mary on July 23, 1816.

The original Marist dream which called for one Society of Mary, with various branches subordinate to the whole, was never fully realized. The individuals who were major figures in the development of the Marist Family were Jean-Claude Colin (founder of the Marist Fathers¹), Marcellin Champagnat (founder of the

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¹Society of Mary (S.M.), Marist Fathers and Brothers.

Marist Brothers²), Jeanne-Marie Chavoin, foundress of the Marist Sisters, and Françoise Perroton, recognized as the foundress of a third order of lay people (later known as the Third Order of Mary) and of the congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary. (This Society of Mary [Marists], centered at Lyon, is not to be confused with the Society of Mary [Marianists], founded by Blessed William Joseph Chaminade at Bordeaux in 1817.)

All these branches of the Marist Family still exist and are self-governing with their own general administrations. A comprehensive Society of Mary, as envisioned by the twelve who made the Fourvière pledge, was not recognized by Rome because of its multi-branched concept. Only the Marist Fathers retain the title the "Society of Mary." However, ecclesial approbation was eventually granted to all four congregations. All have a similar spirituality and wish to live the Christian life with the spirit and the attitudes of the Virgin Mary. The special contribution of St. Marcellin Champagnat, as one of the founders of the Marist Family, was his conviction, "We must have Brothers."

2. Saint Marcellin Champagnat, Founder of the Marist Brothers

Marcellin Champagnat was born in the hamlet of Rosey, not far from Lyons, in the Massif Central, France, on May 20, 1789, just a few weeks before the outbreak of the French Revolution. He was the ninth of ten children of Jean-Baptiste and Marie Chirac. Marcellin attended school for a short time, but showed little interest in studies. Repelled by the brutal manner of some teachers, he preferred farm work to schoolwork.

During the French Revolution, Joseph Cardinal Fesch, the Archbishop of Lyons, encouraged his priests to seek out candidates for the priesthood. It was at this point that Marcellin Champagnat was approached and asked if he would go to the local seminary. He was sixteen years old, with little education, and spoke the local dialect with only some French. He lacked

²Marist Brothers of the Schools (F.M.S.) or Little Brothers of Mary.

Latin and the other prerequisites. He first tried to learn the material with a well-educated brother-in-law. However, he made little progress and was told to forget his dream and try something else in life.

With money he earned from raising sheep, he went to the minor seminary at Verrières. Older than many of his classmates, he failed his first year and was sent home. He was readmitted, through the efforts of his mother, his parish priest, and the superior of the seminary. At the beginning of his second year, Marcellin settled down to a more sober life style, although he was still a member of a "Happy Gang," a group of young people, including seminarians, who were often seen at the local pubs.

Eight years later, Marcellin left Verrières for St. Irenaeus, the major seminary near Lyons. He was ordained on July, 22, 1816, at the age of twenty-seven; the next day, he travelled to Fourvière with others interested in establishing a Society of Mary. At Fourvière, this strong intuition seized him: "We must have Brothers." Appointed pastor in La Valla, on the slopes of Mont Pilat, Marcellin was struck by the isolation in which people lived. Nobody, not even the Church, seemed to be paying any attention to the pastoral and educational needs of the poor children. After attending Jean-Baptist Montagne, a dying sixteen-year-old completely ignorant of Catholic teaching, Marcellin acted upon his conviction of the need for religious Brothers. On January 2, 1817, he founded the congregation of the Little Brothers of Mary, who were to evangelize the young, particularly those most neglected. The congregation began with two young men, in a very poor house. They embraced a spirituality which included mindfulness of God's presence, confidence in Mary and her protection, and the practice of simplicity and family spirit.

For twenty-three years, Marcellin completely devoted himself to strengthening his congregation of Brothers. He was ever-conscious of his weak formal education. When seeking approval for the Brothers, he was reproached: "How is it that you want to have your Brothers approved? You are their leader and are supposed to be more learned than they are, and yet your let-

ters are not even good French." It is by his firm trust in God and in Mary, by his dedication and many human talents that this "man of the mountains" fulfilled the Fourvière pledge and dream. He was a practical person but he bequeathed vision to his congregation. To a bishop who asked for Brothers for his diocese, the founder wrote, "All the dioceses of the world figure in our plans." When he died on June 6, 1840, Marcellin's family of Brothers numbered two hundred and ninety. He passed on to his disciples his apostolic and educational zeal and his love of Mary and her spiritual qualities, using the line from Sulpician spirituality: "All for Jesus through Mary"! He is considered an "apostle to youth" and a model of a "practical Marian Gospel." He wrote his Marian doctrine not with a pen but with a pick.

At his canonization on April 18, 1999, Pope John Paul II said of him that "in the midst of a world sometimes lacking the sense of God and despite countless difficulties, he remained faithful to Christ because of his unshakable faith. He was sensitive to the spiritual and educational needs of his times, especially to religious ignorance and the situations of neglect experienced by the young. . . . Fr. Champagnat is also a model for parents and teachers, helping them to look with hope at young people, to love them with a total love which fosters their true human, moral and spiritual formation. Marcellin Champagnat also invites us all to be missionaries, to make Jesus Christ known and loved . . . with Mary as our guide and Mother."

3. Saint Marcellin Champagnat's Marian Life and Devotion

Marian devotion was part of his family life; his mother, Marie Thérèse Chirat, was a woman of strong faith and dedication. His aunt, Louise Champagnat, had been a Sister of St. Joseph, expelled from her convent during the revolutionary upheavals. These two faithful Christian women instilled in the young boy a sense of prayer, of Marian devotion, and a love of work—all important for his future vocation as a priest and founder.

The second source of Marcellin's Marian devotion were the Sulpicians at the seminary, St. Irenaeus. The spirituality of the

seminary was influenced by the writings of Cardinal de Bérulle, founder of the French School of Spirituality, and by Jean-Jacques Olier, the founder of the Sulpicians. Marcellin knew the Sulpician prayer to Mary: "O Jesus living in Mary, come and live in Thy servants. . . ." He also knew of the "holy slavery" as a way that individuals could participate in Christ's infancy and passion, and in the Eucharist. Champagnat adopted this Sulpician spirituality and, in retreat resolutions taken in 1815, declared himself a "slave of Mary."

In addition, devotion to Mary was part of the popular faith of the local dioceses of Lyons and Le Puy. This was the territory of St. Irenaeus and canons of Lyons, who, in the twelfth century, promoted the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Endowed more with the common touch than with elegant manners, Champagnat was a man of the people. Not by personal brilliance but by the example of his life and his simplicity did he bequeathe to his Brothers a living Marian doctrine and heritage. His Marian devotion was embedded in apostolic action. He proposed making one's own Mary's attitudes of humility, openness, simplicity, availability, living in God's presence. He did not write much—retreat resolutions (1810), letters, outlines of sermons and conferences, and his spiritual testament (1840). From his correspondence, some sentences have been formulated which summarize his Marian teaching. At its center are Christ, the Gospel and the Church. The Little Brothers of Mary were to have the first seats at the crib, at the cross, and at the altar.

The Marian charism of the Marist Brothers, as bestowed by their founder, is practical, existential, sensitive, filial and apostolic. The Magnificat inspired the life and spirituality of Champagnat. His poverty finds its richness in his relation with Mary, to whom he gives all: "We should go to Her as does a child to his mother—with humility, simplicity and modesty!" His Marian dedication is realistic. His personal example suggested a familial relation to Mary. Among the titles he loved much were "the Good Mother," "the first superior,"³ patroness and model. Often he ended his letters, "I leave you in the Holy Hearts of

³Expression used by M. Olier, founder of the Sulpicians in 1641.

Jesus and Mary."⁴ In his life of action and love, it was faith which sustained Marcellin Champagnat, a simple faith that gave him strength and courage and an absolute trust in the Lord.

Champagnat wanted the spirituality of his Brothers to be focused on three essential themes: (1) the presence of God in every action of their daily lives; (2) confidence in Mary as their "ordinary resource"⁵ for help in their apostolic endeavors; and (3) the dedication of all their works to Jesus through Mary. Champagnat's confidence in God, his simple, active faith, and his constant devotion to Mary permeated his writings, his advice to the Brothers, his thoughts, his hopes and dreams, his congregation.

4. Marian Devotion and Spirituality through the Congregation's History

Marist Brothers try to live their Christian life by making the spirit and attitudes of Mary their own. This spirituality accepts the ordinary realities of daily life while striving to be mindful of God's presence, so that Jesus might be the center of this life. The Brothers wish to have the spirit of Mary, the perfect disciple, as they are attentive to the pulse and the heartbeat of the needy, particularly the young. They wish to live in generosity and joy, in faith and love, with a sense of humor, with family spirit. The cornerstones of Champagnat's congregation are humility, simplicity and modesty—virtues which are especially difficult in contemporary society.

Many expressions of Marian devotion are found in the congregation's history. Some traditional exercises are part of the Brothers' personal practice, rather than being prescribed community exercises. Among the former are the first vocal prayer upon rising (*Laudetur Jesus Christus! Et Maria Mater ejus.*), the scapular devotion, the three *Ave Marias* in the morning and the evening, the recitation of the *Ave Maria* each hour of the day, the Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the *Sub tuum* at the end of most community gatherings, and the Saturday fast.

⁴From Saint Jean Eudes, founder of the Eudists (1673-1716).

⁵Expression used by De Clorivière, S.J. (+1819), influenced by the Marian devotion of Jean Eudes and Louis Grignon de Montfort.

Our apostolic Marian spirituality is all about living as Mary, "*notre bonne mère*," did according to Marcellin's motto: "All to Jesus through Mary; all to Mary for Jesus." Mary plays a vital role in salvation history, but she does not place herself "in the lime-light." As they say in the theater, "There are no insignificant roles, just small-minded actors." Marist simplicity and common sense, nearness and availability are lived out on a daily basis. To join with Marcellin in imitating Mary means working without being a star, bringing the world to God, serving others, being friendly and warmhearted with those around us. People committed to Marcellin's way of doing things display the spirituality of Mary.

5. Recent Developments

In 1967, the General Chapter published "The Virgin Mary in the Life of the Marist Brother," a document reviewing for the whole congregation the principles of Marist spirituality. Mary's spiritual motherhood establishes her continuing relation with us, and it is the basis of our love and devotion. "The challenge to the Marist Brother is to love Christ through Mary and to teach youth Mary's maternal role in their religious life. A filial attitude towards the Virgin Mary is the purpose of a Marian formation and the means par excellence of living authentic Christian life."

Since Vatican II, General Chapters of the Marist Brothers have tried to develop the significance of Marcellin's motto: "All to Jesus through Mary; all to Mary for Jesus." They have worked at the purification, unification, and deepening of our Marian spirituality. High moments of the Marian devotion are Mary's month and liturgical feasts. The new constitutions insist on the celebration of the liturgical feasts of Mary—particularly the Assumption, the patronal feast of the Institute since its very beginning. The Marists renew their consecration so that they might realize in their daily life Mary's attitudes of availability, openness, listening, sharing and service. Saturday is the Marian day of the week for the Marists, and the daily Marian prayers are the *Salve Regina*, the *Memorare*, the *Rosary* or other appropriate Marian prayers.

Brother Basilio Ruedo, the Superior General of the Institute, wrote a Marian circular, *Un espace pour Marie* (1976), which concluded, "The Marian motivation is still present but it is weak-

ened because of the Marian crisis which occurred after Vatican II. With the weakening of the Marian motivation, the attachment weakens as well." At that time, he noted that only a quarter of all the newly professed brothers had Marian motivations in joining the congregation. These two Marian documents have given rise to many reflections by Marist Brothers, many from developing areas of the world, on their specific Marian charism.⁶

The Marist Brothers today number about 5000, found in seventy-five countries on five continents. They exist as Marcellin's loving response to God's call to "found Brothers." Like him, they are inspired by Mary to work for the most neglected youths anywhere they serve.

The Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family originated as a grassroots movement of lay people who were attracted to Marist apostolic spirituality and wished to adopt that spirituality and mission. They meet as groups periodically to explore ways in which Marcellin's charism can become part of their life and work. With Mary at their side, they promote social justice, especially for the young, the poor and the destitute. The Marist Brothers were delighted with their endeavors, and they formalized their support in the *Revised Constitutions and Statutes of the Marist Brothers of the Schools, or The Little Brothers of Mary*, approved by the Holy See on 7 October 1986, feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. Article 164.4 of the Constitutions reads:

The Marist Family, an extension of our Institute, is a movement made up of all those who follow the spirituality of Marcellin Champagnat. Through this movement, our affiliated members, young people, parents, coworkers,

⁶Some recently published books by Marist Brothers provide commentary on these two important Marist documents: *La présence mystagogique de Marie dans l'Église* by Sylvain Yao Kouassi Kan (Ivory Coast) in 1998; *Mary for the Third Millennium*, sponsored by the Sydney Province of the Marist Brothers in 1998; *The Superior of the Marists* by Francisco das Chagas Costa Ribeiro (Brazil); *The Conversion of Mary in the Gospel Event* by Bernard Beaudin (Canada); *Con occhi di Madre* by Giovanni Maria Bigotto (Italy); *Bilhetes para Deus (Uma meditação sobre Nossa Senhora)* by Teófilo Minga (Portugal).

Others booklets and cassettes of Marian prayers, meditations and songs include *Pages mariales* (France, 1958); *Un chemin d'évangile, Marie*, by Maurice Goutagny and Guy Desprez (France, 1989); *Marie des mois de l'année* (Canada, 2002) by Bernard Beaudin.

former students, and friends, deepen the spirit of our Founder in order to live it and spread it. The Institute is responsible for animating and coordinating the activities of this movement, by setting up appropriate structures.

Today the General Administration in Rome knows of some one hundred and sixty Champagnat Movement groups around the world. They each choose a name, such as, "Mary, Our Good Mother," "Marcellin's Children," "Light and Life." The average group numbers about seventeen persons, but several are larger. Official recognition of each group is extended by the Brother Provincial, who then names a Brother as liaison. Since the activities of these groups depend on the initiative of the members, there is great variety among the groups, but their overarching purpose is that, following the spirituality of St. Marcellin, they may nourish their Christian life and commitment, following Mary's example of humility, simplicity and modesty.