



Marcellin is ill

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This simple meditation was born out of the experience we have been living through in the last few months. The pandemic situation, the global crisis, the multitude of the sick and dead all over the world... have forced us all to take stock and change our way of looking at things.

Every day we hear news of people who are sick or dying, of acquaintances, friends, relatives, and brothers of our Institute who are infected... And this gives rise to intense feelings in us, at least for me, that are not always easy to manage. We become concerned about our own health, that of our brothers and of those we love. Each in our own way, we are living with experiences of uncertainty, fear, and disorientation. Maybe we ourselves have had to adjust to illness or frailty.

We can also be haunted, as I have been, by the desire to be more active in helping victims and those who are suffering. The witness of the dedication of so many health workers, of so many priests, men and women religious, of many Marists throughout the world, brothers and laypeople, is very powerful, courageous and challenging. Am I being over-prudent? Perhaps the best thing to do is to simply follow the advice of health professionals about prevention? Or rather, perhaps now is the moment to be more daring and get involved to help those most in need today?

This indecision stays with me, and, while I have been trying to “let go” of some of my old security blankets and adopt a new stance, questions keep coming back to me, prodding me to sharpen my focus, such as: How do I face this dilemma from the standpoint of my Marist vocation? Is there a “Marist” way of living through a crisis? How did the first brothers deal with suffering and loss? In particular, how did they react when they were told that Father Champagnat, founder, father, mentor, friend, was ill? And finally, how did Marcellin himself cope with his illness?

Maybe this different perspective can help us - at least it is a help to me. I have always been fascinated by the scene, so often recounted, of Marcellin ill, lying in bed, aware of the discouragement of his followers and the problems of the congregation, and, then, of how, leaning on

the arm of Brother Stanislaus and making a supreme effort, he struggled up and entered the community room.

The Brothers were probably not used to seeing Marcellin in pain, clearly ill and weak. But the sight of him in that state and yet still on his feet maybe changed something in the history and future of the fledgling Institute.

The desire to put this question to myself and all of us is the reason for this article: Why not contemplate Marcellin Champagnat from this uncommon perspective? We are so used to looking at his qualities, his audacity, courage, and dynamism... perhaps now is a good time to look at another facet of the Founder: how he handled illness, weakness, and pain.

Writing these words is a way for me to share my own experience at this moment; more than a study at depth, I want this article to be a meditation. I invite all of us to stop and think about Marcellin in a way we are not used to: as a weak, ill, and vulnerable person.

The key to reading this reflection is found in the Document of our XXII General Chapter, when it invites us to “experience our vulnerability as a source of fruitfulness and freedom”.¹ This idea is integral to our considerations here, as we try to examine how Marcellin managed his experience of vulnerability and illness.

Do I, and do we, really experience moments of crisis, weakness, or frailty as in any way ‘fruitful’? Is this feeling apparent or becoming apparent in the current pandemic, or in times when I or those close to me fall ill? What are the ‘fruits’ I can see in myself of this supposedly fruitful vulnerability?

This is a reflection that will not go away. Many people, maybe ourselves or someone close to us, have experienced how a serious illness, an accident, or a personal crisis has changed their lives, their priorities, their whole sense of purpose. I remember and still have strong feelings about how my mother’s illness and death affected me and changed me in some ways a few years ago.

When we feel and accept ourselves as diminished and needy, fundamental questions arise and paradoxically we can become the richer for it, more aware and free: free from self-images and pretence, from a false sense of control and self-assurance. Above all, free from the danger of being self-centred, or self-referentially as Pope Francis has so often repeated.²

Many serious, rigorous historical studies have treated the apostolic, institutional, political, church and existential crises that Marcellin lived through. Without a doubt, they provide a valuable source of knowledge and an interesting insight into his growth as a person and his spiritual journey. Yet, as life teaches each of us, the presence of our all-merciful God often makes itself felt more when we are or feel “vulnerable and hurt”.³

This is why, then, we will here focus especially on illness and on how Marcellin dealt with it. Pedagogically, I will proceed in three steps: focusing on his relationship with the sick and his preferential care for them; especially his attentiveness to brothers who were unwell; and finally, reflecting on the Founder himself when he was sick and suffering.

¹ Message of the XXII General Chapter, section on ‘Our Vocation as Brothers’.

² Francesc Torralba explains it very well in his “Bergoglio Dictionary” Ed. St Paul: “When faced with our self-referential attitudes or a conscience that seals us off from the outside world, Pope Francis insists that we have to come out of ourselves, to move beyond ourselves in unfamiliar ways and with unknown consequences, opening ourselves to others and being ready to listen to and care for them”.

³ *Water from the Rock*, 57: “All the people and events of life offer an opportunity to encounter our merciful God. Perhaps we meet God most closely when we are vulnerable and hurting.”

1. Marcellin, “Carer” of the sick

The sociologist Alain Touraine recently said that the crisis of the pandemic and of Covid 19 is going to bring about some interesting changes in our society, among them the discovery of “a whole range of caregivers”.⁴ Certainly, care as a life-giving attitude, and in particular care of the sick, are powerful rallying cries in today’s world.

A look at the way Father Champagnat showed a special care for the sick may offer something fresh to this meditation.

Such behaviour was certainly not unique or original to Marcellin. Among the tasks proper to the priests of his time (and always), the care of the poor and the sick was and remains a priority for pastors.

In Marcellin’s case such attention and care were undoubtedly important throughout his life. We have several testimonies of how, as a seminarian, he included visiting and accompanying the sick in his vacation activities. “He carefully organised his spiritual life during those periods of rest: prayer, fasting, visiting the sick, giving catechism classes to the young.”⁵

This sensitivity, which he already showed as a young man, and which he also displayed during the different stages of his formation,⁶ was intensified when he was ordained a priest and placed in charge of pastoral care in La Valla.

And even though he shared this trait with other priests, the testimonies we have about Marcellin speak of his exceptional zeal and thoughtfulness to children out of school, the sick, the elderly living in solitude or those suffering from neglect.

Such charity would even lead, later in his life, to the Hermitage becoming a place of welcome and residence for the elderly or orphans of the area.⁷ Without a doubt, the Founder’s compassion and generosity were born of the love of God which filled his heart.

Father Champagnat, as described in his biography, “was always ready and willing to replace (the parish priest) on sick calls to distant hamlets, or in other of the more demanding priestly duties “.⁸

Perhaps that is why this sensitivity and attentiveness of our Founder has remained with us today as part of our spiritual inheritance and as a Marist “style” of apostolate and immer-

⁴ I believe that we are entering a new type of society: a service society, as economists say, but with a difference, a society where people serve one another. This crisis will raise the status of carers” (Alain Touraine, interviewed in the newspaper El País, March 29, 2020).

⁵ *Life*, Jean Baptiste Furet, p. 20. In a list of holiday resolutions, we find: “... I shall visit any sick people in the neighbourhood or anyone needing my advice.” p. 22.

⁶ “He even made good use of recreation time. He spent it talking over spiritual matters with fellow students or in acts of charity, such as attending to the sick, decorating altars ... “ (*Life*, p. 19).

⁷ From the beginning, Marist schools also took in students who were very needy. Brother André Lanfrey’s study on boarding students and pupils, in *Marist Notebooks* n° 36, pp. 75 ff, is very interesting.

⁸ *Life*, Jean Baptiste Furet, p. 37 “As soon as he heard that someone was sick, he was off to see him. The harshness of the season, rain, snow, nothing would stop him: he braved every obstacle to bring the help of religion to dying persons.” p.53.

sion in the realities that surround us:

“God is revealed to us through those we meet.

Young and old people, members of our families and communities, the refugee and the prisoner, the sick person and the caregiver, our co-worker and our neighbour, all are mirrors reflecting the God of life and of love.”⁹

In this way, we can share or even recreate in our days something of that spirituality of Marcellin, a spirituality of the compassionate heart, of sensitivity towards people and their concrete problems, of discovering the presence of God in all circumstances, all places and all people and, even more explicitly, in children and those who are suffering.

We speak, therefore, about an incarnate spirituality, a truly apostolic spirituality, a Marian spirituality that draws on how Mary cared for the needs of all: she went in haste to help her cousin, she interceded for the bride and groom who had run out of wine, and she stood by the cross where the one suffering in that difficult moment was her dear son.¹⁰

It is not our charism or our specific apostolate as Marists to care for the sick. But it is part of our sensitivity and our way of living the Gospel to give priority to the poor and the least.

In our days, the Chapter call to Marists throughout the world to be “the face and hands of God’s tender mercy”¹¹ echoes the passion of Marcellin and his concrete commitment.

The famous words of the Founder, “If (all the sweat) were gathered together from my treks in that valley, I think there would be enough to take a bath!” are best understood when we know the real reason and sensitivity behind all these efforts: “I may have perspired ... but I have the delightful consolation of having always arrived, with God’s help, in time to comfort the dying ... Today, nothing consoles me more!”¹²

And let us not forget that it was probably at the bedside of a sick young man, (or of many sick children, with few resources, unschooled and with no knowledge of God), that the outline of Marcellin’s dream became clear to him ...¹³



⁹ *Water from the Rock*, 55

¹⁰ Lk 1,39; Jn 2,3; Jn 19, 25

¹¹ Message of the XXII General Chapter

¹² *Life*, Jean Baptiste Furet, p. 56

¹³ *Life*, Jean Baptiste Furet, pp. 58-59. This episode, however, has been re-interpreted and significantly reframed in an interesting study by Br André Lanfrey. See Marist Notebooks n° 35, pp. 27ff



2. Attentiveness to Brothers who were unwell

Although it is partly a continuation of the previous reflection, I would like to dwell for a moment on another facet: if Marcellin cared for all the sick with affection and generosity, his care was especially kind and fatherly towards the Brothers.

The ‘brotherly’ style and even “vocation” of Marcellin manifested itself in so many ways throughout his life that we can say that it was part and parcel of his spirituality and charism. He believed in the vocation of “being brother”, shared his own life with the brothers from the beginning, took loving care of the communities, and made shared brotherhood a defining element of the congregation of the Little Brothers of Mary.

This conviction and attentive manner became the predominant feature in the Founder’s relationship with his brothers, a relationship that has been described by the brothers themselves saying, “a mother has no more tenderness with her children than he lavished on us”, and defining his character as “cheerful and gentle, but firm.”¹⁴

When our key documents invite us to be attentive and patient with the sick, they remind us of something that should be second nature to us as brothers. “All brothers, especially the Community Leaders, show every kindness and patience towards confrères who are ill or infirm. They visit them, encourage them, and pray for them.”¹⁵

This is a feature, then, that needs to be revisited and re-enacted constantly. This is vividly expressed in a fragment of the Founder’s biography:

¹⁴ Testimony of Br Lawrence on Marcellin Champagnat: <http://old.champagnat.org/510.php?a=4a&id=4213>

¹⁵ Statutes 38.1

One other matter which troubled him, and he mentioned it to Brother Francois, was that he could have been more devoted to visiting the sick Brothers. In this case too, the timorous conscience of the Founder and his tender love for his Brothers raised a groundless scruple in his mind; for the sick Brothers had always been the object of his concern and he had done everything possible to provide relief for them. He had put up a building expressly to provide a well-appointed infirmary; a dispensary, equipped at great expense, furnished all the necessary medicines; several Brothers had been trained to look after the sick, whose every want they cared for with meticulous attention. As soon as any Brother fell sick in an establishment, the kind Father had them come or sent someone to get them, so that they could receive the best of care under his watchful eye.

Learning one day that a Brother was ill, and being unable to have him brought to the Hermitage because of the nature and seriousness of the complaint, he exclaimed, with tears in his eyes: “Ah! How frightened I am that this Brother may be let suffer; how I wish he were here to be looked after; I would give all that I have to relieve him.”¹⁶

The same concern and constant interest of Marcellin featured in key moments of the early days of our Institute: at the side of the sick young Montagne, as we have already mentioned; or in the very challenging episode of the Memorare in the snow, motivated by the desire to visit a sick brother, even going beyond the limits of prudence.¹⁷

The care of the sick is an attitude rooted in our own humanity and profoundly in tune with the Gospel (inseparably so). I would go a step further to describe it as truly Marian. In his latest letter, Pope Francis, as he has done on so many occasions, praised the work of caregivers in these times of pandemic.¹⁸

3. Marcellin himself in times of illness

*“A spirituality of simplicity should assist you in accepting your strengths as well as your weaknesses and to find peace of heart.”*¹⁹ This sentence from the *Rule of Life* introduces and captures the central idea of this last part of the meditation and, indeed, this whole article.

In our look at Marcellin when he was ill and frail, let us contemplate how he coped with illness himself; let us recall his capacity for accepting his strengths, but also his weaknesses... Let us observe, at the same time, a man who was confined to his bed, convalescent, dependent, who probably experienced some of the same doubts, questions and fears that assail us today.

I would like to retrace three moments of illness in Marcellin’s life that hold a message for us:

¹⁶ *Life*, Jean Baptiste Furet, p. 242

¹⁷ *Life*, p. 343-344

¹⁸ “We began to realize that our lives are interwoven with and sustained by ordinary people valiantly shaping the decisive events of our shared history: doctors, nurses, pharmacists, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caretakers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests and religious... They understood that no one is saved alone.” (Pope Francis. *Fratelli Tutti* 54)

¹⁹ *Rule of Life*, 26

a) Marcellin and his illness in the seminary

Marcellin had many difficulties in the seminary, and it seems that it took him a lot of determination and perseverance to get through. At first he found the studies demanding; he was expelled after the first year of the minor seminary, although this was later revoked. Other challenges would follow. Among them, one of relevance here, is that he also fell ill and was forced to interrupt his studies in the third year of theology.

According to his biography, “his austere mortified life and his intense application to study took its toll on his health”.²⁰ This, for a strong and generally healthy young man, was certainly a major setback. We do not know many more details about the episode, but it does raise the question of how Marcellin managed this moment as a youth, and what marks it left on his character and his sensitivity to illness and suffering in general.

b) The serious illness of 1825

Marcellin fell ill at Christmas 1825. It was a period of considerable expansion, of opening schools and communities, and of physical exhaustion after building the new house of the Hermitage. Perhaps the strenuous work undermined his health. We can imagine how hard this must have been for Marcellin, at the age of 36 and his congregation still in its infancy.

The illness was serious since, as described in the biographical account of Br Seán Sammon, “within the week, death appeared imminent”. Added to the worries of his illness were concerns about the fragile position of his fledgling congregation and its level of debts. “Some of Marcellin’s creditors, alarmed by news of his illness, demanded immediate payment. The founder, preparing for the worst, made his will on January 6th, 1826.”

The good management of Br. Stanislaus, the personal care and medical attention he received, and the rest had their effect: “Marcellin recovered from his illness, though it permanently weakened his constitution. By February 1826 he was back at work.”²¹

However, in addition to the fact that he survived, there is another important lesson from this serious illness of Marcellin’s that has always impressed me and that seems to me especially provocative in these times of pandemic, fear and uncertainty: I want to return to the scene to which I alluded at the beginning of this article, where Marcellin, knowing the troubles within the community and the discouragement of the brothers... was able to get out of bed (perhaps on the arm of Brother Stanislaus himself) and show himself to his beloved children.

Where did Marcellin get the energy to do this? How great a love for his brothers was on display for him to get up, despite his feeling weak, to help them? Above all, how can any of us not feel challenged by the attitude of a sick person who shows so little self-focus, puts others first and even uses his own frailty to support the weak?

I have meditated a lot on this scene and, although we have few details about it, it still

²⁰ *Life*, Jean Baptiste Furet, p. 25-26

²¹ All these quotations are taken from the biography “*A Heart That Knew No Bounds*”, by Br. Seán Sammon, p. 54-55.



provokes feelings of tenderness and enthusiasm in me. This is because this scene depicts Marcellin as sick and vulnerable, yet not defeated or giving up.

I often recall this scene when hear the words of the hymn: “When pain comes, as I know it will, let not my love dim, nor my peace be clouded.”²² It is a beautiful prayer, but, above all, it presents a healthy challenge when we are tempted by fear or selfishness. I also ask the Lord, as Marcellin did, that my love not diminish in pain and that it remain strong.

Marcellin’s action gave rise to joy, consolation and new life. Br Jean Baptiste narrates that “the scene that took place when Father Champagnat first made his appearance again in community, serves to give us some idea of the attachment and affection that the Brothers had for him and of the pleasure and happiness that his recovery gave them all.”²³

²² The poem is by Cristina de Arteaga, a great poet and Hieronymite Nun who died in 1984.

²³ *Life*, Jean Baptiste Furet, p. 141



c) Marcellin's final illness

Although there were surely other moments of physical weakness than the illness in the seminary and the serious episode in 1825, I would like to add a brief look at Marcellin's final illness.

It seems that after the illness of 1825 he had continuing health problems and pains, especially in his side. Added to this, he developed an inflammation of the stomach and vomiting. His condition was so poor that, his biographer suggests, after his return from Paris in 1838 it was clear that his end was fast approaching.

During the winter of 1839-40 he became progressively more incapacitated:²⁴ by May he could no longer celebrate mass for the brothers; he said farewell to the brothers, and was bedridden and extremely weak until his death on Saturday morning, 6th June 1840.

I have often wondered about these months of his life: how would someone so active and energetic put up with being confined to bed from December 1839 to June 1840? Because, as serious as the illness of 1825 had been, his convalescence was barely a month long; but now it was a long process of being bedridden and of getting progressively worse and the growing awareness that the end was near.

²⁴ *Life*, Jean Baptiste Furet, p. 223: "He suffered very much through the winter. His only food consisted of some broth, a little milk or some very light food, of which he could take nothing but very small quantities... In spite of his suffering, he would not dispense himself from the community Rule."

I believe that there are times, and even more so in the present circumstances, when many of us reflect on helping the sick and caring for them (as Marcellin did so often and so well). This needs to be complemented by the human and Gospel attitude of “letting yourself be cared for”. For sure, (and I recognize this in myself but I have seen it in many brothers as well), we do not take kindly to being cared for, to showing ourselves vulnerable or to letting others look after and help us.

Like Peter, perhaps we are among those who prefer to wash our own feet rather than let them be washed... And I wonder how Marcellin coped with these many months of growing weaker and increasingly in need of assistance. At the same time, imagining Marcellin in this way offers me a new perspective on who this man was, his deep humanity and faith.

Five or six months of feeling frail, ill and afraid is a long time and would demand that a person goes through a process of accepting what is happening. We all know that people deal with illness in different ways: grieving -why me? why now? - or becoming resigned, complaining or being strong, being depressed or heroic. It is interesting to ask myself, how will I cope?

These pandemic times, so unpredictable, have often brought this question to my mind. We often hear it said that we will die as we have lived. But I am afraid that this is neither always valid nor entirely credible. I have been at the bedside of quite a few sick brothers and sisters in my life, some near to death, and have experienced at close quarters their progressive deterioration, loss of strength and even the onset of dementia in some. It is a different story for each one. I have chosen to hold my tongue, because I have many questions about how I myself would deal with moments like these.

What do I get from contemplating Marcellin as a man who knew suffering? It makes me ask myself about how I am living now (rather than in some hypothetical future). It makes me question how I deal with live my daily failings or troubles, great or small. It challenges my tolerance of suffering and frustration; also, my self-understanding as a Christian of who I am and how I act.

*Speaking about vulnerability, our spirituality document *Water from the Rock* has some appealing words: “In humility, we seek to know ourselves in our strengths and weaknesses and readily accept the help we may need. We grow to be at peace with the person God has created.”²⁵*

I hope that the contemplation of Marcellin as one who knew illness will help me and all of us to live the present more intensely and meaningfully; and also, to keep going, grow and open our hearts to God, as only those who feel weak, poor, sick or in need know how.

Just as the paralytics, the blind, the lepers, and so many grieving fathers and mothers approached Jesus, I would like to know how to approach Jesus in whatever state I am in and say, with Bartimaeus: “Lord, let me see again”. Let me understand. Let me accept. Let me love.

But perhaps if I stop and gaze into the eyes of Jesus, or if I listen to the God who lives in my heart, I will get the same surprise as I do from looking at Marcellin who knew what it was to be sick, human and frail. And I will find a God who is not so powerful nor a stop-gap but rather, a God who is omni-weak and all-frail, human and incarnate. A God who is ill with us?

²⁵ *Water from the Rock*, 36. (Cf *Rule of Life* 26)

