

A Heart That Knew No Bounds: Text and Reflection Questions

Who was Saint Marcellin Champagnat? We know that he was a priest of the Society of Mary, and the founder of its Little Brothers of Mary, recognized worldwide today as the Institute of the Marist Brothers. Yes, he was all of those things, but he was also so much more.

The story of St. Marcellin Champagnat takes us back to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century France. Marcellin walked its roads, cherished its terrain, respected the people who shaped him, suffered through the adversity that strengthened him, and, in the end, was seized by the God who was at the center of his life.

Marcellin Champagnat was born on May 20, 1789. He was the second youngest of ten children. During the French Revolution his father held public office in the local town of Marlihes. Marcellin was born into a family where Christian values were put into daily practice.

As a youth, Marcellin preferred manual work to things academic and so grew up learning to farm and to build. Marcellin's life was quite normal. Among his peers he did not stand out as an exceptionally religious person.

It came as a great surprise to his father and brothers when, at age fifteen, he decided to enter the priesthood hardly able to read. This deficiency was to be a cross for him throughout his life. The initial years in the seminary were difficult ones, and after his first year, Marcellin was asked to leave. However, his mother encouraged him to continue and with the help of the parish priest he was readmitted.

Early on in the process of his formation as a priest, Marcellin became more open to the transforming grace of God in his life. The Lord used some very human means to focus the future saint's mind, heart, and energy on this one aim: loving Jesus and, in turn, helping others to do the same.

When Marcellin continued his seminary studies in Lyons, he joined a group of twelve seminarians that together promised to found a society dedicated to the Blessed Mother. On July 23, 1816 the twelve newly ordained priests went to Fourviere, a famous local shrine to the Blessed Mother, and formally pledged to found the Society of Mary. They intended it to include the whole world and have priests, Brothers, Sisters, and lay people. Marcellin's dream was to organize a special group of Brothers, whose main work would be the Christian education of youth. He declared several times that it was the difficulties he had in

school that caused him to conceive the project of preparing religious teaching Brothers for country children.

Reflection Questions

1. Marcellin Champagnat faced challenges on his road to the priesthood. What challenges have you faced in the pursuit of your goals? How have they strengthened and shaped you? What means did you take to overcome them?

2. Looking back on this period in the life of Marcellin Champagnat, what qualities do you find in the man that you most admire? What about them fills you with admiration?

His studies now behind him and at age 27, he arrived as a parish priest to serve the people of LaValla, a small parish consisting of a series of scattered hamlets in the foothills of Mt. Pilat. His whole apostolic life was to be spent in this region of mountains and valleys, but his vision would reach far beyond LaValla.

Marcellin also wanted to address the widespread lack of religious education and spiritual formation found in his day. He is quoted as saying, "We must have brothers, to teach catechism, to help the missionaries and to conduct schools". Marcellin's dream was ambitious: to make Jesus known and loved among the young, particularly those who were most neglected. The founder, though, was not simply concerned about providing better educational opportunities for young people. He was also preoccupied with helping to foster their religious development and experience of God's love. Marcellin was often heard to say, "I cannot see a child without wanting to let him know how much Jesus Christ has loved him and how much he should, in return, love the divine Savior".

The young priest also saw education as a means for integrating faith and culture. Champagnat had more in mind than providing primary instruction for young people or even, than teaching them the truths of religion. He said, "We aim at something better: we want to educate them, to instruct them in their duty, to teach them to practice it, to give them a Christian spirit and attitudes and to form them to religious habits and the virtues possessed by a good Christian and a good citizen."

Reflection Questions

3. Who are the people who have helped you shape your life's dream and encouraged you to live it out? In what specific ways did they help?

4. What events in your life gave you a sense of God's dream for you? The Lord mapped out a journey for you, what milestones along the road helped you find your way?

A few months into his ministry, on October 28, 1816, Marcellin was called to the bedside of a dying teenager, Jean-Baptiste Montagne, who was ignorant of the most basic truths of the faith. Marcellin instructed him, heard his confession, and prepared him for death. He then left to visit another sick person in the area. When he returned to the Montagne household, the young priest learned that Jean-Baptiste had died.

Marcellin's encounter with this adolescent transformed him. Jean-Baptiste's lack of knowledge about Jesus convinced the young priest that God was calling him to found a congregation of brothers to evangelize the young, particularly those most neglected.

Returning from the Montagne home, Champagnat immediately approached a young man of LaValla, Jean-Marie Granjon, and asked him if he wanted to become a teacher. Granjon, who was 22 years old, said yes and Marcellin borrowed money to buy a house in LaValla. He repaired it, cleaned it, built beds and a dining table. A second young man, Jean-Baptiste Audras, who was 14 years old, joined Granjon and the three of them moved into the house on January 2, 1817. This date is regarded to be the foundation day of the Marist Brothers. They worked together, prayed together, visited the sick and elderly, made nails to earn some money, and trained to be teachers. In May 1818, in LaValla, the first six Brothers opened their first school. Throughout the next few years, many others joined Marcellin's band of Brothers. At the time of his death, at age 51, there were 280 Marist Brothers working in 48 schools.

Marcellin Champagnat loved young people. They, in turn, found his enthusiasm and energy contagious. Three elements fueled his passion for life and shaped his spirituality: an awareness of God's presence, an unwavering confidence in Mary and her protection, and the two uncomplicated virtues of simplicity and humility. The practice of the presence of God was more and more, at the heart of Marcellin's spiritual life. His path to a deeper relationship with Jesus and Mary, however, was not an easy one; the young priest encountered many rough stretches along the way.

Marcellin and his brothers were poor. Brother Laurent, an early and faithful disciple of the founder, described the material circumstances of that initial community this way. "We were very poor in the beginning. We had bread that was the color of the earth, but we always had what was necessary". Despite

harsh conditions, the spirit of generosity and good humor that marked this first group of young recruits never failed to shine through. The early brothers did not have an easy life materially. The deprivation they suffered, however, bound them one to another and caused them to share what little they had. It also kept them mindful of their need to live close to the circumstances of those they were called to serve.

In February 1823, Marcellin learned that Brother Jean-Baptiste in another hamlet had come down with a serious illness. Concerned about his condition, the young priest set out on the twenty-kilometer journey across rough countryside to visit him. Brother Stanislaus was at his side.

On their return trip, walking through heavily timbered territory, the two men were caught in the full fury of one of the region's snowstorms. Both were young and energetic, but hours of wandering lost on the slopes of Mount Pilat led eventually to exhaustion. Stanislaus had reached the limits of his stamina. Night set in; the possibility of death in the snow increased with each passing hour. Both men turned to Mary for help and prayed the Memorare.

Within a short while, they spied lamplight, not too far away in the distance. A local farmer, Mr. Donnet, had left his house to enter a nearby stable. This particular evening, though, he had taken an unusual route, especially with the storm underway. By habit, he entered the stable through a convenient door in the wall of the house. For reasons that can be explained only by faith, this particular night he braved wind and snow and chose a route that took him outdoors with his lantern. For the rest of his days, Marcellin saw his deliverance and that of Brother Stanislaus—henceforth referred to as the Memorare in the Snow—as an act of Providence.

The episode that came to be known as the Memorare in the Snow opens another window on the man and his spirituality. What caused Marcellin to set out on his journey in the first place? Concern for a sick brother. The founder's great love for the early brothers was one of his most memorable qualities. Marcellin's world might have been small when compared to that of many people today. But there was nothing small about his heart. He lived a "practical Christianity"; love always translated itself into concrete action. A brother was sick; the founder set out to visit him.

Whatever other reasons motivated the timing of his return journey, we can speculate that his sense of God's presence and confidence in Mary and her protection caused him to undertake the trip where others might hesitate. His recourse to the Memorare in the face of danger was not the final effort of a dying

man. Marcellin was, by this time in his life, aware of God's continual and powerful presence; Mary had also come through for him often enough that he counted on her protection without question. The Memorare in the Snow was simply an external manifestation of the much deeper spiritual reality of the man. When the Revolution of 1830 broke out, and soldiers invaded the Brothers' home, the Hermitage, Champagnat turned again to Mary who came to his aid. From that point on, the community decided to start each day with the Salve Regina (Hail Holy Queen), a practice retained by the Brothers to this day.

Reflection Questions

5. The needs of others and their suffering often shape and transform us. How did both affect Marcellin's character, outlook on life, and his spirituality? How did they work together to make him the person that he became?

6. How have the needs and sufferings of others shaped and transformed you made you the person that you are today? How have they moved you to take action for the gospel's sake?

There was nothing petty about Marcellin Champagnat. He had a passion for the gospel. It is not surprising, therefore, that obedience and love were the two virtues he recommended to his early followers. They are, after all, the foundation of community. Obedience is its mainstay; love binds all other virtues together and makes them perfect. Of this second, there was to be no limit. Marcellin loved his brothers; he expected no less from them, each one for the other.

Throughout his life, the founder was fond of saying, "to bring up children properly, we must love them, and love them all equally". The virtue of love, therefore, was to be not only the foundation of community but also of a distinctive Marist method of evangelization and education. It had been Mary's way with Jesus; it was now to be the way of all who followed the dream that so captured the heart of this country priest and his early brothers.

Shortly after Christmas in 1825, Marcellin's health began to fail and, as usual he turned to Mary and he regained sufficient health to continue directing the Brothers.

When he completed his last will and testament, it included a summary of the spirituality of his "Little Brothers". Practice the presence of God, he told them it is the soul of prayer, meditation, and all the virtues. Let humility and simplicity be the characteristics that distinguish you from others, and maintain always a spirit of poverty and detachment. Have a filial and tender devotion to Mary, he

counseled, make her loved in every place. Love and be faithful to your vocation, and persevere in it courageously. Marcellin took seriously the Good News of Jesus Christ. Having discovered the joy of the gospel and letting it transform him, the founder wanted to share with others, particularly the young, all that he had seen and heard.

Reflection Questions

7. Marcellin was aware of God's presence and relied completely on Mary. After hearing about his life thus far, are there other aspects of his spirituality that are apparent to you? If so, what are they and how did they develop in the man?

8. Sometimes setbacks in life can turn out to be a great source of personal and spiritual growth. Identify a setback in your own life; in what ways did it challenge you to grow more as a person and as a disciple of Jesus?

Marcellin's dream lives on today in the lives of his Brothers. Over 3500 Marist Brothers in 79 countries strive to continue Marcellin Champagnat's legacy of strong family spirit in community and ministry, manual work, active concern for the marginalized and most neglected, deep faith in God and a filial devotion to Mary, our Good Mother. Along with tens of thousands of others who share in the Marist spirit, the Marist Brothers work to make Jesus Christ known and loved as they minister in schools, parishes, and other educational and youth settings.

Marcellin Champagnat was not a theologian, spiritual writer, or educational innovator, but he was an originator. There was no task too small or too great for him to tackle, especially when the task was to serve his Brothers and the people to whom he ministered. "I beg of you, dear Brothers, with all the affection of my soul, and by all the love you have for me, do all you can to ensure that charity is always maintained among you... Let it be said of you as of the first Christians, see how they love one another."

Marcellin was an ordinary man who did extraordinary things because he did the ordinary things with an extraordinary amount of love. This "ordinary man" was proclaimed a saint of the Church by Pope John Paul 2 on April 18, 1999. The world into which Marcellin Champagnat was born in 1789 was beginning to convulse with the tremors of change. The one he left fifty-one years later had seen war and peace, prosperity and hardship, the death of one Church and the birth of another. A man of his times, he carried within himself all the greatness and limitations of the people of his age. Suffering tempered him, setbacks strengthened him, determination drove him, and grace helped him move beyond his circumstances.

Saint Marcellin Champagnat, “priest of the Society of Mary, Superior and Founder of the Little Brothers of Mary”... An example of “practical Christianity”. He was a man our Church calls a very modern-day saint, an apostle to youth. Marcellin Champagnat was both for his time in history; he is no less for ours today.

Reflection Questions

9. Does your personal spirituality resemble Marcellin’s in any way? If so, how?
10. At the end of the DVD various aspects of Marcellin’s life are highlighted. From what you now know about him after viewing this DVD, what is meant by the presentation’s concluding phrase, “...he (Marcellin) is no less for ours today?”