



FREEDOM, EQUALITY AND BROTHERHOOD—

Was the catch-cry of the French revolution. It was a revolution that caught many by surprise and had a significant impact on the Church and society.

Catholic priests were hunted down and imprisoned. In rural France, many priests were hidden thanks to the strength of faith in the ordinary people of the French countryside.

In the midst of the revolution of 1789 and its clamour for a world view that ignored belief in God, Marcellin Champagnat was born.





The hamlet of Le Rosey, near Marlies and towards the south-east of Lyons, was the home of the Champagnats. Marcellin's parents. His mother had a strong and robust faith and saw to it that her children, of whom Marcellin was the ninth of ten, had the rudiments of their faith and practised a spirituality that ensured this faith developed within them.

Marcellin's aunt (and sister of his father) had been forced out of the convent by the revolution, and helped his education in the faith.





Marcellin was an independent boy with a keen sense of justice. When Marcellin was 10 years old he was sent to school. He lasted just one day! He refused to return to school because of the cruelty of the teacher towards a classmate.

Marcellin held firm to his decision, despite his parents' efforts to get him to change his mind. As a compromise, he received some lessons at home from his aunt.





A little later, and after the death of his father, a priest came through the parish trying to interest young men in joining the priesthood.

The Champagnat family was known to be trustworthy and faithful parishioners. Marcellin's older brothers had other plans for themselves.

However, the priest's visit put an idea into Marcellin's head that distracted him from plans for a business venture in which he had begun raising yearling lambs.





Saying yes to the idea of priesthood meant the hardship of study, since Marcellin could hardly read or write.

He began with some lessons from his brother-in-law who was a teacher in another village close by. However, before long he was convinced that Marcellin didn't have the ability to consider further education, let alone a vocation to the priesthood.





But, with the support of his mother's prayers and his own determination, he did go to the minor seminary at sixteen.

For Marcellin, this turned out to be a major lesson in humility, since he was much older than his fellow students. The first years were a struggle, and his association with a rowdy group in the seminary who liked a beer or two and called themselves 'The Happy Gang,' nearly had him expelled.

It was only the death of a close friend that brought him to his senses and reminded him of his original dream.





Marcellin committed himself to the hard work of study. He joined with a group of friends gathered around a young man, Jean-Claude Courveille, who had the vision of founding a Society of Mary, similar to the Society of Jesus.

Almost from the start Marcellin insisted that brothers needed to be as part of the new society.

It became his task to set up the branch within the Society, that would become known as the Little Brothers of Mary (les petits frères de Marie), or as he himself often referred to them, the brothers of Mary.





The day after their ordination as priests on 22 July 1816, a group of twelve young men made a promise in the church of Fourvières to establishing the Society of Mary.

Of that group, four became Marists, among them Jean-Claude Colin, founder of the Society of Mary (or Marist Fathers), and Marcellin Champagnat, their co-founder.





Marcellin's appointment to the small parish of LaValla was a shock to an idealistic young priest just 27 years old.

The young people wasted much of their time on drinking sprees and the equivalent of discos.

His parish priest had given up on life and given in to the demands of the bottle.

But Marcellin's quiet and persistent determination gradually worked on the local people. He was no great scholar, yet there was a humility and sincerity that shone through his homilies.





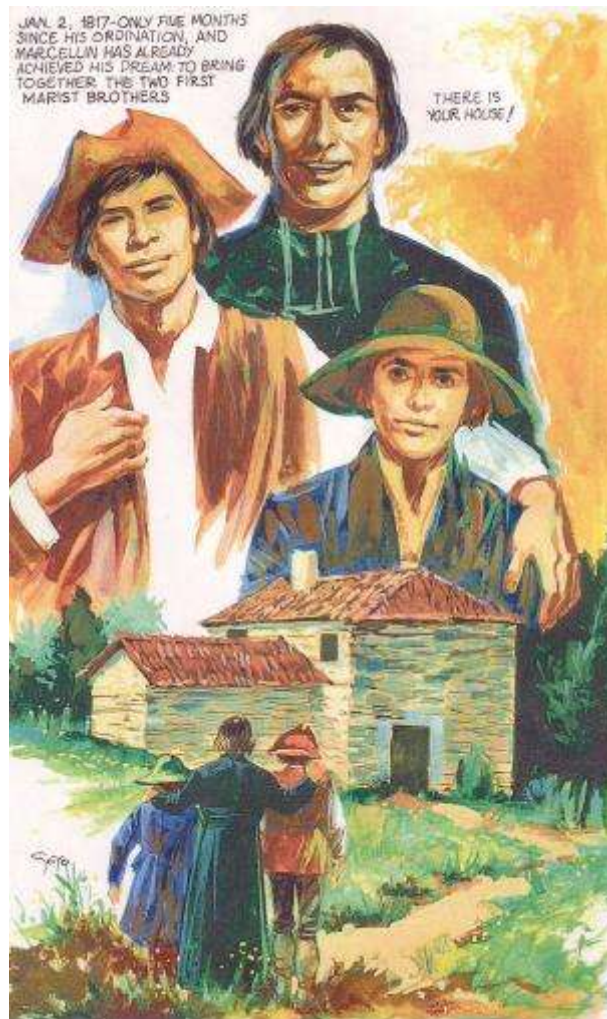
Within a month or two of being at La Valla, a young man called on him.

‘Father Marcellin. Can you come quickly? The Montagne boy is very sick.

I think he is dying.’

When Marcellin reached the young man, it was clear he was dying. Marcellin offered to pray with the young man. To his dismay the young 17-year-old had not even heard about God, let alone knew any prayers. Before tuberculosis had the chance to take the young man’s life, Marcellin assured him that the compassionate God of Jesus Christ loved him and guaranteed him a place in heaven. He died later that night.





That incident confirmed for Marcellin his conviction that, 'We need brothers' was a call of God.

He set about inviting the young people he met with to consider forming a community, a community of brothers to help young people.

On 2 January 1817, not six months after his ordination as priest, the first two young men joined him. Their house was a converted old barn.





One event stands out as Marists retell the story of Marcellin's confidence in God and trust in Mary's help.

Along with Br Stanislaus, a young man of 24, and when Marcellin himself was 36, he set off to visit a sick brother. But they were caught in a severe snow storm and both were suffering from exposure.

In danger of death from hypothermia in the white-out, they knelt and prayed to that Good Mother, saying the *Memorare*.

Before the prayer was finished, they saw a light. It was extremely unusual for a farmer to be outside of the house at night. But this particular night the farmer, Mr Donnet, went outside on his way to check his animals.

The Brothers saw this as a sign that God really wanted Marcellin's project to continue to grow and blossom.





As Marcellin's venture grew by the year, it was not without difficulty. Many considered him not intelligent enough to even think about founding a congregation of brothers.

Marcellin's trusted in Mary, as the 'Good Mother' and held fast to his dream.

His simple trust in God and Mary was matched by his hard work which meant getting his hands dirty. He was not afraid to exercise his skills as architect, stone mason and carpenter, skills learned at his father's side in his boyhood years.

In 1824, Marcellin built a large house, called L'Hermitage, for the brothers.





MISSION TO THE PACIFIC

In 1835 the Church was looking for missionaries to preach the Gospel in Oceania.

The Marist priests offered to undertake this task. Marcellin was the first to volunteer.

In 1836 a small group of brothers and priests left for the Pacific.

They established missions at Wallis, Futuna and New Zealand in 1838. In 1845, a mission was established in Samoa.





The stress of getting his Brothers recognised and the hard work finally affected Marcellin's health.

He was only 51 when he died on 6 June 1840. He was surrounded by brothers whose affection for him was contagious.

At the time of his death, there were nearly three hundred brothers and Marcellin had seen his vision realised of Marists being ready to go to *every diocese in the world*.

