

Marcellin Champagnat

Marcellin Champagnat was the first of the founding people to succeed in forming a Marist group, and his company of Marist Brothers became the fastest growing and the most numerous of the branches of the Marist project. This in itself explains a great deal about this most loveable of characters who did so much for the enterprise in his short life. From beginning to end, Marcellin was a practical person, and everything about him reflects this: the way he understood the ideas exchanged at the seminary, the way he responded to needs, the way he formed his Brothers. Much of this can be traced to his background. His mother was a woman of strong and robust faith, who more than once accompanied Marcellin on foot to the shrine of St Francis Régis at La Louvesc, when difficulties threatened his seminary studies. Marcellin's father was a farmer, who could turn his hand to many other trades as well. Marcellin was a child of the Revolution in more than one sense. He was born in the year of the Revolution, May 20, 1789. As well as that, his father welcomed the Revolution and from the start accepted its principles as a way to help the people. "Our rights were unknown, we have discovered them," he said as Colonel of the National Guard. "The new Constitution is written, now we must support it." As an official under Revolutionary governments, he was required to preside at the secular rituals prescribed by the Revolution. But at the same time, Marcellin's mother attended clandestine Catholic worship. Through his position in the town, Marcellin's father was able to save the Church in his area from some of the worst effects of the Revolution. Marcellin was the ninth of 10 children, and as he grew up, three events dramatically changed his life and formed him as a Marist, an educator, and then as the founder of the Marist Brothers. On one occasion, as a young boy, he witnessed the cruel scene of a teacher giving to a pupil a name which stuck and which caused the child to suffer ridicule from the others in the class. On another occasion he was present when a teacher dealt out harsh physical punishment to a pupil. And as a priest he was called to the bedside of a dying boy who had no knowledge of God or the faith. From these experiences came two great convictions in Marcellin's life: "We must have Brothers!" and "I can never see a child without telling him how much God loves him." The loving relationship which Marcellin inspired in his young Brothers has continued to this day.



Many portraits and statues have been made of Marcellin Champagnat. But three statues are of particular significance, not only because they are in places of historical importance for the Brothers – Marlies, La Valla, and the Hermitage – but also because they are carved from rock. If any man deserved to be called a man of rock it was Marcellin Champagnat. The greatest monument to his life and spirit is possibly the Hermitage, the large five-story building which Marcellin built with his own hands and the labour of his Brothers in 1824. The building was the Mother House of the Brothers, and was Marcellin's home from 1825 till his death. To construct the building, Marcellin had literally to carve into the rock face of the hill. Marist Brother historian Frederick McMahon writes: "The rock face which retreated before the onslaught of the crude tools used by Marcellin and his men tells us of the resolute determination of this man, his toughness, his perseverance, his endurance – his strong mind." The statue at La Valla (above) shows Champagnat with Gabriel Rivat, who as Br François became the first Superior General of the Brothers. Champagnat looks back to the house at La Valla which has always been looked on as "the cradle of the Institute." His hand is on the shoulder of Gabriel who looks down the valley to the world beyond and to the future.

Family environment

Thus it seems that Marcellin Champagnat spent his youth in a remarkable family milieu that could be of immense formative value to him. By no means destitute, the hard-working Champagnat family was obviously very prominent in the district of Marlihes where Jean-Baptiste Champagnat had been for so many years the foremost revolutionary leader. Then, particularly after his father's retirement from political life in 1800, Marcellin would follow him to the fields, the mill and the workbench. Marcellin learned to bake bread, to work with wood, to build in stone and to roof a shed – in short, all the work required in the mill and on the farm, and all this was to prove most valuable to him in his future years. Furthermore, the father gave to each of his sons a sum of money and from it they had to produce more by trade so that each would have a fund with which to go out into life.

Stephen Farrell, fms

What did they think?

The opinions of a former mayor of La Valla, some contemporaries, and his biographer, are worth recording:

"...Father Champagnat was very well liked.... Even when he left us to go to the Hermitage.... many of his parishioners used to go to him in their needs; almost all of them contributed something to help him build the house there." "...His confrères roundly criticised him when he began to work. People wanted to stop him on the grounds that to lead such a harsh and excessively poor life was not befitting the character of a priest. He himself did all the masonry when he built the Hermitage" "...My father was a frequent visitor of the Brothers at the Hermitage, and whenever he went there, he spent a few days working for them as a labourer. When he returned, we would always hear from him: 'What a heavenly place that Hermitage is, where men work, pray, live and love, where there is peace.... Father Champagnat is always the first at whatever there is to be done; he is the most impressive of all the men there; he carries the others along with him because they all love him and venerate him so much'." "...As soon as he heard that anyone was ill, he went to visit them. Inclemency of weather, wind, rain, snow - nothing could stop him."

If he could speak today...

Marcellin Champagnat's experience of the world of the Revolution was different from Jeanne-Marie Chavoin's and from Jean-Claude Colin's. If he could speak to us today, we might imagine him saying something like this:

"It's a painful experience being a late starter at learning. When I entered the minor seminary at the age of 16, I was well ahead of my classmates in age and well behind them in learning. But I'm glad now for that experience, because it made me determined to help others to get the advantages that I was deprived of myself. It's a wonderful thing to be able to free people from the things that hold them back: ignorance of God, sin, and lack of education. My experience made me convinced of the need for teachers who lived in a christian way like Mary. That's what drew me to the plan of a Society of Mary, and there was nothing I wasn't ready to sacrifice for that plan. My father taught me a lot of things, and I'm a practical man like he was. I'm used to working with tools, you see, and used to finding the right tool for the right job. You need that; and you need to be able to make do with the material you have at hand. And when I'm looking for people for a job, it's the same thing. You have to try and find the right person for the right job; but you also have to use what you have at hand. If you can't find someone with two eyes, put in someone with one eye.... But you know, it's all the work of Our Lady, and in the end, she will see that it works out.... This world is the place where you can create things for God, carve new things for God, get great things done in modest ways. For me, humility is admitting the truth about ourselves, and using the gifts we have. Whether we have one eye or two eyes, it doesn't really matter. But it does matter to use the gifts we have and not hide them away."

