



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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Saint John Bosco

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

IN September 1828, in a carriage that was going from Saint-Étienne to Saint-Chamond, two priests rubbed elbows with three young people wearing religious dress. Struck by these young people's modesty, one of the priests asked his confrere who these religious were. "They are," replied the other priest, "Brothers who teach children in the country."—"What are they called?"—"The Little Brothers of MARY."—"Who founded the community?"—"It's hard to tell. Some young people got together, wrote a rule in keeping with their aim, and an assistant priest took them under his wing. God blessed their community and made it thrive beyond all human expectations." The priest who spoke so modestly, concealing his name and his role, was their founder, Father Marcellin Champagnat.

The ninth of ten children, Marcellin was born on May 20, 1789 in Rosey, a little hamlet in the commune of Marlhes in the department of the Loire, France. Marlhes was a farming village far from any major roads. The faith there had remained intact, maintained by the zeal of fervent priests. Nonetheless, news of the Revolution reached Marlhes, and the new ideas had their effect. Jean-Baptiste Champagnat, Marcellin's father, who had received some education, was made colonel in the canton's National Guard. This function led him to preside over the service that replaced Sunday Mass, held once every ten days in Marlhes' church, now transformed into a temple to the goddess Reason. He nonetheless took his sister, a nun, into his home, and allowed his wife and children to attend Masses celebrated in secret by priests who remained faithful to the Church despite the new laws, hidden in the area. His wife, although shyer than him, did not lack personality.

### *An unfortunate method*

Under the guidance of his mother and aunt, Marcellin learned the truths of the faith, but his first schooling would be his last. On the first day of school, he was called to the blackboard by the teacher. Another child who was quicker than he was got there first, but received a pair of blows. Marcellin was so terrified that he refused to go back to school the following day, despite his parents' insistence. Later on, he would often bring up this episode, which seemed to him to be an example not to follow. He forbade any violence in the education of children. Authority, as he saw it, had no need of such methods.

Marcellin loved to follow his father everywhere : to the oven, to the mill, to the fields, to the pastures. He was hard-working, and developed a special talent for

trade : he was given two young lambs to tend and resell several months later. He and his brother Jean-Pierre foresaw in it a profitable business.

During the summer of 1803, two priests arrived at the Champagnat home. They were traveling through the diocese, at the request of the Archbishop of Lyons, Bishop Fesch, Napoleon's uncle, to encourage priestly vocations. The parish priest of Marlhes had suggested that they visit this family that included three boys with a good reputation. Somewhat surprised by this visit, Monsieur Champagnat replied, "My sons have never expressed to me the desire to become priests. But they are right there — ask for yourselves." His brothers replied that they had no such intentions, but Marcellin expressed his desire, up till now unrevealed, to be a priest. For his studies he was sent to the home of his brother-in-law, a teacher in a nearby town. There he found himself in good conditions for making up lost time ; but he had the painful experience of suddenly losing his father. At the end of the school year, the brother-in-law told Madame Champagnat : "Your child stubbornly wants to continue his studies, but you would be wrong to let him. He is too untalented, and has too many handicaps, to succeed." Marcellin was aware of his limitations, but his mother supported him. The two went to La Louvesc, a day's walk from Marlhes, to the tomb of Saint Francis Regis, who evangelized the region in the sixteenth century. On their way home, the young man declared, "Prepare my things, I want to go to seminary. I will succeed, because God wants it." Thus he left in the fall of 1805 for the minor seminary in Verrières, where he applied himself to his studies to the best of his ability. He was sixteen, and his classmates, much younger than he was, were not sparing in their mockery. At first it was quite difficult, and the teachers less than encouraging. Moreover, Marcellin's behavior sometimes

left much to be desired. At the urging of some friends, for his feast day he went to have a drink in a cabaret. At the end of his first year, Marcellin was judged incapable of continuing. He nevertheless remained convinced of God's call and made another pilgrimage to La Louvesc ; then he begged the Superior of the seminary to let him try one more year. Thanks to a priest and a classmate who supported him, this new attempt was crowned with success. In 1810, Marcellin lost his mother. He nevertheless pursued his studies for eight years in the minor seminary and then entered the major seminary of Saint Irenaeus in Lyons, on November 1, 1813. His three years there passed in an atmosphere of peace, piety, and study, despite the political events that resulted from the fall of Napoleon. A transformation took place in the seminarian, in the sense of a greater fidelity to all of his duties. During his holidays, he taught the catechism to the children in his village.

### ***“Take charge of the Brothers!”***

During their final year in the seminary, Marcellin and some companions, moved by the dechristianization of the country, thought of forming the “Society of Marist Fathers,” whose members would be missionaries dedicated to renewing the faith of Christians, under the protection of the Blessed Virgin MARY. This Society was to see the day, being organized, little by little, from 1817 to 1836, the date it was approved by the Holy See. Marcellin, who had suffered much during his childhood from a lack of instruction, insisted that it also take on the education of children. He wanted to form teaching Brothers. His insistence resulted in the others telling him : “Take care of the Brothers yourself, since it was your idea !” In this he saw the invitation of God.

On July 22, 1816, Marcellin received priestly ordination with fifty-one confreres. The next day, twelve of them climbed to the Marian shrine of Fourvière to consecrate their ministries and their lives to the Blessed Virgin, promising to found the Congregation of Marist Fathers. The following August 13, Father Champagnat arrived in the village of La Valla, on the slopes of Mont Pilat, where he was named assistant priest. The region was poor : the mountainous terrain left little space for agriculture. Religious practice was weak, due to the distance between houses and the effects of the Revolution. The pastor whose assistant Marcellin would be for eight years was an elderly man of faltering speech, who preached as little as possible and did not teach catechism. Marcellin, at the time twenty-seven, set to work. His concern was particularly for the children. He gathered them every Sunday and, in winter, every morning, giving them simple, clear instruction studded with examples from everyday life, and with extracts from Holy Scripture and the lives of the Saints. In his Sunday homilies, Marcellin preached on the great truths of the

faith. He sometimes showed a certain severity that his great kindness made acceptable. Because he loved his flock, he permitted himself to reprimand them when he saw them give themselves over to getting drunk or to the village dances, dangerous for souls. He did not tolerate jealousy or quarrels between neighbors.

He himself studied theology every day. Soon, with his pastor's permission, he celebrated Vespers on Sunday afternoons, adding some practical reflections that touched his listeners. Each week the numbers grew. His simple and kind words led his listeners to say, “You can tell he is from Rosey (his native village) — his words are as sweet as roses !” All year round, even in storms and blizzards, Marcellin walked for hours to visit the sick, to administer the sacrament of Penance, and to assist the dying. Bit by bit, a true transformation took place among the Christians of La Valla and the surrounding area.

On October 28, 1816, the priest was called to a distant hamlet, to the bedside of a sick child, Jean-Baptiste Montagne. He noted with sad surprise that the boy knew nothing of religion, not even that there was a God. For two hours, he instructed him in the rudiments of the faith, and then heard his confession. When he returned after visiting another sick person, the child had already left this world. Filled with thanksgiving toward divine Providence for leading him to this dying boy, he was nonetheless stunned to see such total ignorance in a parish that was supposed to be Christian. From then on, the thought of founding, without delay, a society of Brothers to instruct children in the faith never left him.

### ***“Educational emergency”***

Even today, the Christian education of children remains a primary task. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us : “There is talk of a great ‘educational emergency’, of the increasing difficulty encountered in transmitting the basic values of life and correct behavior to the new generations, a difficulty that involves both schools and families. ... We may add that this is an inevitable emergency : in a society, in a culture, which all too often makes relativism its creed — relativism has become a sort of dogma — in such a society the light of truth is missing ; indeed, it is considered dangerous and ‘authoritarian’ to speak of truth, and the end result is doubt about the goodness of life ... It is therefore an essential priority of our pastoral work : to bring close to Christ and to the Father the new generation that lives in a world largely distant from God. Dear brothers and sisters, we must always be aware that we cannot carry out such a task with our own strength but only with the power of the Spirit. We need enlightenment and grace that come from God and act within hearts and consciences. For education and Christian formation, there-

fore, it is above all prayer and our personal friendship with JESUS that are crucial : only those who know and love JESUS CHRIST can introduce their brothers and sisters into a living relationship with Him. ... By educating in the faith, a very important task is entrusted to Catholic schools. Indeed, they must carry out their mission on the basis of an educational project which places the Gospel at the center and keeps it as a decisive reference point for the person's formation and for the entire cultural program. In convinced synergy with families and with the Ecclesial Community, Catholic schools should therefore seek to foster that unity between faith, culture and life which is the fundamental goal of Christian education " (Address of June 11, 2007).

On his return from visiting the Montagne boy, Marcellin met two young men who would form the foundation of his new Congregation. The beginnings of the work were very humble. On January 2, 1817, Father Champagnat installed his two novices in a small house near the presbytery. The poverty was extreme. Their time was divided between prayer, study, and manual work. They made nails for their living, as did all the families in the area. Soon, four postulants joined the first two novices. One of them, Gabriel Rivat, was a piously raised ten-year-old. For two years, he assiduously followed Father Champagnat's catechisms and, after his First Communion, felt called to join the community of Brothers gathered at La Valla. On May 6, 1818, his mother, who had consecrated the boy to MARY in his boyhood, brought him to Fr. Marcellin. Gabriel, who took the name Brother François, would become the Founder's successor as head of the Marist Brothers.

### ***It's your work!***

The care of his Brothers did not keep Father Champagnat from fulfilling his parish duties. Nevertheless, his pastor thought that he was spending too much time on the Congregation. So Marcellin requested and obtained permission to move into the Brothers' house for their formation, in which a teacher would assist. But four years after his arrival in La Valla, noting that he had not found any other vocations for his Brothers there, he prayed a novena to the Blessed Virgin : "It's your work," he told her, "not mine. Send me Brothers." His prayer was heard, and young men came to him from further away. The premises soon became too small, and it became necessary to build. The entire community set to work under the direction of Marcellin, who became a mason and carpenter.

In the meantime, Father Champagnat had begun to establish schools, including one in Marlihes, the parish in which he grew up. However, in the area's presbyteries caustic comments began to flow about the priest of La Valla. "His congregation," they sneered, "is a fantasy

borne of pride and recklessness. How can he, who has neither resources nor talents, dream of founding a community?" Far from supporting his work, some priests turned vocations away from it. "They were wrong to distrust us," one of Marcellin's disciples would later say, "to be suspicious of the motives that led us to Champagnat. If these motives had been human, we would not have stayed a single day. What would have kept us in a house where we had only a barn for a dormitory, a bit of straw or dry leaves for a bed, for food a few vegetables and black bread that was so poorly baked that it fell into crumbs, and water to drink? ... What could attract us in a situation so repugnant to our nature? ... It was the devotion to MARY. We were so touched by the beautiful things Father Champagnat told us about the Blessed Virgin, that nothing in the world could have turned us away from our vocation."

### ***In disarray***

The rumors against the work of the assistant priest of La Valla reached the Archbishop of Lyons. One of the vicars-general, who in fact governed the diocese, reproached Father Champagnat ; another vicar general approved of him. Little by little, an atmosphere of mistrust developed against the teaching Brothers. The community lived in expectation of a disaster. In disarray, they turned to the Blessed Virgin. Then, on December 22, 1823, Monsignor de Pins was named apostolic administrator for the diocese of Lyons, and showed himself favorable to Father Champagnat.

To help him in his task, Marcellin called on Father Courveille, his former fellow student at the seminary, who led the Society of Marist Fathers. During this time, he was relieved of his duties as assistant priest in La Valla. The two priests decided to purchase a large piece of land near Saint-Chamond, and to put up there a large building for one hundred fifty Brothers. Such a project was unheard of, and it was met with incomprehension in the area. A new campaign of denigration began, but, in spite of everything, the work proceeded quickly. The house would be called Our Lady of the Hermitage.

But Father Courveille gave himself the mission of leading the Brothers who, however, considered Marcellin their Father. He stubbornly persisted, and put the choice of Superior to a vote. Marcellin was elected unanimously. Father Courveille would not give up. He took advantage of the founder's absences, when he was away visiting schools, to disturb the Brothers. At the end of December 1825, upon Marcellin's return from a journey, he heaped reproaches on him. Exhausted with fatigue and worn down by many worries, particularly about the finances of his congregation, Father Champagnat collapsed and had to take to his bed. A week later, he was at death's door. At this news, the



creditors appeared en masse. Fortunately, the parish priest of Saint-Chamond paid some of the debts ; but the place was in complete disarray. The Congregation seemed lost when, against all expectation, the founder began to recover, though he would never regain all of his strength. Father Courville continued trying to be named Superior of the Brothers. However, in May 1826, a serious misconduct forced him to retire to the Trappist house in Aiguebelle. Concerned to stabilize the Brothers' vocations, the founder had them take religious vows during the community retreat of 1826.

### **Knowing how to remain still**

Ten years after its foundation, the Institute numbered more than eighty Brothers, spread among sixteen establishments. Father Champagnat's main concern was its official recognition by the public authorities, particularly in order to obtain the Brothers' dispensation from military service, which at that time lasted seven years. In the face of his efforts' failure, he wrote, "Sooner or later, we will obtain this authorization... What is most important is for us to do on our part what God wants of us ; I mean all that we can. After that, we can only remain still, and allow His Providence to act. God knows better than us what is best for us. I am quite sure that a little delay will not harm us." In fact, public recognition would come only after the founder's death.

Marcellin frequently encouraged his Brothers to give themselves totally to God and to others. He himself preached by example. When he was reproached for doing too much, he replied, "No one is indispensable, but JESUS tells us, *Walk while you have the light* (Jn. 12 :35)." He made a point of enkindling a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin among his Brothers. "Other religious," he said, "sanctify themselves — some through poverty, others through obedience, still others through an ardent zeal for the salvation of souls. I want no one to surpass the Brothers in love for MARY, in

devotion to MARY." Not only was MARY the patroness of the Brothers who proudly bore her name, but even more, she was their Mother, their model, their first Superior, and, according to the Founder's expression, their "normal means." They addressed themselves to her at every opportunity, they had recourse to her in every danger, and they ascribed the glory of any success of theirs to her. "She is the one," the Father proclaimed, "who has done everything for us !" On May 12, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI said, in the same sense, "There is no fruit of grace in the history of salvation that does not have as its necessary instrument the mediation of Our Lady."

Towards the end of 1839, Marcellin's strength seriously weakened. Father Colin, Superior of the Society of Marist Fathers, suggested that he choose a successor to lead the Brothers. In October, a vote resulted in the election of Brother François Rivat. Nevertheless, the Founder remained active, but soon stomach pains made it difficult for him to eat and forced him to look after himself. At the beginning of May, he opened the exercises for the Marian month. On his return to his room, he stated, "It is over for me, I can feel that I am going." On May 11, he received Extreme Unction, in the presence of the entire community. "My friends," he said to his Brothers, "the important thing is that we love one another. Remember that you are brothers, that MARY is your Mother, that you are all called to the same inheritance, which is Heaven." The end of the month of May was very painful. On June 6, around two-thirty in the morning, Marcellin pointed out to the Brother who was taking care of him that his lamp had gone out. The Brother told him he was wrong—the light had not stopped shining. "I understand, it's my vision that is going," the dying man replied. "My hour has come. Blessed be God !" Soon thereafter, he entered into his agony. The community gathered around him at dawn and sang the *Salve Regina*, and the Founder gently ended his sojourn on earth.

John Paul II said, in the homily for the canonization of Marcellin Champagnat, on April 18, 1999 : "Because of his unshakeable faith, he remained faithful to Christ despite difficulties, in the midst of a world sometimes lacking the sense of God. We too are called to draw strength from contemplation of the risen Christ by learning at the school of the Virgin MARY."

*Dom Antoine Marie*  
o.s.b.

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