



From A Bishop's Journal (784)

Do You Know the Marist Brothers?

As we near the World Day for Consecrated Life, February 2, I would like to introduce you to a new religious community which we were given as a “gift” from heaven: the Marist Brothers. Their coming had been awaited these past two years. On their part, the general council of the Marist Brothers was working at giving the congregation a new hope-filled direction through establishing an international, “*ad gentes*” team to show its evangelical, missionary, and innovative aspect. It was a great joy for our diocesan Church to welcome, at the beginning of the 2008-2009 pastoral year, the team composed of Brothers Felix Roldan, superior, a native of Spain and missionary in Peru, Jorge Luis Carrasco, a native of Mexico who worked for many years in Chiapas, and Léon Hébert, a native of Canada and former missionary in Zimbabwe, formerly Southern Rhodesia. I want to give you, here the story of their order as it is given in a brochure of Saint Marcellin Champagnat.

Saint Marcellin Champagnat (1789-1840)

Saint Marcellin is the founder of the Marist Brothers. This 19th-century educator was born in France May 20, 1789, just a few days before the start of the French Revolution. He was the ninth child from a peasant family. At its own risks, the Champagnat family would shelter priests who were forced to go into hiding. Marcellin spent the first fifteen years of his life at home on his parents' farm, working with the family. His intellectual formation was difficult for lack of competent teachers. Disheartened by the brutality of the local teachers, Marcellin refused to attend school any further. On the other hand, he was learning much from his father: working the land, cabinet making, masonry work. He also raised sheep and had a small business which allowed him to save money to pay his tuition at the seminary. He left home at 16 for the minor seminary. One of his seminary companions was Saint John Mary Vianney, the future Curé of Ars. Marcellin was ordained a priest in the Lyon Major Seminary July 22, 1816, at the age of 27. The very next day after his ordination he promised to found a new religious congregation, the “Society of Mary,” composed of priests, nuns and laymen. Marcellin insisted on having brothers for the education of country children and youth, to teach them the catechism, maintain school, and make Jesus Christ known and loved.

The “Montagne Affair”

He had been appointed curate at La Valla when he was called in October 1816, to a 17 year old boy. When he arrived, Marcellin realised that the boy was on his death bed. He prepared him for the sacraments, talked to him of God and the Virgin Mary but, to his surprise and hurt, he realised that the boy had never even heard of God. In the adolescent’s eyes he saw the distressed call of thousands of other youths who, like him, were victims of a tragic human and spiritual poverty, without the least instruction. Jean-Marie Montagne – this was the youth’s name – died shortly after Marcellin’s visit. This event left the young curate quite shaken; he realised that he could no longer postpone his project to found the institute of brothers he had had in mind for a number of years. And so it was that, on January 2, 1817, six months after coming to La Valla, he met with two young men who became the first members of the new congregation. A wonderful spiritual and educational adventure was launched in poverty, and trust in God and in Mary. This first community became a real family, and he instilled it with his apostolic and educational enthusiasm.

The Marist Family

While Father Jean-Claude Collin founded the Marist Fathers and Mother Jeanne-Marie Chavoine founded the Marist Sisters, and Father Pierre-Julien Eymard was director of the laymen, Marcellin grouped together the brothers to show them the way of happiness and train them for work with youth, especially the poorest among them. In this was gradually realised the dream of July, 1816, to found a Marist family. In 1836, Marcellin had the joy of having his Society of Mary community officially recognised by Rome. He died of exhaustion at 51, at Notre-Dame-de-l’Hermitage, surrounded by the affection of his brothers. He was declared Blessed in 1955 and canonised by Pope John-Paul II in 1999. In 1885 the Brothers opened their first school in Québec at Iberville. In the year 2000, the Marist Brothers community was composed of 5000 brothers in 75 countries. With thousands of collaborators, they pursue their educational mission in many forms, both traditional and novel forms adapted to new challenges. In Canada, the average age of the brothers is 73, and for 40 years there has been no new recruit to the community. Hence the impression that the Canadians are dying off. A petition was made to Rome to “re-found” the Marist community in Canada and to look on our country as a mission land.

A Spirited “Re-founding”

Despite a decrease in membership in economically developed countries, the Brothers have the conviction that the Champagnat charism shall be suitable to our time as long as there are young people to be led to Jesus. They are sent out just like their predecessors to introduce the loving Jesus, following the example of Mary, to introduce the poor youth to a life of faith through a thorough Christian training, stamped with the Marist identity, and promote vocations to the Marist life in all its forms. Desirous of forming a prayer and sharing community open to the milieu, happy to live Christian family and Marist values in all simplicity, concerned for the human and spiritual growth

of its members, the Marist community in Edmundston are dedicated to proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom through evangelisation and catechetics, and to working with youth in close collaboration with the diocesan Church and the parishes. Over the next six years they want to work with the diocesan youth service, especially in the Upper Madawaska, Edmundston, and Southern Victoria zones. On behalf of our diocesan Church and in my own name, I welcome them warmly. Following the example of their venerable Founder, they lead our youth to meet Jesus on their journey.

+ François Thibodeau

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01-21-09