

Chapter I - The Origin of the Marist Brothers

The founder of the Institute of the Marist Brothers of the Schools was born on May 20, 1789, at Le Rosey, a hamlet in the township of Marlhes in southeastern France. On the following day he was baptized Marcellin Joseph Benedict Champagnat at the parish church of Marlhes. His biographer, Jean Baptistse relates a series of incidents which marked him as an child of destiny.

She (his mother) was fully confirmed in this presentiment (of future sanctity) by a sign which she looked upon as supernatural. Several times, as the child lay in the cradle, she saw a bright flame, hovering round his head, diffuse itself about the apartment . . . she felt that Heaven, in its mercy, had designs upon her child, to be made known in its own good time, and that it was her duty to correspond with its intentions to the best of her power, by bringing him up in more than ordinary virtue and piety.(1.)

The training which young Marcellin received at home instilled in him a noble sense of justice, of piety and of charity. His mother and his aunt, a nun in hiding, were his childhood teachers. They prepared him for his first communion, which he received at the age of eleven. The ceremony was performed in secrecy since the priest was in hiding from the French government.

His formal education began in 1804 at the age of fifteen. The revolution had disrupted the educational system of the times, so that it was only after Napoleon I became ruler of France that Marcellin Champagnat was able to make use of the educational opportunities that were then made available.(2.) In 1803 Napoleon's uncle, Cardinal Fesch, was appointed archbishop of Lyons. This prelate directed his clergy to seek out young men for the priesthood, in order to fill the depleted ranks of the clergy. Young Marcellin Champagnat was one of these who was thus approached.

Father Courbon, a professor at the diocesan seminary, was the instrument God used to introduce this destined young man to the call of the ministry. On a visit to the Champagnat family at LeRosey he told Marcellin: "My child, you must study Latin and become a priest, . . . it is God's will." (3.) This significant mandate pleased the shy Marcellin, but his parents, with the best of intentions, tried to deter him because of his limited learning and of his disinclination to study. To their objections he replied: "My resolution is taken, I can now think of nothing but study." (4.) Secretly admiring his determination, they allowed him to follow the priest's suggestion.

This determination was a characteristic which spelled success in the life of Marcellin Champagnat. He traveled to nearby Saint Sauveur to study Latin under his brother-in-law, Mr. Arnaud, the schoolmaster there. Although he did not succeed too well, he nonetheless entered the minor seminary at Verrieres the following year. At first his deficiencies cause him great hardship. But with consistent effort he reached the standard demanded by the seminary authorities, and was even advanced to higher classes, where he distinguished himself in the Latin studies.(5.) Recognizing his qualities of leadership, his superiors appointed him prefect, a position which he filled with efficiency.

During this period of his life, young Marcellin strengthened his habits of piety and order, which later helped him to organize a congregation of men. A year before he was transferred to the mayor seminary at Lyons, he became acquainted with two new seminarians who were to become close associates in the ministry, and who helped him implement his future ideas. These were Jean Claude Colin, co-founder with Blessed Champagnat of the Society of Mary, and Jean Marie Vianney, the Cure D'Ars and Patron of Parish priests.(6.)

On November 1, 1813 these three seminarians entered the Grand Seminaire of Lyons, where they studied for three years. They were serious students, who during recreations often spoke of establishing a congregation of priests dedicated to their ideal, the Blessed Virgin. In 1816 Jean Colin, Marcellin Champagnat and others presented their views and future plans to their superior, Father Challeton. This holy priest approved their ideas, and brought them to the famed Marian shrine of Lyons, Notre Dame de Fourvieres, where they dedicated themselves to the purpose of founding the Society of Mary. Later this superior, who became Vicar General of Lyons, joined the Society of Mary.(7.)

One recommendation that Marcellin Champagnat often propounded to his fellow seminarians was the inclusion of teaching brothers in the Society of Mary. But they were adverse to this proposition. In fact one of them told him: "Eh bien, chargez vous des freres, c'est vous qui en avez eu l'idee." These words he kept in mind.

On July 22, 1816 Marcellin Champagnat was ordained by Bishop Dubourg, Bishop of New Orleans, Louisiana. The Bishop was the representative of Cardinal Fesch. The young priest returned to Notre Dame de Fourvieres, a few days later, to consecrate his life and ministry to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Father Champagnat was twenty-six when he was named curate in the parish of LaYalle, a hamlet situated on the slope of Mont Pilat in the Loire, where he was to serve as assistant to Father Rebaud. The pariah included two thousand souls, most of whom lacked any formal education and who were scattered in the mountainous area. As the newly ordained priest studied the situation, he became determined to do his utmost to teach these people the fundamentals of the Faith, and so to change their ways. His ingenuity in preaching soon effected results. The children became well instructed in the catechism, and their parents guided back to the Faith. In an unpublished dissertation on Blessed Champagnat, Brother Albert Hamel stated:

Father Champagnat had been in the parish only a short time, when it was entirely reformed. Faith was revived; the sacraments were frequented; devotions were attended; family prayers were again recited; in fact, a complete transformation took place. The work started in the pulpit, and was completed in the confessional.(8.)