

***Reflection delivered at the Mass of Thanksgiving
marking 125 years of Marist life and mission in the United States
Church of St. Jean Baptiste, New York
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On December 1st, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, a woman by the name of Rosa Parks broke the law to win release from the prison in which she found herself. An African-American, Parks sat down in one of the seats on a city bus reserved for whites only. Hers was a courageous act, and one not without its risks.

Legend has it that years later, a student asked Ms. Parks what had caused her to take that seat. Her answer, "I sat down because I was tired". Now, surely it was not just her feet that were tired. No, what ate at the soul and sapped the energy of this middle aged woman were the years of empty promises that she had heard; promises made with only one intention in mind: the desire to keep some people "in their place."

But on that December day in 1955, Parks made a life-changing decision. In an act, stunning in its simplicity, she told all who would listen that henceforth she would no longer live in a way that contradicted her deeply held convictions. And in so doing, she set into motion a civil rights movement that changed the face of the nation and the law of this land.

Now what is the relationship between this story and the anniversary we celebrate today? For after all, Marcellin Champagnat was dead for more than a century before Rosa Parks ever set foot on that bus and to the best of my knowledge the Marist Brothers have never had a presence in Montgomery, Alabama.

I tell the story for this reason: while fatigue may have burdened Rosa Parks that fateful December day, something much more significant caused her to sit down on that bus. She did so because she had a dream, a dream of freedom and of justice, and more importantly, was willing to pay whatever price was necessary to make that dream a reality.

And didn't Marcellin Champagnat do much the same? Here was a man in love with God who at age 27 brought to life a dream that he had carried in his heart ever since the time he and some fellow seminarians made a promise at the chapel at Fourvière in Lyons, France. They vowed to establish a movement made up of sisters and priests, brothers and lay men

and women, a movement aimed at giving a Marian face to the Church of post-revolutionary 19th Europe and teaching the true meaning of the Jesus Christ's *Good News*.

As part of this larger vision, Marcellin was intent on establishing a community of brothers whose sole task would be to tell children and young people just how much Jesus Christ loved them. How did he begin? Modestly, to say the least. He had an old house, two uneducated recruits, and no money. And yet the dream of this simple country priest and saint has grown so that today there are just shy of 4000 brothers and approximately 40,000 lay men and women working with 650,000 young people each year in 79 countries. Yes, with hard work and the will to do so, dreams do come true, giving us the hope that we can change our world.

That very same dream took root here in this country in 1886 at St. Pierre School in Lewiston, Maine in the persons of Brothers Come and Ferdinand who came from Iberville and Brothers Généralis and Henri-Gabriel who traveled from France. Unfortunately, our tenure in that hamlet was short-lived, a mere seven years. A dispute between the principal and the pastor was the reason given for our departure. Some things never change! For years after, however, vocations continued to come from Lewiston, Maine. Among them: Brothers Marie-Petrus who died in 1964, John of the Cross who died in 1984, Charles Raymond, better known as "the Frère", Etienne Emile or B.E.E. and Paul Forgues.

Many other names mark this time of beginning: Cécidius who served as Director General and Visitor; Zéphiriny, a Provincial and the man who purchased the McPherson and Bech properties in Poughkeepsie that today make up part of the campus of Marist College; Ptolémeus who was the last Provincial of the Province of North America and the first of the Province of the United States and later served as Director of Saint Ann's Academy; Florentius the first Master of Scholastics and later the founder of Mount Saint Michael Academy and Central Catholic High School, to name but a few.

While there is a tendency to romanticize the past, to imagine a time when all lived and worked together in harmony, gladly and unquestioningly accepting existing structures and the decisions of those in charge, the truth of the matter is that such an age never really existed. Beginnings are rarely easy and ours was no exception. Between 1886 and 1911, 69 brothers died, their average age was 23. There were conflicts too between some brothers from France and others born in this new world. These wounds healed slowly, if at all.

And yet during the years that followed, many new ministries were established: in New York and New Jersey, Washington, DC and Florida, in Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, California, Oregon, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Texas, South Dakota, Louisiana, Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Georgia, Japan, Liberia, the Philippines, and so many other places. To some, in retrospect, it seems like a glorious age, one marked by success in human terms, but—let us be honest—like every age it had its challenges.

Which brings us to today. Some insist that the present moment in religious life in this country is marked by diminishment more than anything else. Fewer members and ever advancing age. I see it differently and believe that the dream of Marcellin Champagnat continues to unfold in new and surprising ways. First of all, recent years have given us the great gift of lay partnership and we are so much richer for it. Lay partnership has always been there and perhaps we have been late to recognize its presence but these post-Vatican II years have taught us all that the charism that came into our world through Marcellin Champagnat belongs to the Church at large and not solely to the Marist Brothers. So many lay men and women share the dream of that gave life and breath to the founder and his mission.

Second, today the process of renewal invites us once again to become involved with the Holy Spirit. In taking up that challenge, though, let us not forget that Marcellin's troubles began when he allowed himself to be caught up in the Spirit of God. For taking God seriously is never easy and depending upon what the Almighty has in mind, it can change our lives.

Nevertheless, the founder gave God free reign and in time the indwelling of the Spirit of God became his charism, and he began to do things that surprised everyone. For example, he built the Hermitage when he had no money and few recruits. More than a few wondered if he had gone mad.

Today, unfortunately some of us who publicly profess our firm resolve to live radically the gospel message as the aim and purpose of our lives cite prudence, counsel caution, discretion, good sense; we call attention to economic realities, and we worry about retirement. One must wonder: who has gone mad! And so, this afternoon we need to ask ourselves this question: Do we really believe that the Spirit of God so active and alive in Marcellin Champagnat longs to live and breathe in you and me today? And if we do believe it, are we willing to give God's Spirit free reign?

Marcellin founded his Little Brothers to make Jesus known and loved among poor children and young people in particular. Having experienced first-hand

the love of Jesus and Mary, the founder wanted to give that gift to all whom he met but especially those beginning the journey of life.

And his approach to education was revolutionary. Wanting his early brothers to make a significant difference in the lives of the young people entrusted to them, he encouraged them to form a type of relationship with those entrusted to their care that was uncommon in early 19th century France. "Love your students", he said, "pray for them, and work to earn their respect."

This afternoon, these same challenges go out to all of us associated with the Institute, brothers and lay partners alike. And so, we must ask ourselves: are the institutions and other works in which we serve committed to helping young men and women to make Jesus the center and passion of their lives? We can only achieve this end if we are in the midst of young people, willing to give them our time without counting the cost, and doing it in the Marian way: with simplicity.

The qualities of zeal, a spirit of faith, endurance, and the absolute audacity to take on great challenges were surely evident in the life of Marcellin Champagnat and during the founding days of the Marist project on this continent. They need to be equally visible in each of us today: brothers and lay partners alike.

For the last 40 years, we have used one human means after another in our attempts to renew our way of life. But facilitation, pastoral plans and feasibility studies are but means to an end. For it is a profound revolution of the heart and faith alone that is needed to get the job done. Religious life was never meant to be balanced, professional, with regular hours, clear job descriptions, and all sorts of guarantees. Rather it was meant to entail enough sacrifice to be worth the gift of our lives.

And so today as we mark these 125 years of Marist life and mission in the United States, let us pray that the Spirit of God lights in us the fire of renewal. Let us pray, too, for the courage to be as bold, as daring, and as in love with God as was simple country pastor and son of Mary named Marcellin Champagnat. May we, like him, be fire upon this earth making Jesus known and loved among poor children and young people. Amen.