

Champagnat Stories

With Br Tony Butler FMS



Brother Tony Butler is perhaps one of the leading authorities on the life and times of Saint Marcellin Champagnat, the founder of the Marist order. Presented here are a number of articles written by Brother Tony, which provide a remarkable insight into the life of Saint Marcellin.

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What it means to be Marist

Marist Education, like any education worth the name, aims to draw out the mind and soul and spirit of the child, as well as to cultivate the body - *mens sana in corpore sano*, a healthy or sound mind in a sound body. Genuine education concentrates on drawing out rather than pouring in: the child is far more important than the content.

But what is different about Marist Education? I have no intention of giving a full-blown account of the educational philosophy of the school - you can find that in the Handbook - but I want to isolate and emphasise just a few points. I think the first point I would have to make is that Marist schools aim to make Jesus Christ known and loved. Now I am sure that most families do not rush to Penshurst Marist for that reason: I am sure that parents choose Penshurst Marist because it has a good reputation as a caring school with a strong family spirit, it is a small school where the individual gets his fair share of attention, the teaching staff have a good reputation, discipline is sound, academic results are very good and there is a wide range of activities to satisfy a multitude of individual requirements and tastes. That's not a bad list for a school.

But if you want to know what lies at the heart of Marist Education it has to do with a certain emphasis on the values of Jesus Christ. That is what the founder of the Marist Brothers, Saint Marcellin Champagnat, wanted for the Order he founded: that they should promote the person and values of Jesus Christ - but in a special way. Jesuits do the same, Benedictines do the same, Franciscans do the same, The Sisters of St Joseph and the Sisters of Mercy do the same. Marists do it in the way of Mary.

The values of Jesus? I see them as love, justice, service, forgiveness, faithfulness and relationship with God the Father through prayer. And the specific approach of Mary? Doing good quietly, having dust on your feet (or being prepared to get your hands dirty), leading by example, emphasising education through the family, being gentle, reflecting on our experiences in a prayerful way, taking the motherly approach - there is a strong feminine element in Marist Education, complementing rather than overwhelming the masculine so essential in a boy's education.

And Marcellin Champagnat? We will hear more of this extraordinary man over the coming school year. In my articles for the Newsletter this year I want to spend some time talking about Mary and some time presenting the story of Marcellin Champagnat.

So, welcome to Marist Catholic College Penshurst, the school you chose for your sons and daughters for a number of different reasons. We hope to live up to your expectations, but we hope to give you more than you bargained for, as well!

The Marist Dream

In October 1812, Champagnat transferred to the Major Seminary of St Irenaeus in Lyon to continue his studies for the priesthood. It was there that he encountered two young men who were to be influential in the establishment of the Marist society.

The sower of the seed seems to have been Jean-Claude Courveille. Courveille was an enigmatic man and his story is not a happy one; nonetheless he has to take much of the credit for the Marist dream. At the age of twenty-two he was apparently cured of blindness at the shrine of Our Lady at Le Puy, a major place of Marian pilgrimage to the south-west of Lyon. In August 1812 he became convinced, during another visit to the shrine, that the Blessed Virgin was calling him to found a society in her name.

There were several like minded young men in the seminary at the time and they were fired with Courveille's vision: a society dedicated to Mary, consisting of priests and auxiliary Brothers, Sisters and a Third Order of lay people. One of these young men was Jean-Claude Colin, just a year younger than Champagnat. He was often sick and not inclined to put himself forward, but he was inspired by Courveille's vision and in fact was the driving force behind the eventual Marist foundations. It was Colin who, along with Champagnat, co-founded the Marist Fathers and founded the Marist Sisters.

Courveille was an inspiring man: "possessed of much zeal, he had a natural eloquence." And under his leadership, twelve young newly ordained priests made their way from the seminary of St Irenaeus, the day after their ordination, to the shrine of Our Lady of Fourvière on the hill overlooking Lyon, to consecrate themselves to the foundation of her Society.

It was Champagnat who kept insisting that there must be Brothers for the education of the poor children of country areas. His companions did not rush to his assistance, so he chose to go it alone. His dream was put into effect within six months of his ordination. Courveille had assisted him with money for the purchase of the little house at Lavalla, and in fact was closely associated with Champagnat for the next ten years, helping him with the purchase of the Hermitage property as well as in the training of the Brothers. He was, however, a serious thorn in the side of the Marists, priests and Brothers, and eventually left the Society in 1826 to become a Benedictine monk.

The Marist Sisters also got off to an immediate start, being established by the end of 1817. The Society of Marist Fathers was much longer in coming to fruition, but by the end of April 1836 they had Papal approval and were being sent to the missions of Oceania (where their confrère, Peter Chanel, was martyred in 1841. His companion, Marist Brother, Brother Marie-Nizier, was lucky to escape the same fate.) The priests, including Champagnat, were able to make their vows as Marists in September 1836. It was not until January 1863 that the Marist Brothers were granted Papal approval. Champagnat did not live to see that.

The Early Brothers

It is quite extraordinary that so many young men should have flocked into the fledgling Institute of the Marist Brothers in such numbers as they did, but no doubt they felt they were being offered an education and some stability and security in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. And Champagnat was an attractive, charismatic personality.

In 1822 some eight young men turned up believing they were joining the De La Salle Brothers. Champagnat finally received them, and though only two survived - including Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet who became one of the most prominent Brothers in the young Institute - some twenty young men arrived from the same area within six months.

Their work was hard; the conditions of the area cruel. The nearby hamlet of Le Bessat, where Champagnat was so shocked by the condition of the Montagne boy in October 1816 that he immediately implemented his plans to begin an Institute of Brothers, the local people had a terrible reputation for ignorance and indeed brutishness. In 1819 Brother Laurence - the third Brother to join Champagnat - used to trudge the eight kilometres from La Valla with his sack of cheese, bread and potatoes for the week, and teach catechism to the local children. Even adults enjoyed attending his lessons.

The earliest years of the Institute were real struggle, but they helped lay a firm foundation for the future of the Marist Brothers.

Not an Easy Path

Champagnat's efforts to establish the Marist Brothers were not all smooth and plain sailing. That comes as no surprise to us as we struggle with our own day to day activities, whether it is as students or parents or teachers. The strength and success of the Marist Order is a tribute to the sustained effort of Champagnat in those founding days.

Having established the infant Order in the hamlet of Lavalla in January 1817 with two young men, he moved down the valley a couple of kilometres to The Hermitage, a place which he and the early Brothers built, a three story building which is still a thriving house of pilgrimage and formation today. He began there in May 1825 with twenty Brothers, ten trainees and twenty-two Brothers in the schools.

There was in the house as well, another priest who, with little warranty, liked to regard himself as the superior of the Brothers. Father Champagnat battled with this man for some time until he eventually left the house and joined a Benedictine monastery.

In these years Champagnat did a lot of travelling in his efforts to establish the Brothers as teachers in the country areas of Southern France, and the efforts took their toll of Champagnat's health. During these difficult times, Father Courveille invited the Brothers at the Hermitage to vote for their Superior: he was very disappointed when the great majority of them wrote down Champagnat's name.

In December 1825, when Champagnat was very ill, he heard that Courveille was about to hold a gathering of all the Brothers with the express purpose of publicly and severely reprimanding one of the Novices. Champagnat struggled from his bed and with the help of Brother Stanislaus - with whom he nearly met his death in the snow in 1823 - he made his way to the room where Father Courveille was presiding. The joy with which Champagnat was greeted, the applause and delight and tears, were enough to break up the cruel meeting and give Champagnat the heart to continue his enterprise.

Lost in the Snow

Champagnat, from early 1817 when he invited two young men to live in a small house at La Valla, worked hard to establish an Order of teaching Brothers who would dedicate their energies to bringing the Gospel message to the poor youth in the villages and hamlets and small towns around this area of Southern France. These men were to live in community, make the traditional religious vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, and - under the banner of the Blessed Virgin Mary - live a life of service in the centuries old way of the Church.

The person of Mary is the key to understanding what makes the Marist Brothers different to other orders of male religious. The Brother sets himself to follow Christ as Mary did, to regard her as his Good Mother and his Ordinary Resource (that is, the one he automatically turns to in his needs), and to live in a community which has the Holy Family of Nazareth as its model. There is, in all of this, a strong feminine way of looking at things, which presents a balance to the strong male elements at work in the world; and those elements have to do with care, sensitivity and listening. They are the qualities that Marist Brothers hope to bring to their personal lives and the way they run their schools.

Nowhere is the concept of Mary as Ordinary Resource more dramatically illustrated than in what the Brothers refer to as the Memorare in the Snow. In February 1823, Champagnat heard of the illness of a sixteen year old Brother in a town twenty kilometres away from the Hermitage, where the new Order had settled after a few years struggling at La Valla. The terrain is rugged and treacherous even today, but Champagnat made the journey, then, on foot, with Brother Stanislaus.

On the way back they ran into a snow storm and lost their way in the heavily timbered country. Young and strong as they were - Champagnat was 34 and Brother Stanislaus 22 - they quickly found themselves in danger of death; Stanislaus had already collapsed. Champagnat said simply: "If Our Good Mother does not come to our assistance, we will die." So they immediately prayed the Memorare, a very old prayer to Mary which begins "Remember, O most loving Virgin Mary, that anyone who calls on your assistance will not be rejected."

Soon after they had finished their prayer, they saw lamplight in the distance. A farmer had come out of his house to check the animals in his barn. The two made for the light and were given assistance by M. Donnet and his family. M. Donnet maintained, some years later, that he almost never went outside to check the animals in winter because there was a connecting door from the house to the barn. And besides, the stormy nature of the night was reason enough for not venturing out.

For the Marist Brothers, this story is part of the Marist legend: the protection of Mary, very real for us in many and generally far less dramatic ways, is ever present and always readily available.

Hard Work and Determination

If I recount the following example of Champagnat's hard work and determination during a few days in 1825, it is not to suggest that this is the way we need to or ought to behave. I refer to it simply to allow us a glimpse of the conviction this man had that there was work to be done, and if he did not do it, it may not get done. It is a way of encouraging us to take on what needs to be done in our own life and world, and to have the courage to do the extra bit which can make so much difference.

Towards the end of 1825, the new Order had ten establishments and Marcellin Champagnat tried to visit them all, generally on foot. On this occasion he travelled from St Etienne by coach, leaving at 9pm and arriving in Roanne at 8am next morning. Having said Mass, he walked to Charlieu where he visited and inspected the school. Next morning at about 4am he walked the 16 km to Roanne where he said Mass again, took a little food and walked on to Vendranges, about 10 km. After a meal there, he walked another 10km to Balbigny. He slept at the presbytery there and started again at 4am, walked 16km, said Mass and continued his journey to La Fouillouse, visiting the schools, inspecting the students and encouraging the Brothers. From there he walked on to the Mother House at The Hermitage, arriving about 7pm that night.

This behaviour may seem extravagant to us: the long distances walked in the snow and cold, the little food, the sense of obligation to saying his Mass. We should not think we do not measure up to the saints of old - we all have the opportunity to do what has to be done in a world which makes very different demands to those made on Champagnat and his early Brothers. The demands on us are not so much less as different. The response required of us is the same: devotion, commitment, loyalty to our values, stability, going the extra mile. That is what Champagnat's example means for us.