

GETTING TO KNOW MARCELLIN CHAMPAGNAT

CHAMPAGNAT STORIES
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MARCELLIN'S EARLY EDUCATION



For some reason unknown to us, Marcellin did not attend school on a regular basis. It is not that his parents were not good, caring people or that education was unknown in the family: though his mother signed only with a cross, his father could read and

write and had a prominent role in the leadership of the town of Marlhes, the revolutionary centre of the region, about a half mile from Le Rosey, the small town where Champagnat was born.

Champagnat spent only one day at school before the time he decided to become a priest and education became essential. On that one day in 1800 when Champagnat was about eleven, he went to the school in Marlhes but the experience so shocked him that he ran home and never returned. The episode left an indelible mark on him. He had been asked a question by the teacher and the shy, awkward boy was slow to answer. One of the other children volunteered the answer and the teacher was so incensed at the little fellow that he slapped him across the face. This experience may well lie at the heart of Champagnat's simple but powerful pedagogy: "To teach the children effectively you must love them, and love them all equally."

Several years later, in 1804, Champagnat heard the call to the priesthood. Education became the first priority: to learn to read and write formal French rather than just speak the local dialect

and to learn Latin. He went to live in St Saveur, some distance away, to study with his sister Marianne's husband, Benoît Arnaud, an ex-seminarian. At the end of the year Arnaud sent the boy home with the comment: "Sooner or later, and better sooner, you will give it up, and you will regret having caused so much expense, for having wasted your time and perhaps ruined your health." The boy became more determined, and his mother supported him in his resolve and together they made a pilgrimage to the shrine of St John Francis Regis at La Louvesc some 25 miles from Marlhes.

In November 1805 he went to the junior seminary at Verrières to begin his formal study for the priesthood. He was over sixteen, big, awkward, uncomfortable with formal French, and not the most intelligent in the class. It was back to the "Beginners' Class" for him. At the end of the year his results were so poor that he was advised not to return to the seminary.

Marcellin was devastated, but not conquered. With sheer determination and increased prayer he chose to go on. His mother was a powerful force in his determination. Another pilgrimage to La Louvesc, the support of the parish priest of Marlhes, Father Alliot, who had baptized the baby Marcellin, and back to Verrières. Marcellin was so successful that he passed two classes in one year.

It is tempting to think that Champagnat was just a pious, serious, single-minded adolescent. It is not as simple as that. This teen age farm boy had a lot more to him than that. The seminary at Verrières was in need of serious repair, so Champagnat and some of his friends set about repairing it, replacing floorboards plastering the walls, replacing broken panes of glass. The mountain boys may have given more time to what they were used to rather than to the tedium of study. And besides that, the company loving Champagnat, so noted for that family spirit that was to characterize the Marist Brothers, fell in with the "bande joyeuse", a group of lads who preferred sports and physical work - and the local tavern - and as a result of missing part (and sometimes all) of their lessons, their report cards were bound to be less than satisfactory.

It is somewhat of a relief to know that Marcellin was not all prayer and seriousness, but that he had a real warmth for company, a good laugh, and pure enjoyment of life. Those qualities were foundational, but in later life they were to be turned to the pursuit of genuine holiness. By the time he died, Champagnat had practiced the virtues to a heroic degree.

His seminary years were important years for laying the foundations of his spiritual values: prayer routine, love of the Mass, devotion to the Blessed Virgin. But it was also during this time that some of his fellow seminarians were inspired to talk about beginning a new Congregation of priests dedicated to our Blessed Mother. Champagnat was in the thick of the discussions, but remembering the difficulties he had experienced with his own education and knowing the terrible state of schooling in his part of the country, he kept saying "We must have Brothers."

Over the following years he worked hard at his studies - which were not easy in fact, Champagnat and the men who were to become his fellow Marists were never to distinguish themselves as academics, but they proceeded to ordination with complete commitment to the concept of a Society of Mary, and Champagnat kept crying in their ears: "We must have Brothers."

Marcellin began his final year of studies in November 1815. During that year, as well as preparing for ordination, he and his close friends continued to work towards the establishment of the Society of Mary, and the day after their ordination to the priesthood on July 22, 1816, he and a group of about a dozen like-minded men made a journey to the ancient shrine of Mary at Fourvière, above the city of Lyon. There they dedicated their life and work to Mary. This was the beginning of the Marist Order, originally an Order of priests, but, thanks to work of Champagnat within the next six months, also an order of teaching Brothers, whom we know today as the Marist Brothers of the Schools.

THE "MONTAGNE EXPERIENCE"

Those who read and know the Champagnat story will be familiar with what the Brothers call the "Montagne Experience." While he was still preparing for ordination to the priesthood, Marcellin was convinced of the desperate need for a group of Brothers to work for the education of country youth.

It is all very well to have a grand vision, but it has to become a reality or it will die. What made Champagnat's vision turn real was his encounter with the dying Jean-Baptiste Montagne, a boy of 17 who was totally ignorant of the truths of his

Catholic faith.

Champagnat was called to his bedside by the grieving parents he was as appalled by the boy's physical condition - he thought he was a child of twelve, so undernourished was he - as he was struck by the boy's ignorance of God on the threshold of death.



Champagnat instructed him in the basic truths of his religion, heard his confession and prepared him for death. He went to visit another sick person and when he returned he found the Montagne boy had died. This episode was exactly what Champagnat needed to put into action his dream of an order of teaching Brothers. Some two months and four days later the Marist Brothers order began.

Champagnat recognized the call of the Holy Spirit in this episode. He saw all of us down the ages - in Lawrence, Poughkeepsie, New York City, Briarwood, the Bronx, Bayonne, Roselle, Miami, Chicago, Brownsville, Wheeling, Québec, and in Mexico - in the eyes of that dying boy.

THE MEMORARE IN THE SNOW



The story of Champagnat and one of the Brothers being lost in the snow is a familiar one. It is one of the most important stories in the whole life of Marcellin Champagnat and bears

retelling again and again, because over the many years since it happened it has become one of the great symbols of his devotion to and trust in the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

It happened on February 15, 1823. Champagnat heard that one of his young Brothers was ill in the village of Bourg-Argental, some 12 miles away, over the mountain. Marcellin had an extraordinary devotion to his Brothers and in the case of Brother Jean-Baptiste the devotion was not misplaced. Jean-Baptiste Furet was born in 1807 and at the age of 14 in 1822 he chose to become a Marist Brother. In 1823 he was appointed to teach at Bourg-Argental (at the age of fifteen), and because of the bizarre behavior of the Brother Superior, this young Brother and another Brother were left to teach 200 young boys. You can imagine the uproar this would cause today. The result was Brother Jean-Baptiste's serious failure of health - hence Champagnat's hasty visit.

Champagnat, accompanied by Brother Stanislaus, made his visit and against better advice, chose to return home that same afternoon, into deteriorating weather. The upshot was that the two became hopelessly lost in the mountainous and difficult terrain and the raging snow storm. The two men were facing certain death unless they found shelter. "Let us pray to our Good Mother she will not let us down." They recited the Memorare -

"Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your help or sought your intercession was left unaided...." No sooner had they finished the prayer than they saw a light in the distance. They made for it and were welcomed into Farmer Donnet's house. They were saved.

Mr. Donnet was to say that he never went outside in such terrible conditions. If he needed to check his animals he could do so via a door between the house and the barn. That night, for some inexplicable reason, he decided to go via the outside. Champagnat regarded this episode as a sign of the love and protection of the Blessed Virgin. And the Marist Brothers give thanks to their Good Mother every February 15 for her protection of their beloved Founder.

THE BUILDING OF THE HERMITAGE

The Brothers regard the little stone building next to the present school at Lavalla as the "cradle of the Institute." It was there that Champagnat welcomed Jean-Marie Granjon and Jean-Baptiste Audras as the first Brothers on January 2, 1817. It was there that they learned to read and write and how to teach and how to pray,

how to make nails to help support the house, and how to live as a family.



But by 1824 the house was far too small, so Champagnat decided to buy and build. He purchased a property several kilometers below Lavalla, 206 acres of woods, scrub, rocks and field, next to the little Gier River. This was to become the site of the Mother House of the Marist

Brothers Institute, the beautifully named "Notre Dame de L'Hermitage", (the "Hermitage"), the spiritual home of thousands of Marist Brothers, Marist Educators and Marist Youth.

The Brothers, under Marcellin's guidance built this five story building. (It stands today, completed on its fourth side, as sound as it ever was, a house of welcome and pilgrimage for Brothers and all who love things Marist). Professional builders were employed for the basic essentials of the construction, but the Brothers helped during their summer vacation. These young Brothers quarried and carried the stone out of the rock of the area. They dug sand, made mortar, carried materials and assisted wherever possible, and Marcellin oversaw the whole project. The Brothers had moved down from Lavalla into makeshift quarters beside the Gier River – primitive quarters, we would say, especially in the harsh winters of the region - and they rose at four each morning, washed in the river, dressed, and attended Mass under the trees. Then they would go to work.

It sounds unbelievable to us, but these were tough young men, teenagers really, used to the hard work of the farm and with a common purpose and under the charismatic leadership of Champagnat, these men would have gone to Hell and back for him.

These are the men and women who today are excited about their teaching, their coaching, and their participation in the spiritual lives of their students - who love their students and would do anything for them. These are the heirs to the young men who joined Champagnat in the exciting venture of becoming Brothers in the Marist Family, of bringing the Gospel to the children of the land, of making a better life for those whose lives had been blighted by the worst excesses of the French Revolution.

The foundation stone of the Hermitage was laid and blessed on May 13, 1824 and during May 1825, the Lavalla community took up residence. The building was intended not just for the Brothers: it contained the novitiate, of course, where the Brothers were trained, but it also held a school for the poor and a place of temporary refuge for orphans.

Some questions for personal reflection:

Marcellin was presented with many obstacles during his early education yet he used his determination and faith to get him through the difficult times. What difficulties do you face? What gifts and talents can you use/do you use to help you face these challenges?

Champagnat's "Montagne Experience" helped him to clarify his mission. What experiences in your life have helped you to better see what God might be wanting from you in the future?

Marcellin's trust in Mary and faith in God were powerfully demonstrated in the story known as "The Memorare in the Snow." What role does faith play in your life right now? How might you strengthen your faith in God?



The building of the Hermitage demonstrates the Marist values of hard work, sacrifice and teamwork. How are these characteristics evident in how you approach your school work and activities?

