Founding of the Institute in 1817

As part of his ministry, Father Champagnat often traveled the rocky mountain paths to administer the sacraments to the sick and the dying. It was on one of these trips to a twelve year old boy that he decided to found a congregation of teaching brothers. He found the dying boy ignorant of the most elementary truths of religion. For two hours Father Champagnat prepared him for death. He left the boy with the consolation that a soul had been saved. This incident affected him so deeply that he decided to confide to a young parishioner, Jean Marie Granjon, his desire to organize a teaching brotherhood that would educate young men in the fundamentals of the "Faith".

Six months after his arrival at LaValla, Father Champagnat rounded the Marist Brothers. Two young men, Jean Marie Granjon and Jean Baptiste Audras, were received as its first members on January 2, 1817. They were lodged clear the rectory in a house which had been rented by Father Champagnat for their novitiate. He visited them daily to teach them the principles of religious and community life. He drew up a temporary set of rules to mold these two young country boys into cultured religious gentlemen. The following March in order to distinguish them from the laity he gave them names in religion and a distinctive attire in blue.

To inspire them he motivated their thinking by reminding them often of the importance of the religious life, and of the need for religious instruction in a France that had been spiritually ravaged by the Revolution of 17$-9. He established goals which have became the first two articles of the present Constitutions of the Marist Brothers: to labor for the greater glory of God, for the honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and for their own sanctification; and (as a secondary end) to procure the salvation of souls by the Christian instruction and education of children, chiefly those of the rural districts.

Before the end of the year there were three others in the novitiate. As part of their training program, he assigned them to instruct children and grown-ups alike, in the nearby hamlets of the parish. He also assigned them to assist in the school which he had just opened in the parish. After this period of trig 1, he allowed them to make promises a fidelity to God and to one's vocation, rather than the simple vows of religion.

The catechetical movement which Father Champagnat had begun elicited much favorable comment. Encouraged by this he gave the brothers more intensive training, not only in the teaching of religious principles but also in pedagogy and .secular subjects. In November 1619 he felt that the time was ripe for his young religious to be assigned to the parish schools of LaValla and that of Marlhes. In both schools the brothers quickly earned an enviable reputation as schoolmasters, disciplinarians and pious men. The commendable work they achieved with their students drew the attention of several priests and civil authorities in the surrounding area.

In 1820 other young men who had entered the novitiate became teaching brothers in schools at Saint Sauveur and Tarentaise.(9.) Two brothers were usually sent to staff each school, and a third brother to do the cooking, and a little practice teaching.

Before Father Champagnat organized the teaching staffs, he trained Brother Jean Marie (Granjon) to direct the first community at La Valla. In order to be of greater assistance in this training, Father Champagnat moved from the rectory to the brothers' residence. Though he did not partake of the community life, he spent much of his time directing the efforts of the brothers in the art of teaching, in the art of governing a religious community, and in molding their characters.

Thus the founder combined his interests in the brothers with the charge of his ministry. He continued teaching catechism in the parish, visiting the sick and the dying, administering the sacraments and caring for twelve orphans.

To supplement what little revenue he could spare from his salar as a curate, he also helped the brothers make nails which they sold.(10.) Fortunately his robust constitution withstood the pressure of all these duties.

Father Champagnat's work was appreciated by pastors and people alike. But there were a few priests and laymen who found fault with his methods, with his plans for expansion, and with his policy of sending young and inexperienced brothers to teach. With characteristic humility he tried to justify his noble undertaking, and his faith in Divine Providence to whom he always looked for material and especially for spiritual assistance. The docility of the well disciplined students taught by the brothers was proof of the effectiveness of his teachers. Nonetheless charges were made against him that he was duplicating the expenses and work of other congregations that existed for similar purposes at this time. Complaints reaching the Vicar General actually placed the existence of the congregation in danger.

In 1824 when trials were weighing heavily on the Founder, a new administrator for the diocese of Lyons, Archbishop de Pins, became a source of encouragement. In fact on a visit that Father Champapat paid to the Archbishop to explain his position, the latter stated: "I bless you and all your brothers, May God increase your little family and may it spread, not only through my Diocese, but through the whole of France."(11.) He then authorized the founder to clothe the brothers with a religious habit, to allow the brothers to take a simple vow of obedience; and he contributed toward the building of a proposed mother house. Later he offered Father Champagnat the pastorate at La Valla, but the founder declined because of his preoccupation with the Congregation.

While the tide of objections was ebbing in one quarter, a new swell of criticism arose when in 1824 the founder purchased land to build a mother house in a valley near Saint Chamond. Ignoring this new opposition Father Champagnat accompanied his brothers to the site to begin the construction work. Father Challeton came to bless the project. But other priests frowned upon the founder for working like a mason and ignoring his priestly d'gnity. Others refused him loans for a project that they considered foolish. Nevertheless contributions did come from unexpected sources to prove them quite rash in their judgment.

In 1824 Father Champagnat was freed at his request from his parochial duties at LaValla, He then joined the brothers in community lifeâ€ž at Notre Dame de 1'Hermitage, where the LaValla community of twenty brothers and ten postulants had moved.(12.) In addition, two priests of the Society of Mary joined their confrere at the Hermitage to offer their services.

Once the congregation had a mother house, Father Champagnat turned his attention to the detailed work of drawing up permanent rules, and to the development of pedagogical studies. In 1826 he substituted the use of promises at investiture by the simple vow of obedience.(13.) Two years later he chose the present religious habit for the brothers: a black cassock and a separate cape, a white rabat, and a woolen cord for the professed brothers. On the cord a knot indicated a vow taken by the brother To these were added a brass crucifix set in ebony to be worn by brothers who had taken final vows.

To better instruct the brothers, Father Champagnat wrote extensively on religious and pedagogical topics. In 1829 he wrote his first circular letter, on those subjects. Since that time every Superior General has likewise addressed the members of the congregation. From the multitudinous notes he penned at this time, the Second General Chapter of the Institute in 1852 co-ordinated his instructions for publication. Some of the books that were written after his death from this source included: The Common Rules (1852), The Rules of Government (for superiors . . . 1852), The School Guide (1852), The Teacher's Guide (1852), Principles of Christian and Religious Perfection (1863), Sentences; Lecons Avis du Venere Pere Champagnat (1868), Le Bon Superieur (1869). Brother Jean Baptiste who edited these works was also responsible for a two volume biography, The Life of Marcellin J. B. Champagnat (1857) and Models in Religion (1891), the biographic coverage of the early pioneers.

It was specifically during his last fifteen ears of life (18251840) that Father Champagnat became recognized as 'One of the Great Christian Educators of the nineteenth century. He was recognized in a special manner for his prudence and courage in training young men with a grade school education to become zealous and effective teachers. For this he took every opportunity to guide the brothers in their endeavors. Thus he made use of Easter and summer vacations to offer summer courses, and to conduct teachers' conferences. He filled the post of school supervisor in an expert manner. He continually studied and applied various methods of teaching in order to develop an elite group of teachers.(14.) Father Champagnat's work can be gauged in this quotation:

The last fifteen years of the life of Venerable Champagnat were closely associated with everything pertaining to education. Not satisfied with familiarizing his disciples with pedagogic theory, he frequently visited the schools to see how the Brothers put it into actual practice. He questioned the pupils less to test their knowledge than to discover if the lessons had been understood and taking the teacher's place he gave the latter a practical demonstration of what he considered an ideal lesson.(15.)

While Father Champagnat was pre-occupied with the training of the brothers, he was also concerned with the possibility of losing brothers because of the French laws on conscription. Previous to 1828 primary instruction in France was under the control of the Bishops, who easily obtained dispensations from military service for the brothers. But after, 1828 a decree was required from the Royal Council of Public Instruction to release religious from this service. Before the Archbishop of Lyons was able to obtain this decree for Father Champagnat's congregation, the revolution of 1830 halted the proceedings, and anti-clerical laws obstructed the negotiations leading to this decree. For ten years through frequent trips to Paris and incessant negotiations the founder wore himself out in an effort to obtain recognition. The problem was resolved only after his death, when the Congregation of the Brothers of St. Paul Trois Chateaux merged with the Marist Brothers in 1842. As a result of this merger, the Marist Brothers could make use of a decree which those brothers had obtained to avoid conscription. Finally in 1851 during the reign of Napoleon III the Institute was legalized in France, and the dispensation from military service was granted to the Marist Brothers(16.).