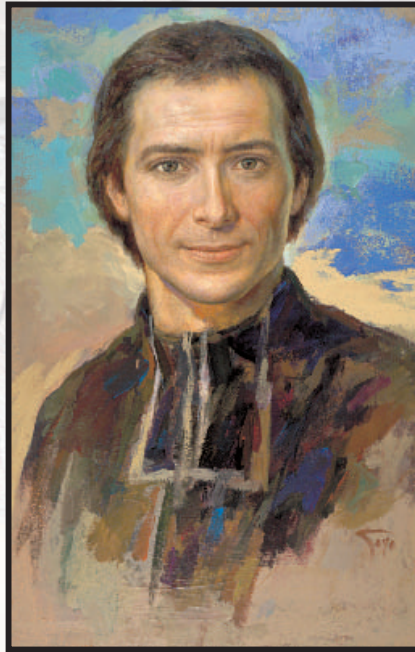


Seán D. Sammon, FMS  
1999

*A Heart That Knew No Bounds*



**SAINT  
MARCELLIN CHAMPAGNAT**

*The life and Mission*



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MARCELLIN CHAMPAGNAT

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Thanks, also to Brother Benito Arbués, Superior General, who provided the time for me to write. I'm grateful for his generosity in this regard.

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This account was written with lay men and women in mind, especially the young among them, though others may also find it of interest. It is, of course, incomplete and influenced by the author’s affection for Marcellin Champagnat. It is not meant to be an historical or biographical record of his life. Several others have taken on those challenges and with more satisfying results. A list of their publications appears in the *References* section at the end of this book. The author hopes, though, that the few stories recorded here will help the reader come to know better Marcellin Champagnat, the remarkable man who founded the Little Brothers of Mary.

The book was a pleasure to write. It was like taking a class with Marcellin: he the teacher, the subject his life, and I the only student. I hope that one day, when I meet him face to face, he will be compassionate in grading the work of this erstwhile student of his. Judging from the evidence that I uncovered in writing the book, I have no doubt that he will.



## ***Introduction***

### ***Dear Reader,***

Who was Saint Marcellin Champagnat? We know that he was a priest of the Society of Mary, and the founder of its Little Brothers of Mary, recognized worldwide today as the Institute of the Marist Brothers. Yes, he was all of those things, but he was also so much more. This book sets out to uncover the message that his life and mission hold for us today.

The story of this young priest takes us back to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century France. Get ready to walk its roads, and to cherish the terrain he so loved, to meet the people who shaped him, to suffer through the adversity that strengthened him, and, in the end, to be seized by the God who was at the center of his life.

Marcellin Champagnat loved young people. They, in turn, found his enthusiasm and energy contagious. Three elements fueled his passion for life and shaped his spirituality: an awareness of God's presence, an unwavering confidence in Mary and her protection, and the two uncomplicated virtues of simplicity and humility.

As a founder Marcellin was young, aged twenty-seven years, when he invited his first two recruits to join him. He gave his Little Brothers a clear mission. Proclaim the Word of God directly to the young, he said, and among them, particu-

larly to those most neglected. He knew that to teach young people you had to love them first. Marcellin guided his life and work by that principle and expected his brothers to do the same.

So, turn the page, and begin to walk alongside this man whom our Church calls a very modern-day saint, an apostle to youth. Marcellin Champagnat was both for his time in history; he is no less for ours today.

Seán D. Sammon, FMS  
Rome, Italy  
22 January 1999



*Marcellin Champagnat's World*



*Chapter I*

***“In the beginning...”***

A war, one man, and three women helped shape him. Marcellin Champagnat, the ninth of ten children, was born in the hamlet of Le Rosey, France on May 20th, 1789. Within a few weeks a revolution was underway in the country. The Bastille, a Paris prison of notorious reputation, fell in mid-July. The freeing of its seven captives, though largely symbolic in nature, hinted to the people of late eighteenth century France that their world was going to change.

Jean-Baptiste Champagnat, father of the future saint, was one of the better off peasant landowners and a man of some education. At first, he welcomed the uprising of 1789, both for its ideals and for what he stood to gain from its success. In time, however, it was apparent that his ardor for the movement had cooled, and he rejected its excesses. They were many: the beheading of a King, a burdensome policy of military conscription, orders to hunt down priests and fugitive soldiers.

Throughout the revolutionary period, Marcellin’s father held several important government positions in the town of Marllhes and distinguished himself as a person of patience, moderation, and political know-how. No one was killed, no one was taken away, the local church was neither burned nor

sold. As a thinker, revolutionary, government official, tradesman, and farmer, what gifts did Jean-Baptiste pass along to his son? Discernment, compassion for others, diplomacy, a head for business, the skills of a laborer.

What about the women who inspired Marcellin? Marie Thérèse Chirat, his mother, was the first. A prudent person of steadfast character, she married Jean Baptiste in 1775. Marked by “utter integrity, sterling faith, and a love of work,” this woman instilled in her son the rudiments of prayer and the first stirring of his vocation.

Louise Champagnat was the second woman to encourage Marcellin. A religious Sister of Saint Joseph and a sister to Jean-Baptiste, she was expelled from her convent by the new government and sought sanctuary with his family during the days of revolutionary excess. Louise assisted in the boy’s early religious formation; she was probably the first to model for him the merging of a life of prayer with one of service to others.

Finally, there was Mary, the mother of Jesus. While a later arrival in Marcellin’s life, in the end, she would make all the difference. Devotion to her was part of the rich texture of faith in the local dioceses of Lyons and Le Puy. Marcellin would, in time, place Mary at the center of the community of brothers he founded. In keeping with the spirituality of his times and particularly of the region around Marllhes, she became eventually for him a “Good Mother,” his “Ordinary Resource”.

So, a war, one man, and three women were there at the outset. Taking these facts as our starting point, let’s begin to answer the question we asked at the outset of this book: Who was Marcellin Champagnat? As mentioned earlier, we know that he was the founder of the Little Brothers of Mary. He was also a citizen of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century France, very much a man of his times with all the virtues and limits that such a description implies. But who was he, really, and what message do his life and mission have for us today? A look at some of the events, elements, and people that shaped his early

years will help us to find answers to these questions.

### ***In the beginning***

Marcellin Champagnat was baptized within twenty-four hours of his birth, on Ascension Thursday, 1789. He lived his life of fifty-one years between two insurrections in France: one in 1789, another about forty years later. The intervening period saw successive revolutionary governments, the rule of Napoleon, the Bourbon restoration, the Revolution of 1830, the Orleans monarchy, and the uprising at Lyons in 1834.

Other revolutions were also underway; initially less noticeable perhaps, they were just as sweeping in scope and unsettling in outcome. The Industrial Revolution, for example, got underway after 1830 and transformed the world of work; it brought with it the exploitation of laborers and a radical change in their way of living.

### ***Other factors***

Terrain also shaped young Marcellin Champagnat. Growing up in a region known as the Massif Central, he knew open fields, quiet rivulets, pine forests. But nature is capricious in that part of France; at times, it can be actually dangerous. Where the winters are hard, locals learn how to endure. The terrain of his region taught Marcellin these virtues: tenacity, adaptability, and toughness.

### ***Marcellin's early education***

Education suffered at the hands of the revolution. More than twenty years of insurrection and external wars had done

little to secure the place of teaching and learning in the overall scheme of things.

Marcellin attended school for a very brief time. He failed to demonstrate much of a capacity for formal schoolwork; the brutal treatment that teachers meted out to students also worked against his settling in. By age eleven, he had decided that he preferred farm work to the world of books. When Marcellin set out for the seminary at age sixteen, he took with him his lack of education. This deficiency was to be a cross for him throughout his life.

### ***Call to be a priest***

After the revolution, the power of the Catholic Church in France was greatly diminished. Napoleon Bonaparte eventually gave the Church greater freedom but for a specific reason: he planned to use the Church as a prop for his regime.

In 1803, Bishop Joseph Fesch, an uncle of Napoleon, was asked to head the archdiocese of Lyons. Finding his priests devastated by the ravages of the Revolution of 1789, he set out energetically to renew the strength of the clergy. Part of his plan called for new minor seminaries. To fill them with candidates, the new bishop encouraged staff at the major and minor seminaries to devote some of their vacation time to recruiting vocations.

As a result, in 1803 a priest arrived in Marllhes seeking suitable young men for the seminary. Father Alliot, the parish priest, confessed that he could think of none. After a few moments of thought, however, he suggested that his visitor might try the Champagnat family.

Among the boys at home at the time, Marcellin alone showed any interest when the proposal to train for the priesthood was presented. However, the young man was almost functionally illiterate. While he expressed himself freely in the



dialect common around Marlies, his reading and writing knowledge of French, a necessary prerequisite for the study of Latin and other subjects, was rudimentary at best.

### ***Preparing for the seminary***

When Marcellin decided to study for the priesthood, he set out at last to get an education. In this quest, he enlisted the aid of his sister Marie-Anne's husband, Benoît Arnaud. His brother-in-law, once a seminarian and now a teacher, was considered to be a well-educated, well-esteemed, and influential man. Marcellin moved to the town of St. Sauveur and lived with his sister and her family for some months during the years 1803, 1804, and 1805.

Progress was slow, however, and the young man did not show much promise. Eventually, the teacher advised his charge to forget his studies and to do something else with his life.

The sudden death of Marcellin's father, in 1804, was another blow to the young man. With the frustration of studies, and now the death of his father, surely he must have thought of heading home and helping out with tasks on the family's farm. For whatever reason, however, Marcellin decided to persist in pursuing his studies. Perhaps his mother's encouragement kept him going. His first biographer, Brother Jean-Baptiste, tells us that during this period Marcellin approached the sacraments more frequently, took more time to pray, and recommended his intentions to Mary.

### ***Important formative influence***

During his months in St. Sauveur, Marcellin had the good fortune to associate with the young priest of the parish, Father Jean-Baptiste Soutrenon. The priest lived poorly and was

unusually effective in attending to the needs of his parishioners. Speaking with them in the dialect of the region, for example, he was often known to roll up his sleeves to help them with their farm work.

Soutrenon also got along famously with the children and young people of the parish. Years later, it was obvious that Marcellin modeled himself as a priest after this fervent and courageous young clergyman. Father Soutrenon was a great inspiration to him, and on his return from St. Sauveur, Marcellin was more determined than ever to be a priest.

### ***Perhaps a pilgrimage will help!***

Despite his brother-in-law's pessimistic assessment of his abilities, Marcellin felt more drawn to being a priest than ever before. The thought absorbed him. Sensing her son's preoccupation with his dream, Marie Thérèse suggested a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint John Francis Regis at La Louvesc.

On their return from the pilgrimage, and in spite of his brother-in-law's strong opposition, Marcellin told his family that he planned to enter the minor seminary. He was convinced that that was what God wanted him to do and he was determined to comply.

### ***Reflection questions***

1. Who are the people who have helped you shape your life's dream and encouraged you to live it out? In what specific ways did they help?
2. What events in your life gave you a sense of God's dream for you? The Lord mapped out a journey for you, what milestones along the road helped you find your way?

## *Chapter II*

### ***“The seminary years...”***

Father Périer was the mainstay of the makeshift minor seminary at Verrières. Conditions there were harsh. Most of the priest’s young charges were housed in a large but dilapidated parish house; he found space for the overflow in a nearby barn. By the time Marcellin arrived, the group was made up of somewhere between eighty and one hundred young men.

Marcellin was older than many of his classmates. While academically unimpressive, he excelled in those tasks that required manual work. Simply put, when offered a physical challenge, he would shine. Throughout his seminary days, the young man had to fight against taking an easy way out and seeking more tangible results by working with his hands.

Marcellin’s first year ended on an unhappy note. Father Périer concluded that he was unsuited for priesthood. The priest told the young man and his mother that he would not be welcomed back to the seminary for a second year. Marie Thérèse, while disappointed, immediately set about to resolve this crisis in her son’s life.

Her first recourse was to prayer. Mother and son made a second pilgrimage together to the shrine of Saint John Francis Regis. With that journey behind them, Marie Thérèse used

some very human means to further her son's cause. The parish priest, Father Alliot, was well connected at the seminary, and she prevailed upon him to intervene. She also sought the help of Father Linossier, a well-respected, highly qualified, and newly arrived member of the seminary staff. Due to the combined efforts of these two men, the Superior at Verrières reversed his decision and agreed to readmit Marcellin.

### ***Marcellin's problems continue***

Marcellin's second year in 1806 got off to a better start than his first. While he found himself in a bigger class, his teacher, Mr. Chomarez, tried to improve the discipline and made Latin available to those who wished to study the subject. The youth, in spite of his weakness in grammar, took on the challenge.

Marcellin, who by this time had developed into a gregarious young man, was known to frequent the local pubs. As a consequence, he was eventually given membership in a group known as the "Happy Gang," made up of seminarians who were a familiar sight in the taverns of the town during their free time.

As the year unfolded, though, Marcellin settled down to a more sober life style. He continued to apply himself to his studies throughout his second year at the seminary. Two events, occurring during the summer following that year, also helped moderate his exuberant behavior. The first was the sudden death on September 2nd, 1807 of his friend, Denis Duplay. The second was a serious conversation with Father Linossier, who supervised the seminary, about improving Marcellin's general conduct.

There can be little doubt that the death of his mother, Marie Thérèse, in 1810, contributed to the changes in Marcellin's behavior. She had played an important role in fur-

thering his priestly vocation; with her death he redoubled his efforts at the minor seminary.

Early on in the process of his formation as a priest, then, Marcellin became more open to the transforming grace of God in his life. The Lord used some very human means to focus the future saint's mind, heart, spirit and energies on this one aim: loving Jesus and, in turn, helping others to do the same.

### ***Marcellin's final years at Verrières***

In 1810 Jean-Claude Courveille came to the seminary. This young man was to play a central role, a few years later, in the early stages of the Marist movement. Marcellin continued to struggle with self-discipline. He did not always meet with success. Throughout his years at Verrières, however, he made confident appeals to God for help. This confidence in God was already one of the cornerstones of his spirituality.

Marcellin passed eight difficult years at Verrières. Poorly housed and fed, he learned to endure. It was an important lesson, and one that would stand him in good stead during the years ahead. Within a few months, he would set out for the major seminary of Saint Irenaeus. To an astute observer, this much was obvious already: from an obscure corner of early nineteenth century France, the eventual founder of the Little Brothers of Mary was already beginning to come into his own.

### ***St Irenaeus: the Major Seminary***

St. Irenaeus, the major seminary, was located near Lyons, a city built at a point where the Saône and Rhone rivers meet. The basilica of Our Lady of Fourvière, perched on a bluff high above the city, dominates the scene; devotion to Mary has

always played a central role in the people's lives. Is it any wonder, then, that Marcellin strengthened his attachment to Mary during his years at Saint Irenaeus?

Rapid political changes shook France in 1814; the ripple effects of these unfolding events found their way into the corridors of Saint Irenaeus. Napoleon abdicated on April 6th, 1814. Cardinal Fesch, his uncle, fled immediately to Italy. The Bourbons returned to the throne of France.

The vast majority of the seminarians had positioned themselves against Napoleon. As a consequence, a great deal of political discussion occupied their time throughout 1814. One historian of the period described it as "a terrible year," one during which seminarians spoke more of politics than theology.

Despite all the turmoil, political events were far from Marcellin's mind. He appeared to hold himself aloof from this type of involvement. He was not alone in this pursuit. Jean-Claude Colin, future founder of the Marist Fathers and a contemporary of Marcellin at Saint Irenaeus, refers to 1815 as "a wretched year".

In spite of the unrest at the seminary, Saint Irenaeus will be remembered as a remarkable place in terms of the fruit it produced. Saint Jean-Marie Vianney, the future Curé of Ars, was numbered among Marcellin's classmates.

### ***Journey to ordination***

His teachers and superiors at Saint Irenaeus held Marcellin in high regard. He had made quite a favorable impression. A brief survey of some of the young seminarian's resolutions gives an insight into his spiritual journey at this time in his life.

The practice of charity ranked high among the resolutions Marcellin made in 1815. The ever-present political disputes common at the seminary at the time no doubt played a role in the making of this resolution. We note also that the young

man's preparation for priesthood led him to "deprivation of self, renunciation, a life of prayer, of rule, of study".

His resolutions for the holiday period emphasized habitual prayer and living in God's presence. Marcellin organized his spiritual life carefully during these periods: prayer, fasting, visiting the sick, teaching young people religion. Commenting on his abilities in this last area, Julienne Epalle—a Champagnat neighbor and witness for Marcellin's beatification—reported, "He taught so well that both adults and children often remained two hours without getting tired".

Marcellin judged his love of others to be an extension of his love of God. He placed great emphasis on having good family relationships. After ordination, he would be remembered also for his fine and sensible judgement in matters of conscience. It was as a counselor, confessor, and wholehearted pastor of souls that he was so well remembered and loved by the people of La Valla, his first appointment as a priest.

### ***Marist movement gets underway***

The French Revolution had set off a wave of persecution against the Catholic Church. Religious orders declined rapidly in size and influence.

In contrast, the Restoration set in motion a flood of religious activity. Many previously suppressed religious orders re-emerged; an extraordinary number of new ones sprang into existence. Father Bochard, one of the Vicars General of the Diocese of Lyons, was determined to found a new congregation. Eventually, he set up a group named the Society of the Cross of Jesus. He saw the seminary as a fertile field for gaining new recruits for his small band. In the hopes of so doing, he enlisted the unwitting aid of a seminarian, Jean-Claude Courveille.

Courveille had been born into a well-to-do family of merchants. When he came to the seminary, he brought with him

quite a bit of history. At age ten, for example, he had contracted a serious eye condition after a bout with smallpox. Concerned about his limited vision, his mother took her son to the shrine of Our Lady of Le Puy. There in 1809, at age twenty-two, he was allegedly cured of his blindness after oil from a sanctuary lamp had been applied to his afflicted eyes. This event led Courveille to dedicate his life to Mary. He claimed in later years to have also heard a voice on the feast of the Assumption, 1812, directing him to found the Society of Mary. The purpose of this group was quite simple: it would do for the Church of nineteenth century France what the Jesuits had done for the Church of the sixteenth century.

Bochard was eager to speak with Courveille, especially when he learned of the young man's plan to found a religious congregation. Since, as was mentioned earlier, the former was in the process of setting up his own religious association, he thought that he could wed the two projects.

The Vicar General encouraged Courveille to seek members for the Marist group he had in mind. Bochard's motives, however, were not pure as the driven snow: he set about evaluating each of the men Courveille was considering with an eye to their eventual membership in the Society of the Cross of Jesus.

Oblivious to the Vicar's scheme, Courveille set out on his membership drive and in a short while had fifteen recruits. All in their twenties and thirties, they came mainly from French peasant families. These young men spent the academic year 1814–1815 hammering out the fundamental principles of the new Society. It was to be made up of priests, auxiliary brothers, sisters, and lay men and women. The group of priests would form the Society's core.

Early in the discussion, Marcellin introduced the idea of establishing another branch of the Society, one made up of teaching brothers. His fellow seminarians did not express much enthusiasm for the plan. If nothing else, however, we know by now that Marcellin was a persistent soul. He kept



putting forward his proposal and eventually, the others agreed: the Society of Mary would include among its number a group of teaching brothers. Responsibility for getting it started, however, was left to the young man who proposed its foundation.

How account for Marcellin's insistence that a group of teaching brothers be part of the new Society? First and foremost, he wanted to address the widespread lack of religious education and spiritual formation found in his day. Brother Jean-Baptiste quotes him as saying, "We must have brothers, to teach catechism, to help the missionaries and to conduct schools". Marcellin's dream was ambitious: to make Jesus known and loved among the young, particularly those who were most neglected.

Other obvious explanations can be found in Marcellin's own personal struggles with French, his lack of academic preparation for seminary life, the backwardness he must have felt sitting in class with younger boys, so much better prepared scholastically.

In 1815, the government also admitted that there were too few schools in France. The Commission of Public Instruction, entrusted with the task of organizing education nationally, began to insist that every "commune take the necessary means to ensure that its local children receive primary education, and for poor children, it is free".

Some initial steps had been taken to address the country's educational crisis. Napoleon had restored the De La Salle Brothers in 1803 along with some orders of sisters. While Marcellin was aware of the work of the former, he knew that their efforts were concentrated on children living in urban centers. He longed to provide the same opportunities for young people in the hamlets, villages, and small towns of the hill country.

Finally, Marcellin may also have been aware of the details of the *Royal Ordinance* of February 29th, 1816. It provided for financial assistance to be given to those who entered the field

of education. All these elements worked together, pushing Marcellin forward. However, it would be his encounter with a young man named Jean-Baptiste Montagne that finally crystallized his dream and filled it with the urgency needed to make it a reality.

### ***Ordination***

On July 22nd, 1816, Marcellin realized his dream of many years: Bishop Dubourg of New Orleans ordained him a priest. Sharing the joy of the day and receiving the sacrament along with him were seven other members of the group now beginning to be known as Marists. The day after their ordination, the eight, accompanied by four seminarians, set off on pilgrimage to Fourvière. The basilica that fills the site today did not exist back then. Instead, the group made their way to the shrine of the Black Virgin, a small chapel that the present day basilica adjoins. Jean-Claude Courveille celebrated Mass for them. At its conclusion, all twelve renewed their pledge and dedicated their lives to Mary.

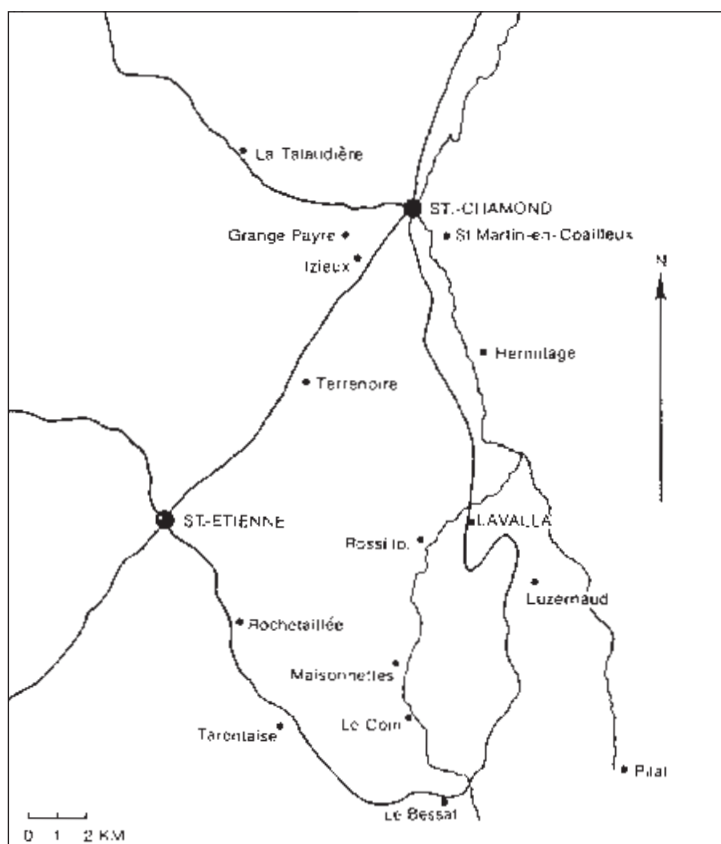
The original Marist dream called for one Society, not several. The various branches were to be subordinate to the unity of the whole. In making their pledge at Fourvière, the early Marists knew that they were committing themselves to some future action. For the present, they were subject to the authority of diocesan officials who assigned the newly ordained widely throughout the vast diocese of Lyons. So it came to pass that Marcellin found himself on his way to the village of La Valla, located in the obscure foothills of Mount Pilat. There he took up the work of his first priestly assignment on August 13th, 1816, two days before the feast of the Assumption.

***Reflection questions***

1. Marcellin Champagnat faced many difficult challenges on his road to ordination. What similar challenges have you faced in your own life? How have they strengthened and shaped you? What means did you take to overcome them?

2. Looking back on this period in the life of Marcellin Champagnat, what qualities do you find in the man that you most admire? What about them fills you with admiration?

*A Map of La Valla and its surrounding*



### *Chapter III*

#### ***“Young priest and young founder...”***

**D**id adversity stalk Marcellin Champagnat? One must wonder. We have seen already that his road to the priesthood was strewn with obstacles. In the person of Father Jean-Baptiste Rebod, pastor at his first parish in La Valla, he would encounter several others.

Rebod was an unfortunate man. Had the Church not suffered such devastation after the Revolution, he would have been counseled in the seminary to think of doing something else with his life. Instead, he was trained hurriedly, ordained, and, in 1812, appointed parish priest in La Valla.

The pastor suffered from arthritis and an unfortunate stammer, drank to excess, and did little to animate the life of the parish. When Marcellin arrived in 1816, he found both presbytery and church in disarray and neglect.

More seriously, due to Rebod's neglect of souls, the parish community itself was in sorry shape. Greed, rivalry, and lack of love marked social interaction. Bitter passions sowed seeds of dissension among the village inhabitants; a number drifted in the practice of their Catholic faith. The pastor, incapable of dealing with his own personal problems, was at a loss as to what to do.

La Valla was also not Marllhes. The terrain of the two regions differed greatly. The word La Valla, meaning “valley,” is actually something of a misnomer when applied to the area around Mount Pilat. Rather than being made up of stretches of good soil surrounded by hills, hardly any level ground can be found in the locale. Ravines, rocks, precipices, and fast mountain streams, etching their way through rock and soil, are more common sights. During the young curate’s day, some places were almost inaccessible for want of passable roads. Without doubt, Marcellin Champagnat faced a tough assignment in the midst of some rugged terrain.

### ***The people of La Valla and the Revolution***

A certain simplicity marked life in La Valla. During the summer months outdoor work occupied the entire day. Winter brought long evenings during which weaving, tool repair, and quiet moments by the fire were common pastimes. Neighbors stopped by to talk, sing or help out with chores. The family unit remained strong.

The Revolution posed a threat to this widely accepted way of living. Men were pressed to attend political meetings, spending less time at home. Some went off alone to the taverns to drink, discuss politics, read the newspapers, or have them read to them. Cheaply printed political tracts took up the time of others. There was talk of emancipating women.

### ***Ascetical practices***

To keep his fervor alive, the young priest set up a rigorous schedule of ascetical practices for himself. He rose at 4:00 AM and began his day with a half-hour meditation. Daily Mass was preceded by fifteen minutes of recollected prayer.

Though fully engaged in parish work, Marcellin still found at least an hour each day to study theology. Fridays he fasted, and he faithfully visited the parish sick.

The practice of the presence of God was, more and more, at the heart of Marcellin's spiritual life. His path to a deeper relationship with Jesus and Mary, however, was not an easy one; the young priest encountered many rough stretches along the way.

### ***The parish curate***

Marcellin worked hard at developing an understanding heart, and with good reason. He was frequently called out to visit people at odds with one another. In these situations, his conciliatory spirit, cheerful character, and simplicity of manner worked together to foster reconciliation.

The young priest also had an uncanny knack of being able to deliver correction in a way that others found palatable! He could admonish people without damaging their self-esteem. As a result, many came to see faults in themselves that, though previously pointed out by others, they had been unable to accept.

By necessity and temperament, Marcellin spent long hours preparing his sermons. Study, reflection, and prayer were the ingredients he put into these lessons. At first, his sermons were simple and short; the people of the parish were impressed. The young priest harmonized his instructions with the events of their everyday life. Simply put, Marcellin spoke the language of the people he was called to serve; thus, when he preached about Jesus and his message, he was able to speak to their hearts.

But the new curate was at his best in the confessional. In spite of the rigorism of his seminary training, Marcellin managed to retain his compassion, good sense, and understanding of human foibles.

The founder, though, was also a man of his times. Dancing, for example, had always been a favorite pastime of the people of La Valla. The Napoleonic armies, however, brought with them on their return from the German States a new form of this diversion: the waltz. In the region's traditional dances, partners touched rarely, and then only slightly on the hand, hardly enough to stir the passions. But in the waltz, couples were required to embrace and to move together as though one.

Marcellin, in keeping with his seminary formation and the spirit of the times, probably objected strongly to this type of dancing. Brother Jean-Baptiste suggests that his opposition took the form of scheduling alternative activities at the same time as those dances where the waltz was to take place.

The pastor Rebod continued to be a thorn in the young priest's side. Marcellin was not merely an idle dreamer; he took action to bring his dreams to life. His initiatives, in the pastor's eyes, only upset the somnolence of parish life in La Valla. Whether threatened by Marcellin's activities, or jealous of the relationship he developed with parishioners, Rebod did not miss an opportunity to criticize his young assistant or attempt to humiliate him. Despite the pastor's antagonism, however, the curate won the hearts of those who came to pray with him or to hear him preach.

Later, when the young priest started his group of brothers, Rebod was one of the project's most outspoken critics. He rarely missed an opportunity to condemn it publicly or to belittle and embarrass its initiator.

Marcellin responded to Rebod with admirable self-restraint, trying by prayer and friendly advice to help the parish priest. The young curate deprived himself of wine in the hope that his example would aid the pastor. While credited with helping to reduce Rebod's excessive lapses, Marcellin's interventions ultimately came to no avail. Protests against the parish priest rose steadily in frequency and volume, and continued throughout the early part of 1824. In June



of that year, diocesan authorities removed Father Rebod from the parish; six months later he was dead at age forty-eight.

***“We must have brothers”***

As was mentioned earlier, Marcellin was aware of the lack of provision for schooling in France, particularly in rural areas. A report on education in the Loire Department, where La Valla was located, had this to say about the situation: “The young are living in the most profound ignorance and are given to the most alarming dissipation”.

Teachers were not held in high regard. One report described them as, “drunkards, irreligious, immoral—the dregs of the human race”. Admittedly, the educational picture improved somewhat under the rule of Napoleon and more so after the accession of Louis XVIII. The *Ordinance* of February 1816 authorized the printing of suitable textbooks, the establishment of model schools, and the payment of teachers. It also gave a strong impetus to primary education: every parish was required to provide it. Children whose families could not pay were to receive free instruction. The climate was ripe for Marcellin to realize his dream.

The founder, though, was not simply concerned about providing better educational opportunities for young people. He was also preoccupied with helping to foster their religious development and experience of God’s love. Marcellin was often heard to say, “I cannot see a child without wanting to let him know how much Jesus Christ has loved him and how much he should, in return, love the divine Savior”.

The young priest also saw education as a means for integrating faith and culture. Brother Jean-Baptiste tells us, “in founding his Institute, Father Champagnat had more in mind than providing primary instruction for the children or even, than teaching them the truths of religion. He said, ‘We aim at

something better: we want to educate the children, to instruct them in their duty, to teach them to practice it, to give them a Christian spirit and attitudes and to form them to religious habits and the virtues possessed by a good Christian and a good citizen.”

Though two schools existed already in the parish of La Valla, the young priest did not abandon his intention of establishing a group of teaching brothers as part of the Society of Mary. He was impressed by the piety and good behavior of a twenty-two year old parishioner named Jean-Marie Granjon, a former Grenadier in Napoleon’s Imperial Guard.

On one occasion, the young man asked Marcellin to visit someone who was sick in his hamlet. The priest agreed and, as they walked together, took note of the character and disposition of the young man. So satisfied was he with Granjon’s responses to his questions, that Marcellin brought the young man a copy of *The Christian’s Manual* when he returned the next day to visit the sick.

Granjon refused the book initially, pointing out that he was unable to read. Marcellin was undeterred. The young curate said, “Take it just the same. You can use it in learning to read and I will give you lessons if you wish”. Granjon accepted the priest’s offer.

### ***Marcellin and Jean-Baptiste Montagne***

Shortly thereafter, on October 28th, 1816, an event occurred that for Marcellin was a conclusive sign to move ahead with his dream of founding a congregation of brothers. The young priest was called to the house of a carpenter in Les Palais, a hamlet just beyond Le Bessat. A seventeen-year old boy, Jean-Baptiste Montagne, lay dying. The lad was entirely ignorant of matters of faith. Marcellin instructed him, heard his confession, and prepared him for death. He then left to visit another sick person in the area. When he returned to the Montagne household, the

young priest learned that Jean-Baptiste had died.

Marcellin's encounter with this adolescent boy transformed him. Jean-Baptiste's lack of knowledge about Jesus convinced the young priest that God was calling him to found a congregation of brothers to evangelize the young, particularly those most neglected. Walking back to the parish house in La Valla, Marcellin decided to put his plan into action: he would ask Jean-Marie Granjon to become the first member of his community of teaching brothers.

### ***The first recruit***

Jean-Marie, to be known later as Brother Jean-Marie, accepted the young priest's invitation on October 28th, 1816; he was eager to give himself to the work. Marcellin had taken the first step to found his Little Brothers of Mary. A second step followed very quickly.

A small house near the presbytery was available for purchase. Marcellin wanted to buy it, but Father Rebod, the pastor, opposed the move. However, Marcellin was able to obtain a loan for half the purchase price from Jean-Claude Courveille, now curate at nearby Rive-de-Gier, and to make up the difference from his own funds. Marcellin signed a tentative contract with Jean-Baptiste Bonner, the owner, and set to work cleaning and repairing the old building. He also built two wooden bedsteads and a small dining table. As encouraging as these developments were to Marcellin, a far more promising event came quickly: a second recruit.

### ***The community begins to grow***

Jean-Baptiste Audras, later Brother Louis, was only fourteen and a half when he asked to join the De La Salle Brothers at Saint Chamond. Judging him to be too young, they advised

him to continue discussing his vocation with his confessor. As luck would have it, that person was the young priest from La Valla. The boy told Marcellin that he had resolved to consecrate his life to God. After talking with Jean-Baptiste and his parents, and reflecting prayerfully on the situation, the priest invited young Audras to join Granjon.

Two months later the house repairs were complete. The first two recruits took up occupancy on January 2nd, 1817. Henceforth, the Bonner house would be referred to, at least in the Marist world, as the “cradle” of the Institute, and January 2nd, 1817 as the foundation date of the Little Brothers of Mary. Its members were to embrace a spirituality that included mindfulness of God’s presence, confidence in Mary and her protection, and the practice of the “little” virtues of simplicity and humility.

Throughout the remaining winter months, Granjon and Audras lived together in the house. Marcellin taught his charges to read, and gave them the tools they would need to teach children. He also showed them how to pray and to make nails. The latter were sold to provide an income for the community.

Both Granjon and Audras assisted the young priest with many of his pastoral duties. They visited and helped the aged and infirm in the hamlets, gathered wood for the needy, and brought them food regularly.

### ***A founder educates his brothers***

Marcellin engaged Claude Maisonneuve, formerly with the De La Salle Brothers congregation, to instruct his brothers in methods of teaching. Though Maisonneuve tutored Granjon and Audras in the theory and practice of teaching, Marcellin attended to their religious and intellectual formation. He was a skilled catechist and also helped them with their general

education.

Jean-Claude Audras turned out to be the third recruit for the Little Brothers, his path to the Institute an unlikely one. Charged by his parents with the task of going to La Valla to fetch home his brother Jean-Baptiste, the young man set out on his journey. However, Jean-Baptiste had no interest in returning to his family. He pleaded with Marcellin, “My brother has come to take me home, but I won’t go. Will you please urge my parents to leave me alone?”

While calming the young boy, the priest also spoke with Jean-Claude, eventually convincing him that he, too, had the qualities to be a good religious. Instead of carrying out the task his parents had assigned him, Jean-Claude decided that he wanted to join his younger brother and Granjon. Apparently, his parents were agreeable because Jean-Claude became the third member of the community in December 1817. He later took the name Brother Laurent. Over the next six months, three more recruits appeared, among them Gabriel Rivat, who would take the name Brother François and some twenty years later succeed Marcellin as Superior of the brothers. By June 1818, six young men were living in the former Bonner house in La Valla.

### ***The ministry begins***

At this time in history, schooling in France was limited to the winter months. Every pair of hands was needed for work on the family farm when the weather turned fine. So it was that in May 1818, his winter assignments in the hamlets having ended, Maisonneuve was able to come to La Valla for the summer months. A school for boys and girls was started in the brothers’ house under the direction of Maisonneuve; they learned by observing him at work and by helping with the classes as they were able.

When Maisonneuve eventually departed, Marcellin continued to operate the brothers' school, appointing Jean-Marie Granjon, the first member of the Institute, as the school's headmaster. Jean-Marie threw himself into the task with zest as he set about educating the children entrusted to him, many of whom were abandoned and orphaned.

With the passage of time, the success of the brothers' efforts became obvious. They also continued to teach in the hamlets, and Father Alliot, the priest who had baptized Marcellin, asked him to establish a school in Marlhes. Late in 1818, two brothers took up that challenge.

### ***Community life takes shape***

As the brothers' school in La Valla developed, so also did their life in community. With Marcellin's encouragement, they elected a Director, the choice falling on Jean-Marie Granjon, the oldest and first member. A daily schedule, beginning with 5:00 AM rising followed by prayer, was agreed upon. Each brother took a turn at cooking for the group, though since the diet appears to have been limited predominantly to soup, cheese, and vegetables, culinary skills probably did not rank high among the talents of Marcellin's young recruits.

The young priest eventually moved from the presbytery to join his community of brothers. This change marks another decisive moment in Marcellin's spiritual journey. The eyes of faith suggest to us that, once again, the young priest unhesitatingly embraced the mission that God had in mind for him.

Though the pastor, Father Rebod, gave permission for the transfer, he warned his curate that he would soon tire of living in such poor conditions. The brothers were delighted to have Marcellin working and praying with them, eating the same food, and organizing and helping in their teacher training. Whether or not the spirit of equality and fraternity had

taken root in nineteenth century France, it had begun to weave itself into the rich tapestry that would, in time, develop into the life style characteristic of the Little Brothers of Mary.

A word about Father Rebod, before we move on. Though he was often a cross to Marcellin, we need to adopt the curate's compassion in evaluating the man. Rebod was obviously troubled and unhappy. At the very least, he abused alcohol. In another era, assistance for these problems would have been more available to him. He might also have chosen another direction for his life. We do not know how many lives he touched in a positive way; undoubtedly, there were some. For Marcellin, though, he was often a source of tension. It is to the young priest's credit that he managed to respond to Rebod's antagonism with patience and understanding.

### ***Money is a problem***

Although Marcellin was a careful steward of funds, money was always a problem for the young community. Manual work, characteristic of the brothers, helped to cut costs. Income from the manufacture of nails, Marcellin's modest salary as curate, and the donations of a number of parishioners helped the young community keep its financial head above water.

When he judged them ready, the young priest sent his followers out to the nearby hamlets, as well as to the towns of La Valla and Marlhès. The brothers were full of fervor, fraternal affection, and an apostolic zeal.

In the days ahead they would need all three. Beyond the hills surrounding La Valla, in the episcopal city of Lyons, trouble was already brewing for the young community. At the center of their difficulties would be one man, the same Vicar General who had taken such an interest in Jean-Claude

Courveille's plan to establish a new religious congregation:  
Jean-Claude Bochard.

***Reflection questions***

1. The needs of others and their suffering often shape and transform us. How did both affect Marcellin's character, outlook on life, spirituality? How did they work together to make him the person that he became?

2. How have the needs and sufferings of others shaped and transformed you, made you the person that you are today? How have they moved you to take action for the gospel's sake?



*Chapter IV*

***“The Institute finds its footing...”***

**B**oichard was a formidable foe. Mercurial in temperament, interfering by nature, excessive in giving praise or assigning blame, he was one of three Vicars General for the Archdiocese of Lyons. Largely unpopular with the local clergy and a zealous supporter of Gallicanism, he conducted business for the absent Cardinal Fesch.

The Vicar General was determined to absorb the brothers at La Valla into his own Society. He summoned Marcellin to the Chancery and made his case. By the end of the meeting, Boichard thought he had won the day, but he was mistaken. Marcellin was more firmly convinced than ever that he was doing God’s will. Not eager to respond promptly to the Vicar’s offer, the curate of La Valla decided that he would, instead, follow this dictum: hasten slowly. His advisors—including some highly placed archdiocesan clergy—were encouraging.

Marcellin’s work continued to expand: in 1822 another school opened in Saint-Sauveur, an important administrative center in the region. The addition of this school was yet another sign of the esteem in which the brothers and their ministry were held.

Difficulties began to develop at the school in Marlies.

Father Alliot, the parish priest, refused to provide the brothers and their students with better living conditions. Brother Jean-Baptiste describes the house in Marlhes as “small, damp, unhealthy”. Marcellin intervened personally and demanded more suitable accommodations. Alliot would not budge. Then the young curate made a difficult decision: he withdrew his brothers from the school in his home parish. Communicating his final decision to the pastor, Marcellin wrote, “Your house is in so wretched a condition that I could not in conscience leave either the brothers or the children in it”.

This incident teaches us an important lesson about Marcellin Champagnat. While a generous man, he also knew when to say “no”. Since neither he nor his brothers were overly demanding, the situation in Marlhes must have been dreadful indeed. Poverty and simplicity marked the lives of his Institute’s members. However, Marcellin also insisted that suitable lodging be provided for those with whose well-being he was charged.

He realized, too, that certain elements, such as satisfactory housing, need to be in place for any educational undertaking to be effective. Marcellin was fond of saying that you could not teach children unless you loved them first. Providing adequate shelter was one way of expressing that love in action.

### ***A vocation crisis***

By February 1822 the Institute was made up of ten brothers. Their gifts varied and not all found a place in the classroom. Some possessed skills that produced needed income for the community or were more valuable for its internal management. One recruit, for example, was a skilled weaver. His trade fast replaced nail making as a means to support the brothers.

But Marcellin was worried. Vocations appeared to have

dried up; he wondered if his Institute and its mission had a future. As always, he turned to Mary and made his problem hers. The young priest said, in effect: "It is your work; if you want it to flourish, you will have to provide the means for that to happen".

In March of the same year a young man sought admission to Marcellin's group. He came from a prominent family, known for its affluence and piety. The young fellow had already spent six years with the De La Salle Brothers in Saint-Chamond, but they had eventually sent him away.

After a three-day trial period, Marcellin refused to admit him to the Institute. "Will you receive me if I bring you half-a-dozen good recruits?" was the young man's response. Believing that only a miracle could bring about such a result, the priest accepted the challenge.

Two weeks later the applicant returned to La Valla with eight other young men. No doubt Marcellin was surprised. Though many in the group impressed him, he decided not to accept any of them. Why? For one reason, he knew too little about them; for another, the house lacked sufficient space to accommodate them.

The newcomers, however, equally impressed with Marcellin, pressured him to allow them to stay. Marcellin gathered the senior brothers of the community and sought their advice. Sensing that he believed that Providence had a hand in the group's arrival, the brothers advised admission but recommended also that the new recruits be subjected to special tests of their vocation.

Two weeks later, the group's leader left; five more followed him over time. Of the remaining three, two died as Marist Brothers: Brothers Hilarion, and Jean-Baptiste who later became an assistant to the Superior General and Marcellin's first biographer.

The story has an additional happy ending. The eight young men had been recruited from the region of Haute-Loire, one

that, to date, Marcellin had not considered for vocations. He quickly sent a recruiter there to test the climate. Within six months, more than twenty applicants had come from the area. For years afterwards, Marcellin insisted that “it was Our Lady of Le Puy who sent them”.

### ***Other comings and goings***

In April 1822, Inspector Guillard, from the Lyons Academy, arrived unexpectedly in La Valla. His mission? To investigate reports about the clandestine teaching of Latin. Only the Academy, a school board of sorts, could authorize such instruction; it was a privilege that that institution guarded carefully.

The inspector was disappointed to find neither the presence of students nor any evidence of Latin classes taking place. The school year had come to a close; rumors about the Latin classes were unfounded.

Guillard, though, discovered that Marcellin had failed, to date, to seek legal authorization for the Institute he had founded five years earlier. This dereliction perplexed the inspector. When asked about it, the priest explained simply that he wanted to be sure that his Institute would survive before seeking approbation for it. Here again we have evidence of Marcellin’s realism and practicality: gaining authorization for a venture that would ultimately fail would be nothing more than an empty satisfaction.

Before leaving, the inspector made a tour of the building used by Marcellin and his brothers. He was not impressed. “We visited the home of the congregation,” he reported later. “Everything there bespoke poverty, even gross untidiness”. In defense of the early brothers’ housekeeping skills, note that construction of a new dining room was underway, due to increased numbers, and barn alterations were in progress to provide additional dormitory space.

Have no doubt, though, Marcellin and his brothers were poor. Brother Laurent, an early and faithful disciple of the founder, described the material circumstances of that initial community this way. “We were very poor in the beginning. We had bread that was the color of the earth, but we always had what was necessary”. Despite harsh conditions, the spirit of generosity and good humor that marked this first group of young recruits never failed to shine through.

### ***Bochard again a problem***

Bochard, the Vicar General, heard that eight postulants had joined Marcellin’s Institute and that others were coming. The source of his information? Father Rebod, the parish priest. Fearing that, should the fledging Institute fail, he would be left with some financial responsibility for his assistant’s young charges, the pastor fired off a letter to the Vicar General. Realizing that Marcellin’s foundation was expanding beyond expectations, Bochard judged the time was right to make his move.

The Vicar replied to the pastor’s letter. Without revealing the contents of Bochard’s note, Rebod attempted to intimidate Marcellin. He suggested that non-compliance with the directives of the Vicar’s letter could lead to suspension of priestly functions. When the curate finally learned the details of Bochard’s message, he realized that the accusations leveled against him were false. He contacted the Vicar’s office and made an appointment.

We are uncertain about the date of this second meeting between Marcellin and Bochard. In all probability it took place in November 1822. From the outset, the young priest realized that the Vicar had been kept well informed. Pointing to a map, for example, he could name the towns in which the Little Brothers were conducting schools. Bochard recom-

mended an immediate union between Marcellin's brothers and his own Society of the Cross of Jesus. And what reason did he give? The latter possessed the legal authorization the curate, now convinced that his Little Brothers would survive and grow, so strongly desired. Marcellin avoided making any commitments and took leave of the Vicar General as quickly as courtesy would allow. He knew, of course, that he had not seen the last of Bochard nor was he finally free of his schemes.

But the young priest was not completely defenseless. Bochard was only one of three Vicars, and the other two were favorably disposed toward Marcellin and his brothers. Following his second meeting with Bochard, the founder set up an appointment with Father Courbon, the Senior Vicar General.

At the outset, Marcellin spoke plainly. "You know my project," he told Courbon, "and all I have done for it. Give me your candid opinion of it. I am ready to abandon it if you wish me to do so. I desire only the will of God". The senior Vicar responded with support, saying, "I don't see why they should annoy you in this way. You are doing very useful work in training good teachers for our schools. Go on as usual; don't mind what people say".

Marcellin's next encounter with the Vicar General would take place about a year later. In the interim, however, another event occurred that sheds further light on the character and spirituality of the founder of the Little Brothers of Mary.

### ***The Memorare in the Snow***

In February 1823, Marcellin learned that Brother Jean-Baptiste in Bourg-Argental had come down with a serious illness. Concerned about his condition, the young priest set out on the twenty-kilometer journey across rough countryside to

visit him. Brother Stanislaus was at his side.

On their return trip, walking through heavily timbered territory, the two men were caught in the full fury of one of the region's snowstorms. Both were young and energetic, but hours of wandering lost on the slopes of Mount Pilat led eventually to exhaustion. Stanislaus had reached the limits of his stamina. Night set in; the possibility of death in the snow increased with each passing hour. Both men turned to Mary for help and prayed the *Memorare*.

Within a short while, they spied lamplight, not too far away in the distance. A local farmer, Mr. Donnet, had left his house to enter a nearby stable. This particular evening, though, he had taken an unusual route, especially with the storm underway. By habit, he entered the stable through a convenient door in the wall of the house. For reasons that can be explained only by faith, this particular night he braved wind and snow and chose a route that took him outdoors with his lantern. For the rest of his days, Marcellin saw his deliverance and that of Brother Stanislaus—henceforth referred to as the *Memorare in the Snow*—as an act of Providence.

### ***Marcellin's spirituality***

For some time now, we have been following unfolding events in the life of Marcellin Champagnat. What insights do they offer us into the man and his spirituality? Without hesitation, we can conclude that he faced some formidable challenges along the way: lack of adequate preparation for seminary studies, academic difficulties, a troubled and troubling pastor, an ambitious Vicar General. Each predicament shaped him, fine tuning in him the virtues of charity, optimism, resourcefulness, and political acumen.

The episode that came to be known as the *Memorare in the Snow* opens another window on the man and his spiritu-

ality. What caused Marcellin to set out on his journey in the first place? Concern for a sick brother. The founder's great love for the early brothers was one of his most memorable qualities. Marcellin's world might have been small when compared to that of many people today. But there was nothing small about his heart. He lived a "practical Christianity"; love always translated itself into concrete action. A brother was sick; the founder set out to visit him.

With that said, though, we might wonder what possessed the young priest to begin his return journey in the face of a threatening snowstorm? Some would, after all, judge the founder's return journey from Bourg-Argental to be an act of imprudence.

Whatever other reasons motivated the timing of his return journey, we can speculate that his sense of God's presence and confidence in Mary and her protection caused him to undertake the trip where others might hesitate. His recourse to the *Memorare* in the face of danger was not the final effort of a dying man. Marcellin was, by this time in his life, aware of God's continual and powerful presence; Mary had also come through for him often enough that he counted on her protection without question. The *Memorare in the Snow* was simply an external manifestation of the much deeper spiritual reality of the man.

### ***A "knock-out" blow for Bochard***

Bochard decided to increase the pressure on Marcellin. At the close of the priests' retreat in August 1823, the Vicar General threatened to close the brothers' house and place ecclesiastical sanctions on the young priest, including his removal from the parish in La Valla, unless he agreed to unite his Institute with Bochard's group. The curate moved into action, relying on his friends in high places. They encouraged him to stand firm.



The Vicar employed drastic methods to break Marcellin's resistance. Father Dervieux, parish priest in the nearby town of Saint-Chamond, prompted by Bochart, attacked Marcellin, pointing out that his young recruits would be left without support should their house be closed.

Father Rebod also rose to the occasion, and attempted publicly to humiliate his curate once again. He offered to hire the brothers himself, or to arrange for their admission to other congregations, if they would renounce the founder. However, the defection of Jean-Louis Duplay who, up until this time, served as Marcellin's spiritual advisor, proved to be the greatest blow the young priest suffered. Influenced by biased reports about Marcellin, he refused to continue to meet with him.

What was Marcellin's response to these developments? Initially he had some doubts and thought of setting out for the missions in America. He reasoned that he could bring the brothers with him on his journey across the Atlantic. Marcellin asked them what they thought. Their response? They were with him regardless of the decision he made.

The young priest's strategy began with a nine-day period of fasting and prayer. He also made another pilgrimage to La Louvesc and the tomb of his favorite saint, John Francis Regis.

Next, he continued to open schools. In 1823, no fewer than three were established. Marcellin also consoled himself with the knowledge that he had the solid support of some diocesan authorities and a number of his fellow priests. Within a short period of time, however, the winds would shift decisively in his favor because of a most unexpected development.

### ***A new archbishop for Lyons***

In 1823 Leo XII was elected pope, following the death of Pius VII. On December 23rd, 1823 he appointed Archbishop

de Pins as apostolic administrator of the Archdiocese of Lyons. The days of absentee governance at the hands of Cardinal Fesch's assistant, Vicar General Bochart, had come to an end.

Bochart eventually transferred from Lyons to the Diocese of Belley. His departure lifted a great weight from the shoulders of Marcellin and his brothers. Though the now former Vicar General continued to question the legality of de Pin's appointment, his move to another diocese rendered him harmless when it came to the affairs of the Archdiocese of Lyons.

In late March 1824 Marcellin traveled to Lyons to meet with the new Archbishop. There in the presence of several clerical friends and supporters, de Pins gave the young priest the diocese's blessing, a word of encouragement, and some financial aid to further his work. An historian of the period tells us that following his meeting with the Archbishop, Marcellin "went to Notre Dame de Fourvière (that small chapel where the first Marists had pledged their lives to Mary) and spent a long time at Mary's altar...utterly overcome".

### ***Building Notre Dame de l'Hermitage***

By 1824, Marcellin's Institute had grown to such an extent that he needed the assistance of another priest. The Archiepiscopal Council voted on May 12th to send Father Courveille to help out.

The priest's arrival freed Marcellin for a project that had long been close to his heart: the construction of a building spacious enough to house the ever-increasing number of brothers. He purchased a piece of property, five acres in size, in a sheltered section of the valley of the Gier River. Bounded on east and west by steep mountain slopes, it contained a grove of oak trees and was well irrigated by water from the river. Late in May, Vicar General Cholleton blessed the cornerstone; construction was soon underway.

Marcellin and his young brothers worked steadily throughout the six months of summer and early autumn in 1824. They quarried and carried the stones for the building, dug sand, made mortar, and assisted the professional tradesmen, who had been hired for the skilled work. Lodged in an old rented house on the opposite bank of the Gier, the group came together for morning Mass in a small shed in an oak grove. This spot came to be known as the *Chapel in the Woods*. A chest of drawers served as the altar; a bell, suspended from a tree branch, called the community to prayer. What heady days for all involved: the young men found support in one another; they were also proud of their achievement.

Throughout construction of the five-story building, the founder set an example for his brothers. He was the first to start work each day and the last to put it aside at night. While the brothers appreciated Marcellin's efforts, some of his fellow clergy were less enthusiastic. They did not take kindly to the sight of a priest wearing dusty clothing, whose hands were rough from manual labor. Marcellin's parishioners, though, stood by him. They loved him as a pastor of souls, and being working people themselves, they admired him as a laborer and builder.

The new building was ready for occupancy by the end of winter 1825. In May of that year, the brothers from La Valla took up residence at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage. Marcellin now had a Mother House for his Institute.

Throughout the period of construction the founder did not neglect the formation of his brothers. Until October 1824, he still fulfilled his duties as parish curate. Despite his fatigue after a day of construction work, Marcellin continued the brothers' religious and professional education. He spent his evenings instructing them about religious life and advancing their formation as teachers.

In addition to building the Hermitage, Marcellin established several new foundations during 1824, including

Charlieu and Chavanay. He was also eager to gain legal authorization for his Institute. He pursued this goal relentlessly but without success for the rest of his days. Unfortunately, the King's Council of State had become more and more reluctant to authorize religious educators, especially those from congregations of men. Marcellin's ongoing struggle for authorization sorely tried his patience and sapped his strength.

### ***Courveille a problem***

Because Courveille fancied himself the Superior of the Marists, he began to intrude into the brothers' affairs. His first concern was their style of dress. Earlier, Marcellin had established a specific attire for his community members. Courveille altered those directives; he prescribed a coat of sky blue color, covered by a blue cape. At a later date, the founder did away with both.

Marcellin was busy at this time, so he tolerated Courveille's interference. The latter developed a first *Prospectus* for the brothers and submitted it to Vicar General Cholleton for approval. That endorsement was granted in July 1824. The final copy of the *Prospectus* narrowed the range of apostolic endeavors that Marcellin had proposed in an earlier draft. Of note is the fact that the *Prospectus* contains the first official reference to the "Little Brothers of Mary".

While charismatic, Courveille was high-handed and often lacked judgment. His dealings with the town authorities in Charlieu demonstrate both facts admirably. Asked by Marcellin to help establish a school there, Courveille was quick to request that a brothers' novitiate also be built. This at the same time the founder was toiling to build such a structure at the Hermitage.

Courveille was enthusiastic, too, about setting up a center for missionary priests. He asked the Charlieu Municipal

Council for financial assistance with this project. But in the end, all he had to show for his ambitious ideas was a school staffed by Marcellin's brothers.

As difficult as Courveille's behavior proved to be, the situation paled in comparison to what Marcellin would have to face when they all moved to the Hermitage.

### ***Reflection questions***

1. Marcellin was aware of God's presence and relied completely on Mary. After reading about his life thus far, are there other aspects of his spirituality that are apparent to you? If so, what are they and how did they develop in the man?

2. Does your personal spirituality resemble Marcellin's in any way? If so, just how?



## *Chapter V*

### ***“Continuing adversity...”***

**I**n May of 1825, Marcellin, along with Courveille, twenty brothers, and ten postulants moved to the Hermitage. Later in the month, the Archdiocesan Council asked Father Etienne Terraillon, another of the aspiring Marists of the Fourvière pledge, to help with the religious instruction of the brothers. Marcellin, in the eyes of most, now had two priests assisting him, Terraillon and Courveille. Distant rumblings, however, were already sounding in this seemingly tranquil landscape.

Jean-Claude Courveille was an unpredictable man. Feeling reined in, the priest decided to assert himself as the Superior of the brothers. Summer had arrived; they had all assembled at the Hermitage. Courveille gathered the brothers together and delivered a lengthy address, concluding with these words: “It is necessary that you choose one of the Fathers here to direct you [that is, Terraillon, Courveille, or Champagnat]. I am ready to sacrifice myself for you”.

The brothers wanted no part of his offer. Asked to write on a piece of paper their choice for Superior, they selected Marcellin. Fearing that his brothers had given insufficient reflection to the matter, or perhaps because he regarded Courveille as the Superior of the group of Marist congrega-

tions, the founder asked them to vote a second time. The outcome of the balloting? Marcellin once again.

Courveille, though, was not put off so easily. In November 1825, when the founder was away visiting the brothers' schools, he assumed the role of Superior and wrote to all the brothers informing them of this fact. Seconded by Terraillon, he also criticized those at the Hermitage who spoke of the absent Marcellin as Superior.

### ***Marcellin falls seriously ill***

The day after Christmas 1825, the founder fell ill. Within the week, death appeared imminent. Weighed down by several concerns and despite two months of unusually severe weather, the young priest had continued to push himself, visiting the ten scattered communities of brothers. Courveille quickly sent a letter to all the brothers' communities asking for prayers for the founder.

Some of Marcellin's creditors, alarmed by news of his illness, demanded immediate payment. The founder, preparing for the worst, made his will on January 6th, 1826. Unfortunately, the only inheritance he could pass on was debts. Not many were lining up to be heirs to such a legacy. Marcellin and his brothers suffered greatly during this period; Courveille and Terraillon were of little help. In 1833, in a letter to Vicar General Cholleton, the founder wrote this moving description of the situation. "During a long and serious illness, when heavy debts hung over my head, I wished to make Father Terraillon my sole heir. He refused my inheritance, saying that I had nothing. With Father Courveille, he did not cease to say to the brothers, 'The creditors will come very soon to drive you out of here. We will move off to a parish and leave you to yourselves'".

Brother Stanislaus decided to contact both archdiocesan



authorities and the creditors. As a result, Father Dervieux, parish priest in Saint Chamond, assumed the founder's debts. Father Verrier, a friend since the seminary, also stepped in to help.

### ***Marcellin recovers***

Marcellin recovered from his illness, though it permanently weakened his constitution. By February 1826 he was back at work. The founder's business sense, optimism, way with people, and confidence in God's presence and providence all worked together to inspire others to give or lend him money for the works he undertook. While he was conscientious about paying his debts, he never appeared unduly concerned about money.

But Marcellin's sickness had taught him an important lesson. "At last," he wrote, "God, in his mercy, alas, perhaps in his justice, restored my health. I saw that in this occurrence neither the one nor the other [that is, Courveille and Terrillon] had for my young people the sentiments of a father".

Courveille, as mentioned above, had taken charge during the founder's sickness; by this time, his behavior was driving the brothers mad. He expected the novices to follow all his orders without question. These were so numerous and restrictive that they dampened any of the natural liveliness of youth. Courveille also refused to hear complaints, seemingly indifferent to the fact that young brothers were abandoning their vocation. Marcellin, still confined to bed, pleaded with Courveille to be indulgent and paternal in directing the brothers. He was wasting his breath; the request fell on deaf ears.

Fueled by ambition and jealous of the brothers' love for Marcellin, Courveille set about to discredit him with archdiocesan authorities. He presented to the archbishop a list of complaints about the founder. Father Cattet, a Vicar General,

was sent to the Hermitage to investigate.

Cattet was not pleased with what he found. The Vicar ordered the priest, by now convalescing at Father Dervieux's rectory in Saint Chamond, to give more time to instructing the brothers, forbade him to undertake any further building projects, insisted that he devote himself less to material things. On returning to Lyons, Cattet also drew up a plan to merge Marcellin's brothers with the recently founded Brothers of the Sacred Heart of Father Coindre. The latter was not pleased with the idea. The archbishop, though still concerned about the Institute's precarious financial situation, did not support Cattet's plan either. When Coindre died suddenly, the Vicar General resurrected his scheme. On August 8th, 1826, however, the archbishop's Council vetoed any merger.

Courveille's attempt to discredit Marcellin placed further strain on their relationship and damaged even more the one he had with the brothers. An incident soon occurred, however, that marked the end of Jean-Claude Courveille's association with the Little Brothers of Mary.

### ***Courveille falls from grace***

We have seen the Jean-Claude Courveille was the source of considerable difficulty for Marcellin and his young community. He was also a much more troubled man than was first apparent, with significant psychological and moral limitations. Shortly after Cattet's apostolic visitation, Courveille sexually abused one of the postulants at the Hermitage. Father Terraillon, on learning of the situation, reported it immediately to Father Barou, a Vicar General. Necessary action had to be taken: Courveille was to leave the Hermitage immediately. He went to the Cistercian Abbey at Aiguebelle, 120 kilometers to the south.

Who was Jean-Claude Courveille? We have seen that since ordination he had been active in encouraging groups of reli-

gious to establish themselves. He also attempted to set up a house for priests at Charlieu, and he clearly considered himself to be Superior General of the Marists.

Despite his efforts and eminence, Courveille did not have the backing of some prominent Marists. Sometime between 1822 and 1824, Jean-Claude Colin, for example, came to the conclusion that Courveille was not the man to lead their group. He dropped the latter's name from all correspondence he had with Church authorities.

There can be no doubt that Jean-Claude Courveille, along with others, had a vision that later grew to be the worldwide Marist congregations we know today. But while full of ideas, he was also unstable. Courveille eventually found some peace at the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes. Accepted there in 1836, he led an exemplary life for a number of years and died as a monk. He never forgot the Society of Mary; to the end he claimed to be its founder.

### ***More upheavals***

With Courveille's departure, did life settle down at the Hermitage? Unfortunately not. Financial problems persisted, though others appeared to worry more about them than Marcellin did. The founder's optimism about money, however, was not enough to stop departures from the Institute. Courveille had convinced a few brothers that with mounting debt, Marcellin's project was doomed to fail. He lured two or three others away to join him in still another religious foundation he had set up in the Diocese of Grenoble.

Brother Jean-François, an early follower of Marcellin's and a brother dear to his heart, left the Institute at this time, as did Jean-Marie Granjon, his first recruit, who was restless and unable to settle down.

Jean-Marie's concept of holiness had also led to some

unhealthy practices. He wore hairshirts, scourged himself, and prayed for hours in cold, wintry conditions with his arms outstretched. Many brothers feared that he had become mentally unbalanced. Reason failed to make any inroads. By the end of October 1826, Jean-Marie was gone.

Father Terraillon left the Hermitage in the same year. He had been unhappy for a long time, and took the occasion of an invitation to preach a series of jubilee sermons to make his escape. Marcellin was saddened by his leaving, the brothers less so. Many had had their difficulties with him. Terraillon was later a member of the first group of Marist Fathers to pronounce vows in 1836; he also became an Assistant General to Father Colin.

If 1826 was a low point for Marcellin, it did little to dampen his zeal or shake his faith and confidence in God. He opened no fewer than three new schools. Those already operating were enjoying unprecedented success. A letter from Jean-Claude Colin, founder of the Marist Fathers, was another source of consolation. Dated December 5th, 1826, it read in part: "I cannot adequately admire the blessings, which God has given to this most interesting and necessary work of forming young people".

Marcellin worked to help the brothers maintain their fervor and their sense of poverty. If the past year had been a difficult one for him, it was no less so for them. The founder was more than anxious to have another priest for the Hermitage. At the urging of Father Barou, Vicar General, Archbishop de Pins asked the newly ordained Father Séon to help. He was more than eager to do so.

### ***More trouble in the ranks***

After the difficulties of 1826, Marcellin must have breathed a sigh of relief that 1827 was shaping up to be such an exceptionally quiet year. His tranquility was soon shattered over, of all things, clothing!

With Courveille's departure, Marcellin changed the blue outfit that the former had prescribed for the brothers. They were now to wear a black cassock and cloak, a black woolen cord, and a white rabat. A three-cornered hat completed the outfit. Those with perpetual profession also wore a crucifix. During the annual retreat of 1828, Marcellin introduced further changes, the first being the substitution, on the upper part of the cassock, of hooks and eyes for buttons. The lower part of the cassock would be sewn together. Most welcomed this modification.

Not so the second. Until this time, the brothers had worn wool or cotton socks. For a number of reasons, the founder wanted to introduce socks made of serge material. Objections arose immediately. A few brothers became quite agitated, and decided to contact two Vicars General from the diocese. Some senior brothers, fearing that matters were getting completely out of hand, sought the founder and brought him up to date.

Marcellin faced a dilemma. Being a person of prayer, he asked for God's guidance in the matter. He next tried to dissuade the dissenters. All but two brothers eventually came into line. Men of great teaching ability and influence, they had grown slack as religious. The founder used the present opportunity to talk with both of them again about their obligations. His efforts were of little use; by October of the following year, both had left the Institute.

What can we make of this seeming tempest in a teapot over socks! Marcellin was a son of the Revolution. He opposed elegance in dress. From a religious point of view, the founder also wanted to reinforce a spirit of poverty. The early brothers did not have an easy life materially. The deprivation they suffered, however, bound them one to another and caused them to share what little they had. It also kept them mindful of their need to live close to the circumstances of those they were called to serve.

The founder might also have been trying to reinforce the

lines of authority within the Institute. He was not an autocratic man, but he realized that excessive individualism destroys the spirit of sacrifice and cooperation within any group. He wanted to insure that it would not find too comfortable a home among the Little Brothers of Mary.

### ***The end of a decade***

The Institute continued to flourish. Schools opened at Feurs and Millery in 1829. During the same year, the brothers adopted a new method for the teaching of reading. Esteem for their work grew.

As the decade came to a close, the founder must have looked back with satisfaction on much that had transpired. He had recently purchased additional land in the vicinity of the Hermitage; archdiocesan officials had given approval for the profession and renewal of vows within the community; his Institute had gained the esteem and support of local authorities; and rumor had it that the archbishop was interested in helping to establish the Marist Fathers. In the midst of all this good news, and with a new decade about to unfold, Marcellin may have thought that most of his difficulties were behind him. But the soon to start French Revolution of 1830 would cause him, sadly, to revise that opinion.

***Reflection questions***

1. Marcellin faced disappointments, near fatal sickness, the manipulations of Vicar General Bochard, a troubled and difficult pastor, the departure of early recruits. He must have had enormous inner resources to come through these trials. From what you know about Marcellin thus far, what might those inner resources be? How did they sustain him?

2. What inner resources do you draw on to face challenges in your own life? What can you do practically to deepen those resources?





## *Chapter VI*

### ***“Growth continues...”***

**T**he revolution of 1830 fueled tensions between Church and State. The field of education was a common and constant battleground for these two institutions. Marcellin’s petition for authorization of his Institute got caught in the crossfire.

In early June 1830, both Archbishop de Pins and the founder had high hopes that they would gain the long sought after legal recognition for the Little Brothers of Mary. Those hopes were dashed when parliamentary elections, held in the same month and fueled by anti-clericalism, resulted in a landslide victory for opponents of the King.

Frightened members of the clergy, many of whom were rabidly royalist, stopped wearing their religious garb, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Marcellin counseled the brothers to stay above the fray, put their faith in God, and redouble their zeal for the education of young people, including their Christian instruction.

The founder appeared unshaken by all the upheaval. In August 1830 he welcomed postulants into the Institute and clothed them with the religious habit. Asking Mary’s special protection during a difficult time of political and social unrest,

he introduced the *Salve Regina* as the first community prayer of the brothers' day, a custom that continues to the present.

### ***Some difficult days***

With the passage of time anti-clericalism grew. Despite that development, the brothers continued to wear their cas-socks in public. This fact, coupled with knowledge that Archbishop de Pins, a royalist, was well disposed to Marcellin, gave rise to rumors about the founder. Reports circulated that the Hermitage was filled with arms, and that the brothers took part in daily military drills and were harboring a counter-revolutionary leader. On July 31st, 1831, the Crown Prosecutor and a company of troops appeared at the door of the Hermitage to investigate.

Pushing their way into the house, they met a hastily summoned Marcellin. Starting with the cellars, he took the Prosecutor and troops through the entire building. The visitors' ardor soon cooled, and they suggested cutting short the search. Marcellin would not hear of it. He insisted on a thorough inspection. With that completed, however, he invited the Prosecutor and those with him to have something to eat and drink. All accepted this offer of hospitality. As the Crown Prosecutor left, he turned to the priest and said, "I promise you this visit will be for your good".

True to his word, the Prosecutor's report refuted the rumors that had circulated about the Hermitage. He also praised Marcellin and the work of his brothers. Marcellin Champagnat was a very practical and politically astute man.

### ***Additional developments***

The prominence of the Society of Mary grew in the arch-

diocese of Lyons. The Archbishop's Council named Marcellin superior for the group there, and assigned Father Jacques Fontbonne to the Hermitage as an additional chaplain. About the same time, the priests in the Lyons and Belley dioceses associated with the Marist movement elected Jean-Claude Colin overall superior for the Marist Fathers.

Marcellin had been developing a *Rule* for his brothers for a number of years. Early copies were handwritten and the text revised with the opening of each new foundation. When writing the *Rule*, the founder used a method of broad consultations: the most experienced among the senior brothers were invited to reflect upon, discuss, and give feedback about its content. He finalized and printed the text in 1837. The process undertaken for writing the *Rule* is one more example of Marcellin's spirit of collegiality and of his ability to listen to others and learn from them.

Marcellin's *Rule* for his brothers provided them with a framework for their religious life. In 1836, for example, the young men who formerly had made vows privately, professed them in a public ceremony. Everyone, including superiors, was also required to do some manual work. The printed *Rule* of 1837 regularized many other aspects of the Little Brothers' lives.

### ***Persecution increases***

As 1831 dawned, the anti-clericals stepped up their attacks on the Church. The field of education was a convenient target. A royal ordinance called for the conscription for military service of all non-authorized teachers in religious schools. If this directive were implemented, the outcome would essentially cripple Marcellin's still unauthorized Institute.

Could the situation get any worse? Yes. New government officials of the Loire took specific aim at the Little Brothers.

Scipion Mourgue, the new Prefect of the area, had this to say: [The Marist Brothers Institute] “is all the less worthy of encouragement in that it is publicly known that the subjects who come out of it are of a deplorable ignorance....There [at Feurs] they brought what they call their teaching, which, I think, could be called the guarantee of ignorance on the cheap....Too long has France bowed down beneath the saber and the censor” [that is, the King and the Church].

Mourgue was further incensed when he discovered that the local people did not want to abandon the brothers’ schools. So, he attacked them also. “I meet stupid local people,” he said, “who want this degrading system maintained”. Many of those “stupid local people,” however, had already lived through the period of educational collapse after the Revolution of 1789; they had little interest in seeing history repeat itself.

### ***School at Feurs is closed***

Ignoring the people’s wishes, the anti-clerical Mayor of the town of Feurs was determined to drive the brothers out of their school there. Despite a number of concessions on Marcellin’s part, the Mayor eventually ordered the brothers to leave.

In response to this directive, Marcellin wrote, “I note with resignation...the destruction of the establishment of the brothers, since I have made all efforts I ought to have made to save the school whose reputation was continually increasing. I am instructing them [the brothers] to give back the furniture that is the property of the town”.

The founder’s letter tells us a great deal about the man and his spirituality. In marked contrast to the earlier ranting of Scipion Mourgue, Marcellin expresses regret, resignation, and a sense of propriety—the brothers will return the furni-

ture that belongs to the town. There are no threats, predictions of dire consequences, anger. The tone of serenity and inner peace so obvious in Marcellin's words suggest that the trials he faced throughout life purified his spirit.

***The problem of military conscription and the Brevet  
(a certificate to teach)***

At that time military service in France often lasted from six to eight years. Teachers who were members of religious orders could be freed from this obligation only if their congregation had legal authority to conduct schools. Marcellin's Institute did not. He quickly turned his attention to solving this problem.

Marcellin had two alternatives available to keep his schools open. One, he could join his brothers with a legally recognized congregation or, two, he could continue to pursue authorization for his Little Brothers. At first, Archbishop de Pins encouraged the priest to try once again to gain independent legal approval for his brothers. However, when it was not forthcoming he followed the recommendations of his Archdiocesan Council and advised the founder to join his brothers with Father Querbes' Clerics of Saint Viateur. Marcellin, however, feared such a union would destroy the spirit among his Little Brothers. So, he continued to resist the calls for union.

Despite the lack of legal recognition and the pressure to merge his brothers with other groups, Marcellin continued to open schools. He was not lacking for invitations to do so. People in the country areas, suspicious of teachers graduating from the State Normal Schools, pressed their elected officials to secure the services of the brothers.

Pressure from the Archdiocese for a merger with another congregation subsided in January 1834. Unfortunately, how-

ever, government approbation for his Institute would elude Marcellin throughout his life. Events in French history at that time worked against his petition. The Laws of Associations, for example, passed in February 1834 and meant to curb working class militancy, were used to delay authorization.

### ***Marist priests win approval***

Earlier in our story we met Vicar General Bochard and learned what a cross he was to Marcellin. He was also a cross to Jean-Claude Colin and his fellow Marist priests at Belley. Bochard was competitive, but did not like competition. Consequently, he opposed Church authorization of any congregation whose ends resembled those of his Society of the Cross of Jesus. Unfortunately, the apostolate the young Marist priests had in mind was similar to that of Bochard's group.

Father Courveille proved to be another roadblock to authorization. We have seen already that the man lacked judgment and a spirit of discernment. He was also deficient in the skills needed to get the group organized. Father Colin eventually took on that task.

The bishops of the region initially proved to be still another obstacle to the young Marist priests and their dream of Church approval. What bishop is going to say "yes" to a congregation whose existence will reduce the number of priests in his charge?

Despite these difficulties, in 1824 the Marist priests received permission to live in two communities, one in Belley and the other at the Hermitage. Father Colin was named Superior for the first, Marcellin for the second. The latter was devoted to the group of Marist priests and worked hard to see that they were established. He confided to one of his brothers, "To my mind the work of the [Marist] priests appears to be also of such importance that, were it necessary for its suc-

cess, I would be prepared to sacrifice all that I have”.

The priests of the Society of Mary, of which Marcellin was a member, were always close to his heart. Their affection and esteem for him was also obvious. In 1839 the group elected him as one of the Assistants General to Father Colin.

Marcellin worked to build up other branches of Society of Mary. In August 1832 he encouraged three young women to join Jean-Marie Chavoïn's Marist Sisters at Bon-Repos, in Belley. He eventually directed no fewer than fifteen candidates toward that group of women religious. One was his niece, another the sister of one of the brothers. His enthusiasm high and his heart hopeful, Marcellin must have thought that formal Church approval for the Marist dream would be realized shortly. An August 1833 trip to Rome by Father Colin quickly brought him back to reality.

### ***Colin goes to Rome***

Jean-Claude Colin, determined to gain approbation for the Marist group, traveled to Rome in the summer of 1833. There he met with frustration. First, he had difficulty obtaining an audience with the Pope. Then, the Society that included priests, sisters, brothers, and a Third Order was greeted with suspicion by Vatican authorities. They saw it as a huge group dominated by the French. Gallicanism still struck fear in the hearts of Roman Church authorities.

In December of the same year, however, Colin received from Cardinal Odescalchi, Prefect of the Vatican Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, general approval for the idea of the Marist group. The Cardinal did suggest that the enterprise was “too big”. He also handed the matter over to Cardinal Castracane for further study. The latter quickly came to this conclusion: “This Society made up of four branches was considered...to be a delirium. Approval of this monstrous organi-

zation was not possible”.

In April of 1834 Cardinal Odescalchi wrote to the Ordinaries of both Lyons and Belley to inform them that Rome found unacceptable the plans for Colin’s Society of Mary. He cited several reasons. One, there was no need for the Marist Brothers since the De la Salle group existed already and apparently had the same goal. Two, so many congregations of women religious existed in France already that it was almost impossible to count them; why add another? Three, the proposed Third Order of laity was judged to be an “outlandish” idea, setting aside the bishop’s power in favor of the Superior General of the Marist Society. Was there any good news in this litany of woe? Yes: Rome supported Colin’s request to form a new clerical congregation and to have an elected Superior General.

### ***Opportunity knocks***

In 1835 Vatican authorities informed the bishops of Lyons and Belley that the Marist priests could, on application to Rome, become an interdiocesan congregation and elect a Superior General. No specific work was assigned to the group.

Full recognition as an religious Institute was not long in coming. The Vatican was disappointed by the lack of response to its appeal for missionaries to go to Oceania. Vicar General Cholleton heard that Rome was looking for a congregation to fill the gap. He passed along the news to Pompallier, a priest who had served as a chaplain at the Hermitage, who quickly informed Colin. The young Marist priests seized the opportunity presented to them and took the mission of Oceania as their work. On April 29th, 1836, the long awaited approval for the new society of priests arrived from Rome.

Marcellin was delighted with Rome’s approval of the



Society of priests. His delight was only augmented by the decision to take Oceania as a mission for the group. The founder had always hoped to serve overseas; his name, in fact, headed the list of Marists volunteering for the Pacific. Unfortunately, age and health had become obstacles. Also, his continuing presence as leader of the brothers was critical at this time and for the foreseeable future. He supported the missions by sending a small group of brothers along with the first Marist priests who traveled to the Pacific.

Pompallier was named Vicar Apostolic for the Missions of Oceania and shortly thereafter ordained a bishop at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Rome. He and his group of four priests and three brothers went to Fourvière and placed their missionary work under Mary's protection. They then traveled to Paris, and on Christmas Eve 1836 departed for the Pacific from the port of Le Havre. Speaking of the brothers, Marcellin had once said, "A brother is a man for whom the world is not large enough". The ship's departure from port, with his three brothers on board, was the first step he took in making that vision a reality.

### ***Reflection questions***

1. Sometimes setbacks in life can turn out to be a great source of personal and spiritual growth. Identify a setback in your own life, in what ways did it challenge you to grow more as a person and as a disciple of Jesus?
2. The founder was delighted with approval of the Society of Marist priests. For what events or decisions in your own life do you give thanks to God?

### *Chapter VII*



***“A man and a saint for all seasons, and  
for all times...”***

**W**e are near our story's end. Until his death Marcellin continued to pursue authorization for his Little Brothers, traveling to Paris and doing battle with one or another government official or agency. At times, those with power to give approval agreed to do so if he made concessions: restrict his brothers' schools to certain geographic areas, for example, or confine them to towns of 1000 people or less. The founder was unwilling to be so limited. Eventually his work for official government recognition came to naught.

Authorization came eventually in 1842, two years after Marcellin's death, when Father Mazelier's Brothers of Christian Instruction of the Diocese of Valence merged with the Little Brothers. The former held legal status in three Departments. While not all that the founder had hoped for, it was a beginning.

The Institute continued to grow, but Marcellin was careful not to overburden the brothers or to stretch his resources too thin. In 1837, for example, Father Fontbonne, once a chaplain at the Hermitage and now a missionary in Saint Louis, Missouri, wrote requesting brothers to help with the work in America. Marcellin responded, "All the brothers were jealous of the two who had been chosen to go to Polynesia...I would

be happy to send you brothers to help in the work in America, if it were at all possible". Oceania, however, remained the sole overseas mission for a number of years.

Marcellin continued to marvel at the growth of the Marist group in general. He once said to his fellow priests, "We who are at the commencement of our work are but raw stones thrown into the foundation. One does not use polished stones for that. There is something marvelous in the commencement of our Society. What is marvelous is that God has wished such people to accomplish his work".

### ***Marcellin falls ill***

In the course of 1839 the founder fell ill. Since his sickness of 1825, he suffered constant pain in his side. Later he developed an inflammation of the stomach and vomited frequently. On his return from Paris in 1838, Brother Jean-Baptiste had remarked, "It was easy to see that his end was fast approaching".

Concerned about Marcellin's deteriorating condition, Father Colin, Superior General of the Marists, arranged for an election to choose the founder's successor. Brother François, who as a ten-year-old boy had been brought by his brother to one of Marcellin's catechism lessons, was elected overwhelmingly. Brothers Louis-Marie and Jean-Baptiste were chosen as his assistants.

Over the next several months, the founder became progressively more incapacitated, and after May 3rd was no longer able to celebrate mass for the brothers. Sensing that he had little time left, he assembled them in the community room and addressed them for the last time. The young men were choked with emotion, so deep was their love for this priest who had been a father and older brother to them.

***The end***

Death came for Marcellin Champagnat early on a Saturday morning. The date: June 6th, 1840. The brothers had kept vigil all night; he slipped away as they recited community prayers at daybreak.

Two days later, the founder's body was laid to rest in the Hermitage's cemetery, not far from the site of the tiny *Chapel in the Woods*. His *Spiritual Testament*, not written in his hand but expressing the sentiments of his heart, had been read three weeks before, on May 18th. He asked for pardon from all whom he might have offended, expressed allegiance to the superiors of the Marist Fathers, and gave thanks for being able to die as a member of the Society of Mary. Then, he turned his attention to his brothers.

There was nothing petty about Marcellin Champagnat. He had a passion for the gospel. It is not surprising, therefore, that obedience and love were the two virtues he recommended to his early followers. They are, after all, the foundation of community. Obedience is its mainstay; love binds all other virtues together and makes them perfect. Of this second, there was to be no limit. Marcellin loved his brothers; he expected no less from them, each one for the other.

Throughout his life as a priest, the founder was fond of saying, "to bring up children properly, we must love them, and love them all equally". The virtue of love, therefore, was to be not only the foundation of community but also of a distinctive Marist method of evangelization and education. It had been Mary's way with Jesus; it was now to be the way of all who followed the dream that so captured the heart of this country priest and his early brothers.

The founder warned his followers against rivalry with other congregations and completed his testament with a summary of the spirituality of his "Little Brothers". Practice the presence of God, he told them, it is the soul of prayer, meditation, and all the virtues. Let humility and simplicity be the characteristics that distinguish you from others, and maintain

always a spirit of poverty and detachment. Have a filial and tender devotion to Mary, he counseled, make her loved in every place. Love and be faithful to your vocation, and persevere in it courageously.

Marcellin took seriously the Good News of Jesus Christ. He was a holy man because he lived his ordinary life exceptionally well, and did ordinary things with extraordinary love. Having discovered the joy of the gospel and letting it transform him, the founder wanted to share with others, particularly the young, all that he had seen and heard.

The world into which Marcellin Champagnat was born in 1789 was beginning to convulse with the tremors of change. The one he left fifty-one years later had seen war and peace, prosperity and hardship, the death of one Church and the birth of another. A man of his times, he carried within himself all the greatness and limitations of the people of his age. Suffering tempered him, setbacks strengthened him, determination drove him, and grace helped him move beyond his circumstances.

Marcellin Champagnat, “priest of the Society of Mary, Superior and Founder of the Little Brothers of Mary”. An apostle to youth and an example of “practical Christianity”. He was a man and saint for his season and time; he is both for ours also.

***Reflection questions***

1. The lives of saints make the gospel message more evident for us. In what way does Marcellin's life help you to understand and live out the gospel more fully?

2. In his *Spiritual Testament*, the founder expresses joy at being able to die as a member of the Society of Mary. Looking ahead to the end of your own life, for what response to God's love would you want to be able to give thanks?

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