

The Society Of Mary

The Society of Mary, as we have stated was founded as a congregation of priests in 1816 at the seminary at Lyons. Initial steps to obtain canonical approbation from Rome was begun by Father Jean Colin in 1822. Fourteen years later in the Brief "Omnium gentium" Pope Gregory XVI sanctioned the Society and confided to their ministry the missionary territory of Polynesia. The Fathers had already grouped together at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage with Father Champagnat and at Belley with Father Colin. Gathered in the latter place, they elected Father Colin the Superior General of the Marist priests, Marist Brothers.(17.) With certainty was this an illustrious group of priests, including Venerable Jean Colin, Blessed Marcellin Champagnat and St Peter Chanel, who made their first profession following the election.(18.)

The brothers were an integral part of the Society. Father Champagnat had direct responsibility for them although he had always hoped that the Superior General of the Marist fathers would assume this duty. But Father Colin thought otherwise. In fact eight months before Father Champagnat died, the Superior General persuaded him to allow the brothers to rule themselves. This point of view was later endorsed by the Holy See; which directed furthermore that the brothers elect their Superior General from among themselves. To this end Father Colin convoked a general chapter of professed brothers. He presided at this meeting, at which Brother Francois was elected superior with the title of Director General.(19.)

This election was providential, for Father Champagnat's health had declined rapidly. Shortly before he died on June 6, 1810 he entrusted his spiritual testament and apostolic mandate to educate (the youth of) the world, to the two hundred and eighty brothers in his little congregation.(20.) One hundred and eighty of these were teaching in forty-eight schools, with a total enrollment of seven thousand students. Forty-nine other brothers had preceded the holy founder in death. He was buried among them in the community cemetery at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage.

The heroic life of Marcellin Champagnat was recognized not only by the members of the two congregations he helped to found, and by the local clergy, but also by the Holy See. His cause of beatification was introduced in Rome in 1886.(21.) Ten years later Pope Leo XIII decreed him Venerable. In 1955 the late Pope Pius XII presided at the ceremony at St. Peter's Basilica which proclaimed the holy founder Blessed. His cause for canonization is under study at present. It is believed that this process will conclude in a few years, at which time the founder of the Marist Brothers will be declared a saint.