

Marcellin's experience of school

God often uses the shadowy pages of our personal history, the wounds that life imposes upon us, in order to make a light-bearing spring rise to the surface. Marcellin lives through an educational experience that was very deficient. Two negative experiences will make a vigorous impression upon him.

His aunt teaches him basic reading skills, but with disappointing results. His parents decide to send him to Bartholomé Moine, the teacher in Marlhes. On the first day of class, Marcellin exhibits excessive timidity, and the teacher calls him to his side to read. As Marcellin comes forward, another student jumps in front of him. The teacher gives a sharp slap to the pushy lad and sends him to the back of the room. Marcellin feels revolted, thinking: "I'll never return to a school that has such a teacher. If he mistreats a student with no questions asked, I can see what is in store for me. For some petty reason, he'll do the same thing to me. I don't want to go to school with him, and still less to take any punishments he may hand out." Marcellin's first day of school is also his last.



There is another incident that happens, this one during a catechism class, that makes a deep impression upon Marcellin. The priest who is giving the lesson, tired of a student's fidgety behaviour, corrects the boy and pins a nickname on him. The lad quiets down, but his classmates do not forget what the priest has said. When class lets out, they shout out the nickname in chorus. The boy's angry response serves only to increase the nastiness of his classmates. He becomes sad, morose, uncommunicative. Many years later, Marcellin will comment, "Here you have an example of a real failure in knowing how to educate young people. Because of his bad disposition, the boy was made the center of attention. He is tormented by what has happened, and then perhaps becomes a problem for his family and neighbours. And it all happened because of a teacher's fit of impatience that should have easily been controlled."



Marcellin's Pilgrimage to Lalouvesc



In the summer of 1803 two recruiters for the priesthood visited the Champagnat family to see if any of the boys in the family might consider the priesthood.

When the proposal to train for the priesthood was presented to the three sons, it was only Marcellin who showed interest. The one great drawback was that Marcellin was almost illiterate. His father thought this to be too great an obstacle and repeatedly questioned the lad on his intentions but Marcellin's mind was made up: he thought only of becoming a priest.

Marcellin was 14 years old... his decision to enter the priesthood caused him to do some study under his brother-in-law Benoît Arnaud, married to Marcellin's sister, Marianne. Formerly, Arnaud had been a seminarian.

Marcellin made little progress in his studies whilst staying with his brother-in-law over two years. Benoît decided to tell Marcellin to forget about studying and to do something else. However, this failed to shake Marcellin's determination. He prayed harder invoking the intercession of St John Francis Regis.

Finally, Benoît brought him back to his mother, declaring that he could not agree with Marcellin's going to the seminary. Yet the more the obstacles piled up in his path, the more determined Marcellin became in his vocation. His mother, seeing her son's determination suggested a pilgrimage to La Louvesc, in the conviction that they would find help at the shrine of St John Francis Regis. For this Pilgrimage they walked the 40km from Marlies to La Louvesc and back in three days. When they returned, Marcellin declared that he had made up his mind to go to the seminary. He was sure it was God's will for him to do so.



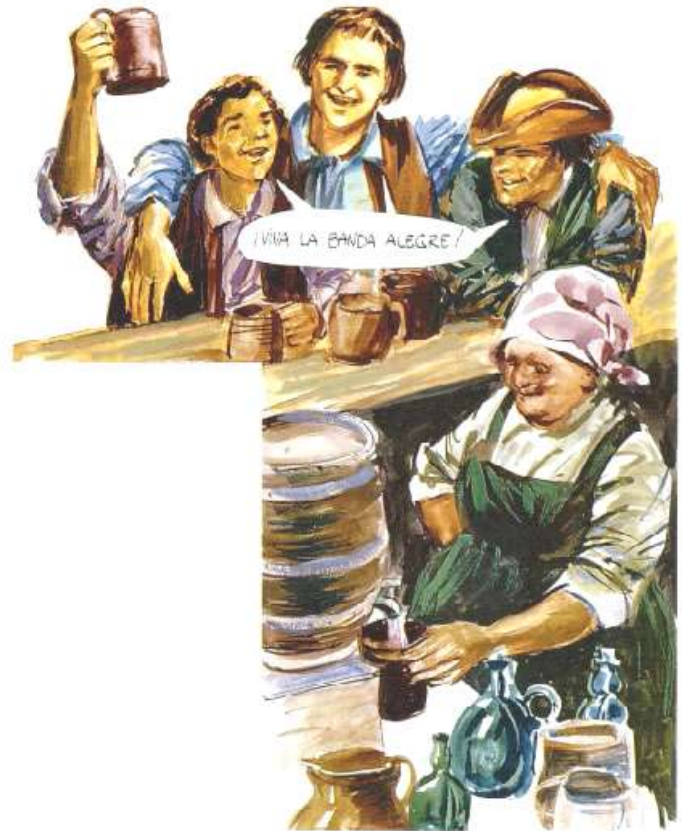
“The Happy Gang”

Marcellin entered the Verrières minor seminary in 1805. However Father Périer felt that Marcellin was not suited to the priesthood and suggested that he should not return.

Marcellin and his mother made a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Francis Regis to pray for guidance. After talking to the Parish priest it was agreed that Marcellin would be readmitted to the minor seminary.

Marcellin was developing into an outgoing young man. He started to frequent local pubs and became part of the "Happy Gang," (*a group of young men who met at the pub regularly for drinks*) and he was not without fault.

However, three events were to have an influence on Marcellin at this time. The first was the sudden death in 1807 of a friend at the seminary Denis Duplay. The second was a serious talk with Fr Linossier about his need to improve his behaviour at the seminary. The third was the death of his mother Marie Thérèse in 1810.



Montagne experience

An incident that occurs on October 28, 1816 serves as the spark that ignites Marcellin's eagerness to found a religious community. In the neighbourhood called Les Palais, he goes to visit Jean Baptiste Montagne, a seventeen year old boy who is ill and in danger of death. The fact that the boy lacks any purpose in life makes a deep impression on Marcellin who realizes that the young man does not know even the basic elements of faith. A few hours later, the young man dies.



It is impossible for Marcellin not to act. That very day he explains to Jean Marie Granjon his plan and the work he could carry out.

There is an urgent need to make the plan a reality. Marcellin's ideas about the need for teaching Brothers is assuming a dramatic character. Five days later, Champagnat is approached by a young man, Jean Baptiste Audras. The young man reveals his vocational restlessness to Marcellin who in turn proposes that Jean Baptiste Audras join Jean Marie Granjon in community.



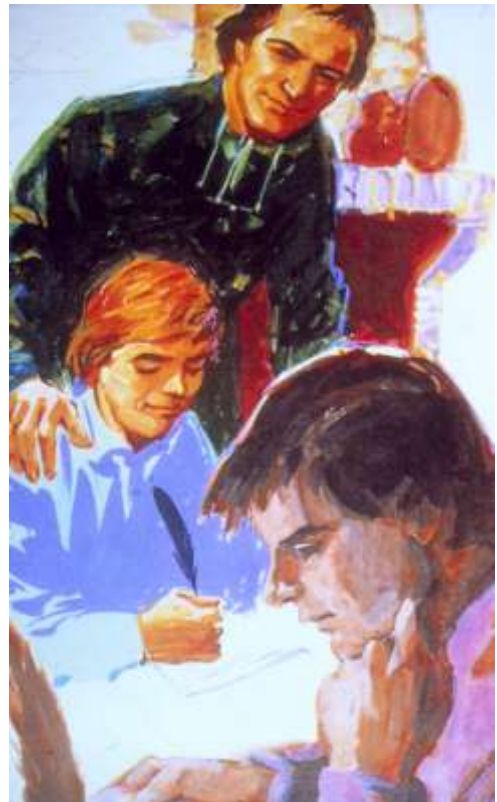
New community of Brothers

Marcellin has now seen enough. In his heart echo the words of Mary, "Do whatever he tells you." He moves decisively into action. He is twenty-seven years old, and not even seven months have transpired since his ordination.

On January 2, 1817, the twenty-three year old Jean Marie Granjon and Jean Baptist Audras, fourteen and a half years of age, move into the small house that Fr. Champagnat has rented for them in LaValla. Their day is comprised of prayer, work and study; their manual work is making nails, an activity that helps to pay expenses. Marcellin teaches them reading and writing, and he looks after their formation as religious educators. Other young men join the undertaking, among them Gabriel Rivat who, as Brother François, will later become the Brothers' first Superior General.

After he has prepared the Brothers sufficiently, Fr. Champagnat founds a school at Marlies. Brother Louis is its principal; and despite his youthful years and inexperience, the results that follow in a brief period of time are evident to anyone willing to see them.

The basic educational skills of a good teacher are evident. Behind them, however, there begins to appear the type of educational program promoted by Marcellin: sharing in the students' lives; loving them; and leading them to Jesus with the motherly assistance of Mary. Slowly but steadily other schools come into existence. The number of aspirants is not equal to the numerous requests for new schools.



Memorare in the snow

Even in the darkness of night, there are rays of light. On his way back from visiting a sick Brother, Marcellin and Br Stanislaus are lost in a powerful snowstorm. His faith in Mary as "Good Mother" enables him to find a safe haven away from the storm. As the young Brother who Marcellin is traveling with is near collapse, Marcellin prays the Memorare:



*Remember, O most loving
Virgin Mary
That never was it known in any age
That anyone who fled to your
protection, implored your help,
or sought your intercession
was abandoned.
Inspired with confidence, therefore,
I fly to you, O virgin of virgins,
My mother.
To you do I come,
Before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful.
Do not, O Mother of Jesus
Despise my prayers,
But graciously hear and grant them. Amen.*

Mr. Donnet, a farmer, goes out of his house in the storm to check his cattle and is carrying a lantern. Marcellin sees the lantern in the storm and follows the light. They are both saved and provided shelter by Mr. Donnet for the night.



The construction of the Hermitage and a philosophy of education

The construction of the building on the River Gier site takes place in very harsh circumstances that are lightened by the Brothers' religious spirit and fraternal relations, traits that make it possible to complete the work in less than half a year. The local residents are in constant amazement when they reflect on the enormous difficulties that such a rock-bound site presents. Walking near the construction site, they are delighted to hear the Brothers singing. The local residents observe the young priest who rolls up the sleeves of his cassock and lifts the heaviest stones. Our Lady of the Hermitage (Notre Dame de L'Hermitage) is a house built on rock.



Father Champagnat often repeats the words, "Every time I see young people I long to catechise them. To make them realize how much Jesus Christ loves them." He points out the need to develop faith through culture. "If it were a matter of teaching only academic subjects to children, it would not be necessary to have Brothers; for such work, any teacher would suffice. If we claim to be giving the students religious instruction, we would be limiting ourselves to be catechists only, and we could gather the children for an hour a day to learn their catechism lessons.

Our goal, however, is higher. We wish to give the students a real formation. That is, to create in them a sense of responsibility, to see that they carry out their commitments, to instil in them a spirit and a way of feeling, to develop religious attitudes, to help them acquire the qualities that characterize a good Christian life. We cannot attain such objectives unless we are educators, unless we live with young people, unless the young people are in our company for a long time." There you have it: a plan for a well-integrated education from the Christian point of view.



Mission to the Pacific

By a happy coincidence at the time that the Society of Mary was seeking permission from Rome to become a religious order, Rome wanted missionaries for the Pacific. Marcellin was delighted that Rome had approved the Society.

Fr Pompallier, who had been a chaplain at L'Hermitage was named Vicar Apostolic and ordained a bishop. A meeting was held at L'Hermitage to select the priests and brothers for the new mission.

After agreeing on the group of four priests and three brothers the missionaries went to the shrine at Fourvière to place their missionary work under the protection of Mary.

The missionaries departed Le Havre, France on 24 December 1836. Arriving in the Pacific, Fr Pierre Bataillon and Br Joseph-Xavier began the mission at Wallis Island and Fr Pierre Chanel and Br Marie-Nizier at Futuna.

On 10 January 1838, Pompallier Bishop Pompallier, Fr Louis-Catherin Servant SM and Br Michel (Antoine) Colombon FMS arrived at the Hokianga, New Zealand.



Marcellin's death and his vision

"May it be said of the Little Brothers of Mary as of the first Christians, 'See how they love one another' . . . This is the most ardent desire of my heart in this, the last moment of my life. Yes, my very dear Brothers, listen to the last words of your father which are those of our beloved Saviour, 'Love one another.' May a tender and filial devotion to our Good Mother animate you at all times and in every circumstance. Do all that you can to make her loved everywhere."

Jesus, Mary and Joseph are at the centre of his heart and of his prayer. On June 6, 1840 - it is the Vigil of Pentecost - a little before dawn, Marcellin passes away. He is fifty-one years of age. (*The Brothers would have prayed the Salve Regina written below in English*). Marcellin leaves behind him a very great accomplishment; yet his dream is still more ambitious: "All the dioceses of the world enter into our view". Today, almost five thousand Marist Brothers and numerous lay people associated with them bring Marcellin's charism to seventy-five countries.

*Hail, holy queen, Mother of Mercy.
Hail, our life, our sweetness, and our hope.
To you do we cry, poor banished children of Eve.
To you do we send up our sighs,
Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.
Turn then, most gracious advocate,
Your eyes of mercy toward us.
And after this, our exile,
Show unto us the blessed fruit
of your womb, Jesus.
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.*

