**Marcellin Champagnat and the Young Montagne**

Life of blessed Marcellin Joseph Benedict Champagnat
Br John-Baptist Furet - 1856

**Father Champagnat founds the Institute of the Little Brothers of Mary. Calling his first followers; the way of life he gives them.**

Father Champagnat's priestly duties and the rich harvest of souls he reaped, in no way distracted him from his plan to establish a group of Brothers. It was a preoccupation that was always with him: in the midst of the most absorbing tasks; travelling; off visiting his country parishioners whom he found sadly ignorant; teaching the children catechism; or at prayer, especially the mighty sacrifice of the Mass. When he spoke with God, he pleaded persistently for his plan, with the frequent avowal:

"Here I am, Lord. I come to do your will."[[1]](#footnote-1) There were however times when he was overcome by fear of illusion, and earnestly prayed: "If my inspirited does not come from you[[2]](#footnote-2), my God, if it is not conducive to your glory and the salvation of souls, drive it far from me." These misgivings, springing in fact from his deep humility, did not deter him all the same, from preparing to implement his plan. It was on his very first day[[3]](#footnote-3) at La Valla that his eyes fell on a young man who seemed to him just the one to be the first candidate for the Society he had in mind. The youth came looking for him one night, to hear a sick person's confession.

Father Champagnat took the opportunity to say a few words to him about God and the emptiness of earthly pursuits. He urged the young man to practise virtue and sounded him out on his career hopes. The priest was so impressed by his answers and his good disposition, that on the very next day he visited him at home[[4]](#footnote-4), bringing him a copy of "The Christian's Manual"[[5]](#footnote-5).

The young man, John-Mary Granjon, hesitated about taking it, on the grounds that he couldn't read. Father Champagnat insisted, saying that he could use it to learn to read and that, if John-Mary wished, he would himself give him lessons. Shortly afterwards, the priest stressed the advantages of coming to live at La Valla, where he could see him more often and give him more regular lessons. John Mary therefore came to live not far from the church, and, with Father Champagnat as guide, he not only learnt to read and write but became a model of piety and virtue for the whole parish.

At this stage, something happened in a clearly providential manner, to dispel Father Champagnat's misgivings and make him decide to go about setting up the Society of Brothers without further delay. He was summoned to a hamlet, one day, in order to hear a sick boy's[[6]](#footnote-6) confession. As usual, he set out at once. Before proceeding with the confession, he put a few questions to make sure that he was sufficiently instructed to receive the sacraments. To his great surprise, the child knew nothing about the principal mysteries and, in fact, didn't even know whether God existed. Greatly upset at finding a twelve-year-old[[7]](#footnote-7) in such ignorance, and fearing that he would die in such a state, he sat down beside him to teach him the mysteries and truths necessary for salvation. It took him two hours for the instruction and confession. It was extremely difficult to impart, even the most fundamental truths, to a child who was so sick that he scarcely grasped what was being said.

Having heard his confession, and helped him make several acts of love of God and of contrition as preparation for death, the priest left him, to minister to a sick person in an adjoining house. As he went out, he asked after the sick youth, to be told by his tearful parents that he had died a moment after the priest's departure. Then he felt an upsurge of joy at having been there so opportunely, but it was mingled with a shudder of dread at the danger run by the poor boy, whom he had perhaps just snatched from the gates of hell. He went home overwhelmed by those feelings and saying over and over to himself: “How many children are in the same predicament every day, exposed to the same dangers because they have no-one to teach them the truths of faith!" Then he became obsessed, with overwhelming intensity, by the thought of founding a Society of Brothers to obviate such disasters through the Christian education of children. The result was that he went off to see John-Mary Granjon and tell him everything that he planned to do. He explained to him all the good that his projected Institute was capable of achieving and asked him if he would like to be part of it and dedicate himself to the education of children. The young man, who had listened with rapt attention, said in reply: "I am in your hands; do what you will with me. I shall consider myself very happy indeed to devote my strength, my health and even my life, to the Christian instruction of little children, if you believe I am capable." Delighted and edified at this answer, Father Champagnat urged, in turn:

"Courage! God will bless you and the Blessed Virgin will bring you companions." That promise soon had its fulfilment, for, on the Saturday 8 of that same week, a youth presented himself offering to share his way of life.

1. Ps. 39,9; Heb. 10,9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. He had developed a moral certitude that the Society of Brothers should be founded and in his 1837 statement of resignation (OME, doc. 152, p. 339), he will recall that he had been commissioned by other future Marists to assume responsibility for the Brothers' branch. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the second time, the author speaks of "first day". [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Father Bourdin says, in this regard: "First Sunday of October, Brother John-Mary - a good man - came to seek help for a sick person at La Rive (hamlet of La Valla) - met him there" (OME, doc. 166 [1], p. 437). Also, LPC 2, p. 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A collection containing the New Testament, the Psalms, the Imitation of Christ and a few prayers, including the Office of the Blessed Virgin. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John-Baptist Montagne, living in the hamlet of Les Palais, beyond Le Bessat (OM 4, p. 220). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In one of his conferences, Brother Francis refers to a dying young man whose death spurs on Father Champagnat's zeal, but he puts his age at seventeen. That adolescent was born May l0th, 1800 and died October 28th, 1816. He was therefore sixteen and a half. (Cf. Parish Archives of La Valla, Catholic Register). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)