

(April 29, 1889 - May 1, 1938)

Adapted by Joseph L R Belanger, 7 November 2002, primarily from Brother Florentius' obituary in the Marist Brothers' Bulletin of Studies, June 1938, pp.7 - 10

At 21 years old he was named the first Master of Scholastics at St. Ann's Hermitage, Poughkeepsie. At 37 years old he founded Mt. St. Michael Academy in the Bronx. At 46 years old he founded another great Marist school, Central Catholic in Lawrence MA. Not surprising that at a young 49 years old he dropped dead of a heart attack. This human dynamo, administrative genius, and exemplary religious was Bro. Mary Florentius, fms.

Joseph Ludger Poisson was born in the Province of Quebec, Canada, in the small town of Richemond, on 29 April 1889. His devout Christian parents, Philippe and Julie (Lambert) Poisson, named him Joseph Ludger; he was one of twelve children they had. In 1899 the family moved temporarily to Lawrence MA, where Ludger attended St. Anne's Grammar School, directed then by Bro. Arigelicus, fms, future Assistant General. Brother soon noticed the gentle piety and keen intelligence of the boy and asked him if he would think about being a Brother. The boy and his parents were honored by the invitation, and in 1901 Ludger went to the Juniorate in Iberville, Canada. His steady character, self-confident initiative, and sincere piety developed quickly and fully and were to be his trademarks until death.

He entered the Novitiate in St. Hyacinthe on 4 April 1904. Bro. Cesidius, founder of the North American Province and Provincial from 1885 to 1903, was Master of Novices at that time. Ludger took the Marist Habit on 8 December 1904, and his First Vows on 8 December 1905. As usual, the new Brother was appointed to manual work, in his case to cook for two years. Despite a frail appearance, he was no wimp, as future events were to show. He had a forceful character and strongly but charitably defended well-thought out views. Thus it was that one year the Provincial Council rejected his request to renew his Temporary Vows. Fortunately the members of his community vigorously protested and the Council decision was reversed. What a loss was averted! He pronounced his Final Vows on 22 August 1910 and was named Master of Scholastics immediately afterwards. There were then some 10 Student Brothers confided to him. He jovially refused the title "Master" and simply called himself "the student in charge." In fact, Master and students all studied together for the "Life State Certificate" needed to teach in New York.

The Brothers had founded St. Michael's School in 1907 in Montreal. It was an English-speaking school for Irish immigrants. From the beginning relations with the pastor, Fr. John Kiernan succeeded by Fr. Luke Callaghan, were difficult, primarily over the Brothers' poor living conditions and low salaries. Young Bro. Florentius was sent to smooth matters out in 1912. The choice proved happy. Studies improved in the school and religious spirit in the community. The new principal and director was a man of details. He reorganized the programs of studies, scheduled frequent tests, gave public rewards, personally controlled detention sessions, established the Junior Holy Name Society with attractive spiritual and sports programs. Though a devout and regular religious, he was still his own man and often welcomed shaky vocations into his community.

His work done at St. Michael's, Florentius was appointed to teach at St. Ann's Academy, New York. The classroom, though, was not his preferred element. He taught only from 1918-1920 at the Academy, then became Director of St. Joseph's in Lowell MA and returned to the Academy as Principal from 1922 to 1926. This is what he loved and was best at. The "beehive" hummed. However, the opening of Mount St. Michael Academy in the Bronx and the considerable problems it entailed led the Provincial and his Council to entrust that heavy burden to Bro. Florentius. He obediently left the Academy and launched the Mount on its illustrious history. The huge undertaking, both the school and the community, took its toll. He developed severe heart problems, was forced to take a year of rest in 1931, and when generally better he was sent to direct St. Anne's School, Lawrence MA, succeeding Bro. Constantin.

Inner-city Lawrence in 1932 had several Catholic girls' high schools -- St. Anne's, St. Mary's, St. Patrick's, Sacred Heart -- but none for boys. This deeply troubled Bro. Florentius and he soon planned to remedy the situation. The Brothers had, indeed, opened a parish one in 1920, but it had to close in 1928. A city-wide school was needed, A central catholic high school, supported by all the parishes in town. He entrusted his project to St. Therese, the Little Flower, then shared his vision of a full four-year Catholic high school for boys with the Pastors and civic leaders. They enthusiastically supported he idea. On 16 September 1935 Central Catholic High School was born, to the great joy of all the city. It started in the Knights of Columbus building on Haverhill Street and expanded later in rented classrooms in the Oliver Grammar School. Land was purchased and plans were being prepared for a new school building when Bro. Florentius died suddenly on 1 May 1938 of coronary thrombosis.

This strong character, eminent educator, and guardian of souls could well say with the Psalmist, "Zeal for your house devours me!" [Ps 119: 139]