

# THE MARIST TEACHING TRADITION



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## Abstract

This article outlines Marcelin Champagnat's educational aims and captures some of the spirit he imparted into his young Institute. It reflects his passion for the education of young people and his thoroughness in explaining to his followers the specifics of the teaching methodology he wanted adopted in his schools, a methodology not always consistent with the current practice of the time. Interpreting Champagnat's ideas, Maurice Bergeret highlights those which are particularly pertinent to today's world.

## Editor's Note

This paper, which was delivered during the First European Congress on Marist Education in Barcelona, Spain between 11th and 15th May, 1992, was originally written in French and initially published in FMS Marist Notebooks in March 1993. Some modification of the original article has taken place for translation purposes. Further information about the bibliography can be obtained from the editor.

## Introduction

The pedagogy of the Congregation of the Little Brothers of Mary at the time of their Founder ... is still a vast unexplored area, whether we are looking at its aims, its spirit, its methods, its methodology .... These are the words of Br Pierre Zind ... former professor of the history of education at the Lumière University in Lyons. Zind died during a visit to Brazil in 1988, where he had gone to Mendes, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, to give a series of conferences on Marcellin Champagnat.

Zind's book gives the text of the conferences that he had carefully prepared for this seminar on the Founder. It is a work of patience and erudition quite typical of the author, who, as he tells us 'began his research in the school of Greco-Latin antiquity' (Ch.1). But we are not going so far back in time as that. We will confine ourselves, in all modesty, to the period when Marcellin Champagnat set his work afoot and began his practical research into education and pedagogy, during the years 1819 to 1840. We will try to expand our field of vision, and, if possible, look towards the future. Marcellin Champagnat's educational thinking is not only an inheritance from the past, but it should be a light for us on the road, a dynamic source of energy in facing up to the challenges of the new evangelisation. In the text, Zind details four aspects of this vast area of exploration: the aims, the spirit, the method, the methodology.

After long and patient study of this topic, Zind is of the opinion that he cannot deal fully with it, so he takes only the last two points and deals with them in Chapter 8 of his book, *Pédagogie didactique des Petits Freres de Marie*, a chapter which is about 120 pages long, almost a quarter of the whole book. So the study still has to be made on the first two points, the aims and the spirit of our educational tradition, a vast and challenging field to cover. I was tempted to undertake the task, not realising that it would be impossible. ... I make no claim that I have succeeded where Br Zind did not dare to go. I have simply brought together some reflections on the major points of an interdisciplinary field where there is work for a whole team of specialists.

Guided by Zind's preliminary remarks, I take as my topic the first two main points he mentions: 1. the aims of Marcellin Champagnat's educational ideas and 2. the spirit of his educational philosophy.

## 1. The aims of Marcellin Champagnat's educational ideas.

It is not easy to separate the two ideas, the aims and the spirit, since one flows naturally from the other. In the case of the first, the aims, we have to be as objective as possible, so that we can be sure that the second does not come from our own imagination, or from the common enough desire to see the past in a modern context, and risk not seeing it in its true colours. Luckily, we have enough authentic historical documents which we can read and analyse in a careful and honest fashion. Fr Champagnat stated that his aim in educating children was to allow them to become people worthy of their condition as children of God. With this in view, he was ready to use any effort, any method of teaching which would help the children to grow. In my view, the expression 'educational pedagogy' is not really the right one to express this aspect of our Founder's work.

A man of action as he was, and continually having to defend and promote his work, he must have spent hours explaining the Brothers' educational work both by word of mouth and in writing. The result is that we have a substantial number of documents to which we can refer in this matter. In January and February 1825, he set about, for the second time, trying, with the support of Monsignor de Pins, Archbishop of Lyons, to get the legal authorisation necessary for his young Congregation. He had to draw up a complete file on it to present to the authorities. I quote some passages from it:

Since the Brothers of this Congregation have in mind only the good of society, I dare to hope, Monsignor, that Your Excellency will not refuse them your protection, and that His Majesty, whose only wish is the wellbeing of his subjects, will not refuse them what they ask for (Champagnat, 1825, in Michel).

This aim, frankly social in character, is set out in two documents: 1. the Prospectus dated 29th July 1824 and 2. the Statutes, the first edition of our Rule of Life, dated January 15th 1825. From these we quote the following three short passages:

The aim of our establishment is the instruction of children in general, and particularly of poor orphans. As soon as we have finished the buildings at the Hermitage and the means at our disposal enable us to get a good water supply to help us in our work, we will take in children from the 'Houses of Charity' and set them up in life by giving them a Christian education.

Those of them who are disposed to virtue and knowledge will be employed in the house (Prospectus, 65).

A Christian and religious education is the most efficacious way of forming good subjects for society and fervent Christians for the Church. Unfortunately this means is lacking in most of our country areas (Statutes, Foreword).

The Little Brothers of Mary have as their aim, elementary education. They will teach reading, writing, arithmetic, the principles of French grammar, Church music and Sacred History. The method they will use in their teaching is that used by the Brothers of the Christian Schools; their schools will be free, and they will agree with the local civic authorities on what is necessary to ensure them an honourable existence without overdue burdens being placed on them (Statutes, Article 1).

These three texts, each one in its own way, insists on the frankly social aspect of the Christian education and primary instruction that the Marist Brothers intend to offer to children in rural districts. The expression 'forming good subjects for society' demonstrates the same concern, but in terms better adapted for the King of France, Charles X, for whom this text was intended.

In spite of frequent attempts, Fr Champagnat did not manage to get the authorisation that he felt was absolutely necessary. 1833 saw the passing of the 'Guizot Law', which was more demanding in requirements for opening schools and for the diplomas needed by teachers if they did not belong to a recognised religious congregation. Champagnat tried again, for the sixth time, but his efforts came to nothing. In 1837, three years before his death, he tried again for the seventh time, but again without success. For three years, he knocked on the door of Mr Salvandy, Minister of Education, a man who was not in the least favourable. He met with various politicians and highly placed civil servants, presented file upon file, and built up a huge volume of correspondence.

These documents show that the aim of Champagnat remains what it had been at the start. It is well summed up in a letter written by a friend of Champagnat, Mr Baude, secretary of the General Council of the Loire, to Salvandy, on 5th November 1838: 'The Little Brothers of Mary constitute a new and excellent instrument for the spread of a primary education which is complete, moral, religious nothing more, nothing less' (Michel, p.193).

In the historical context, the phrase 'primary education' means an education which follows the ideas of the University to form citizens who are sufficiently instructed to take their place in the society of the time, and to lead to their political and economic development. Mr Baude gives his own version of the phrase 'the good of society' used by Champagnat in his letter of 9th February 1825. This far seeing aim is made more explicit in a letter Champagnat wrote to Mr Libersat, who worked in the Ministry of Public Education: 'Our aim...is to form good Christians and good citizens from among the inhabitants of the rural areas' (Champagnat in Sester, 1985 Letter No 273).

I feel that this rapid look at some of the historical official documents of the Marist Brothers is largely sufficient to define the main aim of Champagnat's pedagogical thought. We can sum it up: We should aim at educating the whole person in his or her religious, moral, and civic dimensions. Research into this aim is not hindered by the social or family situation. Poverty in all its forms, abandoned children, orphans of the countryside and of the towns should not put off the Marist Brothers. On the contrary, the marginalised of all kinds should engage their attention, without, however, taking it away from the others. This demands of educators patience, perseverance, dynamism, and ingenuity in their teaching.

So we have now a solid foundation for the discovery of the spirit of the educational pedagogy of Fr Champagnat. The next step is to underline some of the more significant aspects of this second topic.

## 2. *The spirit of Marcellin Champagnat's pedagogy*

We find this expressed throughout the whole career of the Founder of the Marist Brothers: in his life, his writings, his attitudes, his relationship with his Brothers. As we said above, we cannot even try to do an exhaustive study of the topic, but will concentrate on three major aspects:

2.1 Human pedagogy of being close to the children;

2.2 Pedagogy of the educational team and the educational community;

2.3 Pedagogy of creativity and project.

These ideas – project, creativity, team – are not found in the writings or in the talks of Fr Champagnat. They are our ideas, not his. But they can help us to understand and to explain what he said, what he did, how he lived, when he was training his Brothers to be authentic educators.

## 2.1 Human pedagogy of being close to the children

Here is an important text on this subject:

To educate children well, one must love them and love them all equally. We love them, if we dedicate ourselves entirely to their instruction and utilise every means suggested by an industrious zeal, to form them to virtue and piety.

In this love, we never forget that children are feeble creatures who need to be treated with kindness, charity and mercy; and that they need to be formed and instructed with perfect patience.

Our love leads us to bear uncomplainingly their defects, their indocility and even their ingratitude; to propose to ourselves, in the care that we bestow on them, only supernatural motives, such as the glory of God, the good of religion and the salvation of those tender children (Furet, 1989, p.538).

This is the golden rule of Champagnat's pedagogy: 'To educate children well, one must love them and love them all equally.' Some educational experts of today would shy away from the word 'love'. Psychoanalysts point out the ambiguity of this relationship between adult and young person. There are all sorts of possible results according to the situation: excessive dependence on the part of the very young, Oedipus complex, Electra complex, varying degrees of pedophilia more or less hidden... and above all, the school is a necessary antidote to the home, where unchecked affectivity can lead to egotism. The school should be the place where the child can go from the closed society of the home to the society of the world at large, where in civic, economic and other matters one must be more open to others. So 'love the children' – yes, but be careful! Luckily, Champagnat adds the words: 'Love them all equally...'. The word 'all' avoids all that certain modern educational experts or psychoanalysts would see as harmful consequences for the psycho-affective development of the child or the adolescent. It does not imply a one-to-one relationship which could be pathological, but an interpersonal relationship open to the group and the community. For us as Christians, this is getting close to charity, if it has not already reached that stage. Champagnat further clarifies his meaning when he adds the word 'equally'. Equality is a democratic virtue, but also a Christian one. God and his Son Jesus have no favourites. By an 'equal love' for all his pupils, however lacking in docility or gratitude they

are, the Marist Brother shows all of them the love which God has for them.

This is what Champagnat wants when he adds: 'To love the children is to devote oneself entirely to teaching them.' The teacher must use an 'industrious zeal' – or as we might say nowadays 'a spirit of initiative, of looking for the right way' since 'the children are weak beings.' The great virtues for a teacher must be goodness, charity, patience, readiness to put up with everything. A high ideal, and one which is almost too high if not underpinned by 'supernatural intentions': the glory of God, that is the spreading of His love, and the spiritual salvation of the young. So we have a human educational programme, very close to the children, in the sense that God has made Himself close to us in his Son Jesus Christ, in order to save us and make us share in His glory. We might say also that it is a divine programme, a programme of incarnation and redemption, in which suffering and joy are intimately mixed in the daily exercise of our 'beautiful profession'.

This is the main general principle of Champagnat's educational philosophy. Rising from it we have the concrete attitudes and modes of behaviour necessary for daily life in the classroom with the pupils. To make it clearer, we can divide them into two categories: 1. extremes to be avoided and 2. positive attitudes to be adopted. Here we touch, very rapidly, on an area dealing with the pedagogy of teaching, for we are at the heart of the famous 'teacher/pupil relationship' which has a positive or a negative effect on the learning process, the area of motivation. There is a lot of discussion of this topic in educational circles today for, in fact, no one can say why, how, or even when the pupils are 'motivated'. Fr Champagnat was too busy with the urgent need for teaching to give much time to these largely theoretical questions.

*Extremes to be avoided.*

Let us point out a few of the main extremes that Champagnat, following a book called 'La Conduite des Ecoles chretiennes', told his Brothers

- no loss of temper, no nicknames, no undue familiarity;
- no corporal punishment.

The 1838 edition of the book goes on to say:

Care should be taken not to strike the pupils with the hand, the foot, or even with the pointer; it is unbecoming and lacking in dignity for a teacher to pull the nose of the pupil, or his or her ears, or his or her hair, or to strike or push him or her roughly, or to pull him or her by the arms, make him or her trace the sign of the cross with his or her tongue or kiss the feet of others, or make him or her stand with outstretched arms. ... It is equally forbidden to shut the pupil in a cupboard or small room alone, to detain the pupil after school .... To make the pupil wear a gag, or a dunce's hat, or other such, can only show that the teacher is inexperienced or incompetent.... (Zind (1) p.417)

In this area, Champagnat goes further than the 'Conduite', forbidding the punishment of making the children kneel with joined hands at the door or in the middle of the class, and also forbids the use of the 'fertile' (a leather strap which, according to Zind, 'produces more noise than pain', since the business end was wrapped in thread or cloth!)

We will conclude this list of extremes to be avoided by giving three very wise general principles:

- no serious punishment is to be given without taking time to think it over and to discuss it with the headmaster;
- no excluding a child from class (we will come back to this later), except in case of immorality which might spread to others;
- no excessive or finicky supervision.

#### *Positive attitudes to be adopted*

As opposed to these extremes to be avoided, what are the positive attitudes to be cultivated? In the first place, as a matter of daily practice, the important thing is presence, without going to extremes in supervision, as we said above. However, Champagnat insisted that his Brothers should be careful to avoid faults, bad behaviour, and violence among the pupils. They had to watch them in class, in the yard, in going with them to church, or in the streets at the end of lessons. But he insists always on the Brothers being present and giving good example.

To educate and form a child, one must establish a claim to his respect and obedience. Now, the claims which a child recognises and understands best are virtue, good example, competence and the paternal feelings displayed towards him. Education is especially the fruit of good example. This is because virtue reinforces authority; because it is natural to man to imitate what he sees done; and because actions carry more power to convince and persuade than do words and instructions. A child takes in a lot more through the eyes than the ears; it is through watching his parents or masters work, that he learns the various skills and acquires a trade; likewise, it is especially through seeing good done and through receiving good example, that he learns to practise virtue and to live as a Christian. A Brother, who is pious, regular, charitable, patient, devoted, courteous and faithful to all his duties, is constantly giving catechism classes. By his good example, and without even adverting to the fact, he instils into the children, piety, obedience, charity, love of work and all the Christian virtues (Furet, 1989, p.538).

As a comment on this text of Marcellin Champagnat, I could offer you a text I saw in October 1990, in the entry hall of a primary school in Quebec; it was rather long, so I just quote a few lines:

Every child learns from example.... if the child is surrounded by hostility, he or she learns to be aggressive... if the child is surrounded by tolerance, he or she learns to be patient... by approval, the child learns to accept himself or herself for what he or she is... by friendship, the child learns to love life.

With his 19th century wisdom and common sense, Champagnat has told us what the modern experts in childhood studies are not discovering, but rediscovering. Is it so astonishing to find, among the educational attitudes recommended to the Marist Brothers such things as trust, encouragement, zeal, and not least, prayer? In order not to dwell too long on this aspect, I would simply like to give two extracts from the 'Conduite' quoted by Zind (1):

The teacher should not give all his attention to correcting the faults of the pupils. He should be more inclined to rewarding them when they deserve it. There are so many ways of doing this. A simple look of satisfaction can revive the child's courage and bear more fruit in a school than a whole series of punishments... A word of encouragement brings joy to the

heart of a child, a child who would be crushed by a repellent look (p.149). ... Rewards, whatever their material value, bring about good results in a well-run school, provided that they are given out properly, always because they are deserved, not just at random (p.75).

The 'Conduite' gives five types of reward:

- Privileges;
- Pictures, prayer books, other articles of some use to the child;
- Medals and ribbons;
- Good conduct marks;
- Notes of satisfaction.

Concluding this section on Champagnat's teaching philosophy, so full of humanity, I want to give as an example the story of the young Jean Baptiste Berne, so well told by Br Gabriel Michel in the second volume of his *Né en 89* chapter 19:

Jean Baptiste was an orphan, and lived like a young savage. Fr Champagnat, helped by a few good people, came to help the boy's mother when she was dying in extreme want after being abandoned by the father. After the death of his mother, Jean Baptiste was not able to live with the children of the charitable neighbours who took him in. So Fr Champagnat turned him over to the Brothers. Br Jean Baptiste Furet, who wrote the biography of the Founder, tells us: 'Used to a beggar's life and to being free to follow all his bad instincts, he could not put up with the ordered life of a school... He ran away a number of times, preferring to beg his bread and live in want rather than giving in to the discipline in a school... The Brothers lost heart, and finally asked the Founder to send the boy away and leave him to his unhappy lot... They said: 'We are wasting our time with this child, and sooner or later, we will have to send him away'. Fr Champagnat encouraged the Brothers to have patience, for a number of months. In the end, Jean Baptiste Berne changed completely. He became well behaved, docile, 'as pious as an angel'. After he made his First Communion, he asked if he could become a Brother. 'He was a pious Brother, regular, obedient, and he died a holy death, aged twenty one, in the arms of Fr Champagnat, after thanking him for all he had done for him' (Furet, J. (Frem), 1989, pp.524-525).

After hearing this story, we can better understand when Champagnat told his Brothers:

Take particular care of the poor children, the most ignorant and the dullest; show such children a lot of kindness; ask them often how they are; and make it clear on all occasions, that you esteem and love them all the more for the fact that fortune has not smiled on them nor has nature favoured them. Poor children are to a school, what the sick are to a house — a subject of blessing and prosperity, when they are viewed with the eyes of faith and honoured as the suffering members of Jesus Christ (Furet, 1989, p.507).

## 2.2 Pedagogy: Educational team and/or community

My starting point is a paragraph from the Spiritual Testament of Marcellin Champagnat, drawn up a few days before his death on the 6th June 1840:

I beg of you, my 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. Love one another as Jesus Christ has loved you. Be of one heart and one mind. May it be said of the Little Brothers of Mary as of the first Christians: 'See how they love one another' (Marist Brothers of the Schools, 1986, p.140).

You could rightly draw my attention to the fact that this advice, very spiritual as it is, was given to a religious community, a community of Marist Brothers, and that now in many countries, the Brothers in the schools are small in number. However, in my opinion, they would seem to apply also to the lay people dedicated to education in a Marist school. In the first place, Champagnat saw the religious community of Marists as a praying and a working community. The first Rule of Life that he gave his Brothers in 1837, after twenty years of reflection and experiment, is a collection of rules for a spiritual life and for a life of work in education. So the phrase 'May you always have but one heart and one mind' means not only the fraternal charity that exists between religious living together, but also the spirit of collaboration and solidarity between members of the same educational team in a primary school, high school, boarding school. The same is true of all the partners in the educational work of the school, whether administration,

maintenance, teaching or direction and including the parents and the pupils themselves.

When Champagnat reminds us of the words of Christ: 'Love one another', he reminds us that, as for the pupils, as we have seen above, understanding, mutual help, devotedness to one another, service of one another are essential for the dynamism of what we call the educational community. The way that Champagnat tried, all through his life, to govern his community, shows us that he tried his hardest within the parameters of the mentality of his age, to build up educational teams and communities. A few examples will suffice to show this.

Seeing his subjects increase, Father Champagnat thought he should give them a more organised life, conducive to living in community. He knew that he couldn't always be with them himself, but he saw the importance of not leaving them to their own resources. His desire was to have a Director in charge of them whose role would be to lead them, to see that the Rule was observed, and to correct those who breached it or who committed other exterior faults. To make obedience and submission less burdensome to them, he would let them choose their own Director. He therefore arranged a secret ballot and each one registered his written vote. Father Champagnat publicly counted these and proclaimed Brother John-Mary, Director of the community. He had been there the longest, and he secured the most votes (Furet, 1989, p.66).

This was in 1818, barely a year and a half after the foundation. Champagnat already wanted to give the young community a certain amount of autonomy, and not only that, but to allow them, in a democratic fashion, to choose their own leader. Later, when he came to live with his Brothers, he left the Director 'full liberty to act; far from hampering or diminishing his authority, he strove to strengthen and augment it' (Furet, 1989, p.75). Later, in 1822, in answer to his prayers, in a most peculiar way, Mary sent him a good-sized group of future novices, but the house was too small and too poor.

Marcellin, therefore, did not think it right to impose this burden on his Community, without consulting the principal Brothers. Next day, he explained to the assembled postulants: 'I can't promise yet to accept you. Before I can tell you what I must do, I need to seek the advice of the Brothers. All I can do is allow you to stay for a few days; but since your eventual

admission is far from certain, those who wish to withdraw now, can do so'. At the same time, he wrote to the Brothers of Bourg-Argental and of Saint-Sauveur and requested them to report to him at Easter, which was ten days away. They did so; he gathered them several times in his room, and explained to them the designs of God, which seemed clear for the burgeoning Congregation, in this matter. He gave it as his opinion that subjects visibly sent by Providence, should be accepted. Since the Brothers were all of the same opinion, it was decided that the eight postulants should be admitted and their recruiter also. However, they were to be subjected to special trials in order to test their vocation (Furet, 1989, p.97).

So from the beginning, Champagnat worked towards having his community organised in a spirit of autonomy and of responsibility accepted by all. This is what we are looking for in our educational teams and communities. Later on, even when the congregation became more numerous in its schools, he always acted with this 'leadership' oriented idea, to use the modern term. He went even further; his chief concern was always to train directors whom he saw as true leaders in both the spiritual and the educational fields.

During the two months' vacation time, he delivered frequent talks to the Brothers Director. In these, he dealt with the government of the houses, temporal administration and school management, going into the minutest detail on the virtues needed by a good Superior and how he can acquire them, similar detail was given on the duties of a teacher and of a Director and how to fulfil them (Furet, 1989, pp.450-451).

He made no claim to be the sole possessor of the truth. He listened to what his Brothers had to say. We could say that he had an innate sense of communication:

In these instructions, the Founder allowed the Brothers every opportunity to air their difficulties, to raise their doubts and to discuss any practical problems in the discharge of their duties. The Brothers made good use of this freedom, each one offering his comments and revealing his feelings and his preoccupations about numerous aspects of administration or government of the house; he was asked how best to conform to the Rule and to the spirit of the Institute in particular circumstances, and what a Brother Director would do in regard to the infinite number of matters he was called on to treat and resolve.

He often invited the principal Brothers to sit with his Council, and took practically no action without seeking their opinion. He saw a number of advantages flowing from involving the Brothers in the affairs of the Institute and from consulting them on the Rules which he was drawing up and on the teaching method he wanted adopted. This strategy, he believed, was a sure means of forming their spirit, of straightening out their ideas, of training their judgment, of widening their experience and of teaching them how to evaluate matters before dealing with them intelligently and successfully.

There were times when, after a debate in Council on the pros and cons of some matter or some line of action, he left it to a particular Brother to follow up the matter or to take action, trusting him to judge carefully the best course to adopt. However, once that Brother's task was completed, he was expected to give an account of how he had carried it out. Then the Founder would praise and approve what he judged had been well performed; he would draw attention to a means that could have been used to avoid a problem, to overcome an obstacle or smooth over disagreements; or he might simply point out that another particular approach would have succeeded better [Furet, 1989, p.452].

Is there any need for me to point out that what we have here is all the ingredients of good leadership on the part of a school leadership team: consultation, discussion, putting forward of various points of view, delegation ... not to mention report on what has been done and evaluation in view of better work in the future? This includes a constant interaction of theory and practice. More than a century later, in a quite different cultural context, we can find here a practical model which can serve us well in the orientation and functioning of our modern educational communities. And now we come to the third aspect, which will reinforce this way of looking at Champagnat's thinking.

### *2.3 Pedagogy of creativity and project*

In my view, Champagnat is essentially a man of creativity and of project. All through his life, his creativity led to a project, and the project in turn blossomed into more creativity, in a positive interaction which dynamised both his spiritual life and his educational work. His creativity is already evident in his early life, when, before he found out that God was calling him to the

priesthood, he was already preparing for his life as a farmer. His father gave him some young sheep, and with them he began his own sheep-rearing and started his first commercial venture, his first project.

God brought him to use this aptitude for initiative in his priestly ministry. At the Major Seminary, with a small group of future priests like himself, he got the idea of a 'Society of Mary' to bring the Good News to the people in the country areas. To this group initiative, he brought his own personal inventiveness. If the young country people were to be able to find out 'how much God loves them', they need education, and in particular, they must learn to read and write. For Marcellin, the future Society of Mary had to have a branch of teaching Brothers alongside the Fathers, Sisters and lay people envisaged by the others. And the others told him: 'All right - you look after the Brothers!'

He accepted the challenge and immediately his creativity got to work. Only months after the start of his ministry at Lavalla, the spiritual poverty of a dying boy demonstrated to him the urgent need to begin the foundation of the Institute of teaching Brothers, and on 2nd January 1817, he brought together his first two disciples. From that moment on, his projects followed one another more and more rapidly as the needs were seen, and his creativity developed to such a degree that some confreres and friends could not follow it, and thought him mad. This area is so vast that it would take too long to cover it adequately, so I will give only the main points of his work in the field of education.

He was only a junior curate in a small, poor country parish. He had no money. His followers were too many for the small house he bought for them a couple of hundred metres from the church in Lavalla. There were too many of them, and they had no resources either, either in money or in kind. However, the needs were pressing and more and more demands were being made on the Brothers to open small country schools, demands which they could not meet. There was only one solution: to build a novitiate house big enough and well enough planned to be used as a Training School for the Brothers who would teach in the country schools.

With money he borrowed from fellow priests, he bought up some property on the banks of the river Gier - no flat meadows to build houses on, just woods and above all, rocks and steep cliffs. There were a few more or less abandoned buildings along the river bank which had been used by local cloth workers and metal workers. No



matter – the project had been conceived in the heart and in the head of Marcellin Champagnat, not without much praying over it and, as we have seen, asking the opinion of the Brothers, whom he consulted on all important occasions. Once the project was thought up and put into effect, it led to a new burst of creativity. The young Brothers were divided into teams of builders' labourers. Professionals helped him with the plans and overseeing the work. They lived in an old building and heard Mass in the wood. The bell for calling them to their duties was hung from the branch of a tree. The lack of all sorts of things only made Champagnat and his young Brothers more inventive, more creative. The rocks were broken down, the walls rose, and soon the project came to fruition in a fine big building, rising almost like a miracle in a place which a few months before had been seen as wild and inhospitable.

The Hermitage was the result of Champagnat's essentially inventive and creative nature, nourished by the grace of God, which came to him through the intercession of Mary, his Ordinary Resource. No rock, no obstacle, either human or material, ever put him off. The rest of his life was to be a series of projects which his creativity would bring about. Other Hermitages were to spring up in the spiritual and educational fields, and again he had rocks to break: jealousy, petty-minded opposition, all that mean human nature could bring against him. The growth and development of his young Congregation brought his creativity into play in a thousand ways, in a thousand circumstances. His priestly confreres did not always understand him, and he had to be his own advocate with the parish priest of St Chamond, with the Archbishop of Lyons and even with Fr Colin, Superior General of the Society of Mary who was more a mystic than a practical man, who did not always see the practical side of the educational apostolate which Champagnat had in view for the Brothers' branch of the Society.

Against all this narrow-minded lack of comprehension, Champagnat multiplied his meetings, his contacts, his proposals. In the end, his foundation not only grew itself, but drew to itself two other similar foundations, the Brothers of St Paul Trois Chateaux in the Drome, and of Viviers in the Ardèche. These two amalgamations were also, in their own way, a victory for his enterprising spirit which had been hindered by the French government of the period, particularly under the reigns of Charles X and Louis Philippe, as we saw briefly above.

Like many young men of the time, the young Brothers were threatened with conscription, to do military service for a minimum of six years. This long period in the army brought the risk of a loss of vocation. So to avoid this, steps had to be taken to obtain legal recognition for the Congregation, and for that, Champagnat had to become a political negotiator. As we have seen, he made frequent trips to Paris, to meet the Minister of Public Education, Mr. Salvandy, or his officials. He had to develop files, dossiers, lists of statistics, reports. He was helped by a number of friends in political circles - but to no avail. While he did not get the required recognition, he avoided the difficulty by the amalgamation mentioned above, since these two Congregations had already been recognised by Louis Philippe's predecessor, Charles X.

You will say that these last two examples have nothing to do with educational theory. Agreed, and I will go on to mention two aspects more directly concerned with our subject. The first I will call by the modern term 'Sandwich Courses' involving teaching during the holidays. Br Avit tells us in his Annals:

At the time when the Brothers came to the Hermitage, the summer holidays were, as they had been before, two months long. Fr Champagnat used this time to teach the Brothers what they needed to know for their primary school work, how they should develop the best ways of keeping discipline in their classes. He used the time particularly to train the Brothers in the virtues of their state of life, and to study the Rule with them, the Rule he had given to the Congregation. To start them off on teaching, he made the more capable give sample lessons, something he also did himself. He made them show the others the ten pages of writing they had to complete during the year, and samples of their end of the year work; in this way, he got some measure of their progress. He also set up committees, in which he took part, to examine the work of the young Brothers and the postulants (Avit).

Br Jean Baptiste Furet, the official historian of the early years, gives other interesting details:

In order to stimulate the Brothers to love study and to encourage them to vie with one another in this matter, during the holidays, he often required them to write compositions; moreover for many years, that is while their numbers were small, he made them sit for a formal examination in all sub-

jects to be taught, making an exact record of each one's results so that, the following year, he could check their progress. He wanted the Brothers to be adept in the different kinds of handwriting. Those who taught the First and Second Classes had to write their own models and were not allowed to use ready-made ones. It was also a rule that each Brother bring at least ten samples of his own work in this regard, to the annual retreat. His aim was to stir up emulation and to evaluate each one's progress.

The Brothers Director were likewise trained to a love of work, of orderliness and of accuracy; and they were formed in sound administration of finance and temporal matters; as a means to these ends, Marcellin not only inspected the account books personally, but established a competition for excellence in keeping them. A commission consisting of the principal Brothers was given the task of examining all these books and of evaluating them on the basis of three criteria: regularity of entries, fidelity to the details laid down by Rule and custom in the Institute, and beauty of presentation. A list was then drawn up in order of merit and was handed over to Father Champagnat.

In addition, to prevent anyone becoming careless during the year or postponing study and preparation for the holiday exams till the last months, he arranged assemblies each Term. The subjects for teaching, to be treated at these, were indicated in a circular letter and each Brother had to prepare them carefully, even doing so by written exercises. He himself was responsible for most of the instructions at the assemblies; this involved long and painful journeys for him, but no cost was too great when his goal was to give the Brothers a love of work and develop their professional skill (Furet, 1989, pp.422-423).

The second and last aspect of his creativity in the field of education that I want to draw attention to is the question of the reading method; the adoption of this method, and the decisions about the dress of the Brothers which brought about the great crisis of 1829, a crisis which could have been fatal for the young Congregation. Again we quote from Br Jean Baptiste Furet:

These changes in costume were followed by a modification of teaching method. Hitherto, in teaching the children to read, the Brothers had followed the system in vogue, spelling the words according to the old pronunciation of the consonants.

Father Champagnat, in fact, was convinced that this method increased the difficulties of teaching to read, and he adopted the new way of pronouncing the consonants, doing away with the old style of spelling. The Brothers were not used to that way of teaching reading and unanimously rejected this new idea.

Having explained the indisputable advantages of the new method and pointed out the shortcomings of the old one, Father Champagnat, seeing that the Brothers were not convinced by his arguments, put to them the idea of trying out the new method. When they had given it a genuine trial, over a year, they would know from experience, he suggested, whether it was the preferable method and a definitive decision could be made at the next annual holidays.

Meanwhile, the Founder, distrustful of his personal views, used the interval to consult widely on the question. Those consulted, after careful examination of the question, were in unanimous support of the new pronunciation of consonants, as being more rational and better calculated to speed up the progress of the children. The Brothers, who had reluctantly agreed to try out the new method, did not really give it a fair trial, and were only partially satisfied with it. Father Champagnat, in due course, called a meeting to decide on the issue. One after another of them arrived with a host of objections, which they canvassed all the more vigorously for their belief that they were perfectly justified.

Marcellin listened to the objections and to the remarks made by each, then showed the irrefutable superiority of the new method before deciding that it must be adopted. It was pointed out by one Brother that nearly all found the method defective. How, he asked, could it therefore be considered better than the other? In any case, could they adopt a practice which the majority opposed?

Marcellin answered him in these terms: 'Brother, there are circumstances in which votes should be weighed rather than counted. You Brothers Director, who don't have to teach the lower classes, and are moreover prejudiced against this method, have given it neither serious study nor fair trial. The small number of Brothers who have put it into effect, speak highly of it and don't complain of the difficulties you refer to. On the contrary, they point out its superiority and capacity for accelerating the progress of the children. Competent and

experienced people whom I have consulted, express that view too. Therefore, it is a wise course we follow in adopting this method against the majority opinion, given that it is a prejudiced majority and one judging without full knowledge of the facts' (Furet, 1989, pp.162-163).

This example leads me to a general conclusion. On the matter of reading, as on many other points which I have not touched on, Fr Champagnat would have undertaken nothing, and would have achieved nothing, if he had not been a man of God and a man devoted to education of the young. He would not have been the Founder that we know. Today we would not speak of him, nor of his work. Certainly he was a man of deep faith and God gave him strength, but he must, together with his Brothers, have reflected much, worked much, suffered much - all for the good of society, and, above all, that the young be good Christians and good citizens.

Our aim in the field of education is the same. We want society to be a place where people can live together, and that is the reason we want to form good Christians and good citizens. To that end, we want to follow in the footsteps of Champagnat in his work in education. Happily for us, he has not laid down strict rules of method, nor a system well marked with signposts. Following him, we can use our own creativity, our own initiative, our own dynamism. Like him, working as a team, an educational community, supported by Mary, our Ordinary Resource, we can go forward, we can form projects and set them going with courage and boldness. What a great journey, what a beautiful perspective, is open to us if we but want it!

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