

1905 Centenary Celebration 2 March 2005

Remarks by Brother Joseph Belanger (revised 13 June 2005)
at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Marist Brothers arrival in
Poughkeepsie, New York

Special thanks to VP Bob West and Staff, especially Shaileen Kopec.
Main sources: John Ansley and Archives; Bro. Leonard Voegtle, copybooks.

01. Marist College was founded by the Marist Brothers. The first piece of land bought at the site of the present Marist College was bought on 28 February 1905 by [Bro.] Louis Zepheriny "of the Borough of Manhattan". It was the 35-acre MacPherson estate immediately north of the Water Works Road in the town of Poughkeepsie.

02. The Marist Brothers were founded by St. Marcellin Champagnat on 2 January 1817. Champagnat was born near Lyons, France, the ninth of ten children, on 20 May 1789. The French Revolution broke out 7 weeks later, on July 14. The Champagnat family harbored a religious aunt during those turbulent years and she it was who taught the children the rudiments of reading and writing. Marcellin went to school only a few days and left in disgust when the teacher slapped a pupil. He promised himself to start a group of teaching Brothers who would run their schools like a family. After the chaotic years of the French Revolution were calmed somewhat by the coming to power of Napoleon in 1799 and the signing of the Concordat with Rome in 1801, the Church started intensive recruiting for its depleted seminaries. To everyone's surprise the unschooled, nearly illiterate Marcellin decided in 1803 to begin studies for the priesthood at the minor seminary in Verrières near Lyons. He spent eight difficult years there in and out. He went to the major seminary of St. Irenaeus in Lyons in Fall 1813 and was ordained on 22 July 1816 as one of the original eight priests of the Society of Mary.

03. Champagnat was named assistant in a small village called La Valla, southwest of Lyons. That October, after helping a teenager prepare for death, he set about starting the group of teaching Brothers he had been thinking about for years. Two recruits took up residence in a small house near the presbytery on 2 January 1817, founding date of the Marist Brothers.

04. The number of recruits grew slowly. When Champagnat died on 6 June 1840, probably of stomach cancer, his Marist Brothers numbered only 280. His designated and elected successor was Bro. François [Gabriel Rivat]. When François retired after 20 years, the Marist Brothers numbered 2,086 and had spread all over Western Europe. Bro. François retired in 1860 and was succeeded by Bro. Louis-Marie Labrosse, a brilliant seminarian who had decided in 1831 to join the Marist Brothers. He was followed by Bro. Nestor in 1880.

05. Catholic schools had won a Pyrrhic victory in 1850 with the passage of the Loi Falloux which legally authorized a qualified Principal to cover all of his staff. The Third Republic inaugurated in 1875 became very

anticlerical and Jules Ferry, named Minister of Public Instruction in 1879, had a law passed in 1881 that all State primary education be "obligatory, free, and lay," i.e. non-religious. This was an excellent law, but it initiated the "school battle" which raged from 1881 to the Michel Debré laws in the early 1960's which allowed those Catholic schools which wanted to contract with the State for considerable funding in exchange for some loss of autonomy. In 1881 most of the elementary schools were run by the hundreds of teaching congregations of men and women founded in the first half of the 19th century. Almost all of the Brothers' schools then were primary. Bro. Nestor wrote a lengthy Circular to the Brothers in 1882 telling them to forget the Loi Falloux, accept the Ferry changes and meet, nay surpass, all State requirements. He is the first Superior to give a tremendous impetus to studies and general culture in the Institute.

06. Unfortunately Bro. Nestor died suddenly on 9 April 1883. He was succeeded by Brother Théophane Durand, another former seminarian. Théophane was Superior General from 1883-1907. With the intensified school battle launched by Jules Ferry, it was natural for the Brothers to start looking beyond France and Western Europe and the South Pacific for new apostolates. The Superiors chose Brother Césidius, 40 years old, to lead a group of six Brothers to Canada in 1885 to found a new Province of North America. The very next year Césidius sent Brothers to Lewiston ME to start a school there. That was the first foundation of the Marist Brothers in the United States, and a plaque in our chapel commemorates that centenary. They then went to Manchester NH in 1890, to Lawrence MA in 1892 where my Dad had them as teachers, and to NYC also in 1892 where they started St. Jean-Baptiste grade school and St. Ann's Academy elementary and secondary school, now Archbishop Molloy HS in Queens. French-speaking New England was fertile ground, and the Brothers added Haverhill MA in 1903 and then St. Agnes back in NYC in 1904.

07. Directing schools in Canada and in the USA proved awkward from the beginning, culturally and linguistically. Especially, United States recruits to the Marist Brothers were not keen on having to go to Canada for their formation, particularly the NYC boys. Something had to be found in the USA, and the closer to New York the better. We needed two things; we needed a suitable property, but we also needed guaranteed religious services: daily Mass, weekly Confession, monthly Recollection, and annual retreat. We looked at properties in Westchester and in Esopus, but found nothing satisfactory as property and/or services.

The MacPherson Estate:

08. Bro. Zepheriny was the one who had founded St. Ann's Academy on 76th Street and Lexington Avenue in mid-town Manhattan in 1892 and he knew the Jesuit priests at St. Ignatius on Park and 84th. Most probably it was they who suggested we look at the MacPherson estate in Poughkeepsie. The Jesuits themselves had bought St. Andrew's in Hyde Park in 1897 and their Novices had moved there in 1903. The MacPherson mansion was ramshackle, but the 35-acre property was attractive with a small lake just southwest of the mansion and an island in the center of the lake. When Fr.

Joseph Havens Richards, Director of St. Andrew's, promised us daily religious services, Bro. Zepheriny obtained permission from the Major Superiors then in Grugliasco, Italy, to purchase the property. There was only one hitch: with all the trouble in France and the moving it cost, the Brothers didn't have enough money. So, Bro. Zepheriny approached his sister in France, borrowed money from her and under the name Louis Zepheriny, "of the Borough of Manhattan," because of the anti-Catholic sentiment in the mid-Hudson area, signed the deed for the MacPherson Estate on 28 February 1905 for \$7500, plus some \$2000 in incidental expenses. In 1908 he sold the property to the Brothers for \$100, plus the mortgage. It is rumored that he could have bought all the way to Violet Avenue [remember that the Jesuits had bought over 1000 acres], but that the French Superiors, so used to small chess-board patches of land in their country, thought the idea extravagant and turned it down. Bro. Zepheriny called the new property St. Ann's Hermitage in memory of St. Marcellin Champagnat's Hermitage in France.

09. In his heydays Thomas J. MacPherson had socialized regularly from 1885 when he purchased the property, inviting groups of friends from the area and New York City for grand balls. We read that he himself was a fine piano player. The mansion was oriented east-west, with the eastern end where the south third of Dyson now stands. The small island disappeared when the Brothers turned the little lake into a huge concrete swimming pool opened in 1939. After the opening of the McCann Center in 1977 Marist College could not afford to operate two large swimming pools, and early one morning Bro. Nilus Donnelly bulldozed the outdoor spring-fed pool into oblivion, in spite of the local committee formed "to save our pool." This eventually made way for the opening of Lowell Thomas in 1987, but you recall that drainage was overlooked in the original construction and the basement had a foot of water. On the second try the foundations were tarred and drainage added to the east and north and the basement has been dry since.

10. As we have said, the MacPherson mansion needed extensive repairs. A group of Brothers carpenters came from Canada after the purchase of MacPherson and needed a full year to make the mansion habitable. On 21 February 1906 12 Juniors arrived from St-Hyacinthe, Canada, to begin their studies in English. They are the first students on campus.

11. The Juniorate then was a stage of formation during which the pupils completed grade school and started high school. This stage was followed by a two-year Novitiate. At the end of the first year the Postulants took the Religious Habit and at the end of the second year, those accepted and accepting made their First Vows, Temporary Vows renewed annually for five years. Secular studies were permissible by Canon Law during the Postulancy, but only one hour a day of secular study was allowed during the Novitiate Year itself. After the Novitiate came the Scholasticate.

12. The MacPherson mansion was the site of the Juniorate, but the two-year Novitiate was located in the Bech homestead, once that property was bought on 23 July 1908 and the Novices moved in two months later on

September 25. The Novitiate had actually opened six months before with 12 Postulants, and on 26 July 1908, feast of St. Ann, nine of these twelve took the Marist Habit, six of whom died as Marist Brothers. One of the Brothers teaching in that first Novitiate, Bro. Charles-Camille, died suddenly of meningitis on 1 September 1909 and a cemetery was blessed at the south end of the Bech estate to bury him. This cemetery was filled by 1953 and a new one was blessed in Esopus. A marble stone now stands at the entrance to the McCann Center near the buried cemetery.

13. Of the nine who took their First Vows in the United States on 26 July 1909, three are given in the August nomination list as named to the Scholasticate in Poughkeepsie for 1909-1910. The other six probably went to St. Ann's Academy to study; there the new Brothers could finish their high school at St. Ann's if need be, or start college courses at Fordham. Again, not a good arrangement. So, in November 1910 eleven student Brothers, a mix of Americans, Canadians, and Italians, moved into a rehabilitated two-storied Greystone. A third story and the tower were to be added only in 1928. Twenty-one-year-old Bro. Florentius was named Master of Scholastics, thus becoming in 1910 the first Academic Dean on campus. He himself received his State Life Certification in 1913.

14. We mentioned that the early Brothers found the MacPherson estate attractive. Since the mansion was dilapidated this must mean there were shaded walks for meditation and the recitation of the Rosary. It also must mean there was good potential for farming. Of the 21 Brothers listed for St. Ann's Hermitage at the split from Canada in 1911, Ptolomeus is Provincial, Marie Anicetus is Provincial Econome, Marcellien Louis is infirmarian, another is chef, two are tailors, Michel Ange and Sanctus are farmers, and four are carpenters, i.e. 10 out of 21 are in non-school apostolates. Livestock on the MacPherson estate included cows, pigeons, pigs and chickens. Rabbits were added later. Gardens were everywhere possible, even within feet of the mansion. The estate had much undulating land, and coke from the Hudson River Psychiatric Hospital was regularly dumped on the property to fill in depressions. Produce from the gardens and the livestock was shared with the Sisters of St. Francis who accepted their first patient on 17 February 1914.

15. With the three stages of formation in place and recruiting in New England and New York going well, the Major Superiors in Grugliasco, Italy, decided that the Province of North America would be divided in two. This was done on 17 March 1911, creating the Province of Canada with 360 Brothers and the Province of the United States with 210 Brothers. Most of the future development of the present campus was done initially on the 65-acre Bech estate immediately south of the Water Works Road, almost twice as large as the MacPherson estate.

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Sue Brown will tell us about Bech.