

23 July 1816 - Fourvière Pledge



On a hill overlooking the city of Lyons a chapel dedicated to Our Lady was built during the XIIth century. It became the destination of pilgrimages and it was very famous especially in the XVIIth century. Fourvière was the place where Jean-Claude Courville, Jean-Claude Colin and Marcellin Champagnat went on the 23rd July, 1816 - the day after their ordination - with nine others to entrust to Mary their plans to found an order whose mission would be the continuation of her work in the Church.

The commitment was formulated in their Fourvière Pledge. It was also decided that Marcellin would be in charge of the foundation of the Marist Brothers. He went back to Fourvière to make his own promise which he fulfilled in a very short time.

Until recently, the statue of Mary contained a heart that could be opened and strips of paper were placed there with the name of the missionaries, both Brothers and Fathers, who had sailed for the South Pacific.

12 August 1816 - Marcellin Champagnat arrives in La Valla



The newly ordained priest Marcellin Champagnat was appointed as a curate (assistant priest) to the parish of La Valla.

The village is located a little more than 45 kilometres south-west of Lyon.

At this time the parish had approximately 2,500 inhabitants.

About 500 people lived in the village of La Valla itself.

The other 2000 were scattered over more than 60 hamlets. Many of these hamlets had no roads and were isolated by heavy snow in the winter months.

1 October 1816 - Marcellin Champagnat meets Jean-Marie Granjon



A Sunday Mass, Fr Champagnat notices a well behaved young man, Jean-Marie Granjon. Jean-Marie was in his early 20's and had been a soldier in the Imperial Guard and had seen action in the campaigns of 1814 and 1815.

On 26 October, Jean-Marie asked Fr Champagnat to visit a sick person. Champagnat believed he had found in this young man someone with the dispositions needed for his planned foundation. The next day, Fr Champagnat gave him a copy of *The Christian's Manual*, a small compendium of doctrine and devotion. When Granjon objected that he could not read, "Take it away, you can use it to learn to read, and if you wish, I will give you some lessons myself".

28 October 1816 - Montagne Incident



On the 28th October, 1816, an event occurred that for Marcellin Champagnat was a conclusive sign to move ahead with his dream of founding a congregation of Brothers. The young priest was called to the house of a carpenter in Les Palais, a hamlet just beyond Le Bessat.

A seventeen year old boy, Jean-Baptiste Montagne, lay dying. The lad was entirely ignorant of matters of 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, Marcellin learned that Jean-Baptiste had died. Marcellin's encounter with this adolescent boy 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. Walking back to the parish house in La Valla, Marcellin decided to put his plan into action.

(Recent research indicates this may have occurred in 1819)

2 January 1817 - La Valla Community



Marcellin saw his encounter with Jean-Marie Granjon as a sign from heaven. He persuaded the young man to join him in beginning the project. He quickly found him a companion, Jean-Baptiste Audras. On 2 January, Marcellin brought the two young men to a dilapidated house he had rented and renovated in La Valla.

As they had to earn a living, they made nails, an activity widely practiced in these villages. The metal foundry in the Gier valley provided the partly finished lengths of metal rods called verges. They also maintained a vegetable garden. As the house was close to the presbytery, Fr Champagnat would come and give them lessons in reading and writing. They were living as a group of pious young men. Around 30 March Champagnat gave them a uniform consisting of a knee length blue or black frock coat, black trousers, a short cape and a round hat.

In December 1817, they were joined by Jean-Claude Audras, Antoine Couturier and in May 1818 by Barthélemy Badard and Gabriel Rivat. In November 1818 Marcellin moved into the house. Now, there are six members.

November 1817 - The First School



Once Champagnat thought them sufficiently well trained, the Brothers began working in the parish. They gathered 12 poor children whom they fed, clothed and taught to read and write. This gathered momentum during the school year of 1818-1819 to the great satisfaction of the parents. This resulted in a confrontation with the village teacher who left. By the summer of 1819 the Brothers were the only ones in the village looking after the boys and teaching them.

At the end of 1818 two Brothers went to Marlies (where Marcellin was baptised) to take over the school. In November 1820, they went to Saint-Sauver. By this time some of the Brothers had also begun going out daily or weekly to teach school in the nearby hamlets. In 1822 the Brothers went to Bourg-Argental, their first town school.

1819-1821 - Vocations Crisis



Between 1819 and 1821 only four new members had joined the Brothers. This had taken their number to 12. However, in 1822 the novitiate was empty. In March 1822, a young man arrived seeking admittance to the Brothers. Champagnat would only let him stay for a short time. The young man persuaded Marcellin to admit him if he could return with half a dozen new recruits. Arriving back in his home area of St Pal-en-Chalancon, 60 kilometres west of La Valla, he quickly recruited 8 young men.

Marcellin was dumbstruck when they arrived at La Valla. The Brothers were meeting in mid-April and Marcellin persuaded them, in spite of the lack of space, to accept them into the novitiate. This required a new addition to the house at La Valla to accommodate the new members.

Marcellin saw this as a miracle, "I consider them as sent by Mary".

1824-1825 - Building l'Hermitage



By 1824, the Institute had grown to such an extent that he needed the assistance of another priest. Father Courveille was asked to help out.

The priest's arrival freed Marcellin for a project that had long been close to his heart: the construction of a building spacious enough to house the ever-increasing number of Brothers. He purchased a piece of property, five acres in size, in a sheltered section of the valley of the Gier River. Bounded on east and west by steep mountain slopes, it contained a grove of oak trees and was well irrigated by water from the river.

Marcellin and his young Brothers worked steadily throughout the six months of summer and early autumn in 1824. They quarried and carried the stones for the building, dug sand, made mortar, and assisted the professional tradesmen, who had been hired for the skilled work. Lodged in an old rented house on the opposite bank of the Gier, the group came together for morning Mass in a small shed in an oak grove.

The new five-story building was ready for occupancy by the end of winter 1825. In May of that year, the Brothers from La Valla took up residence at Notre Dame de l'Hermitage.

Note: The white building in the centre of the photo was constructed in 1824. The other buildings followed later.

1823 - Incident in the Snow



In February 1823, Marcellin learned that Brother Jean-Baptiste in Bourg-Argental had come down with a serious illness. Concerned about his condition, he set out on the 20 kilometre journey across rough countryside to visit him. Br 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 evening, though, he had taken an unusual route, especially with the storm underway. Usually, he entered the stable through a convenient door in the wall of the house. For reasons that can be explained only by faith, this 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 Br Stanislaus as a miracle.

1836 - Missionaries to the Pacific



Marcellin once said that, "All the dioceses of the world enter into our views." When in 1836 Gregory XVI recognised the Society of Mary (Marist Fathers) as a religious community he imposed a condition that they accept missions of Oceania.

The first Marist Missionaries, four Marist priests and three of Champagnat's Brothers, with Bishop Pompallier, sailed from Le Havre, France, on the Delphine for Oceania. The group included Fr Peter Chanel SM, together with Brs Marie-Nizier Delorme FMS, Joseph Xavier Luzy FMS, and Michel Colombon FMS.

On 10 January 1838 Bishop Pompallier, Fr Servant and Br Michel arrived at the Hokianga. While the Brothers acted as catechists the first Marist school was not opened until 1876.

In 1875, Fr Jean Forest SM wrote to the Superior General requesting Marist Brothers for his school in Napier. Fr Forest had begun his missionary work in New Zealand in 1842 and like many other Marist Fathers had lived with Fr Champagnat and the Brothers at L'Hermitage. Fr Forest had to wait until 1878 for his request to be fulfilled as the first teaching Brothers were sent to Wellington.

Marcellin Champagnat's Timeline

1789 (20 May) Marcellin is born at Le Rosey, France

1805 (30 October) Marcellin enters the seminary

1816 (22 July) Marcellin is ordained a diocesan priest
(23 July) Marists pledge to form the Society of Mary at Fourvière

1817 (2 January) Marcellin founds the Marist Brothers

1824 With the early Brothers, Marcellin builds the l'Hermitage near St Chamond

1836 (24 September) Marcellin takes vows as a Marist priest

1836 Marcellin sends Brothers to Oceania

1840 (6 June) Marcellin dies at l'Hermitage aged 51

1999 (18 April) Marcellin Champagnat is canonised a saint



