



Historical sources of Marist spirituality

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This text comprises a series of articles written in 2020 by Marist historian and spiritual writer, Br Michael Green, on the theme of Marist spirituality. Br Michael takes the six characteristics of our spirituality that are named in 'Water from the Rock' and explores their historical and spiritual sources, relating them to the situations of today's Marists. The articles were written for the Australian online Marist newsletter 'Christlife', and were also published in the education journal 'Champagnat'.

Introduction

Marcellin Champagnat didn't know anything about Marist spirituality, or about any kind of spirituality for that matter.

What?

No, there's no myth-busting exposé to follow. Please, stay calm and keep reading.

The term 'spirituality' has not been around for long, just over a hundred years or so. The word, as a noun, would have been unknown to Marcellin. It emerged in France towards the end of the nineteenth century, and grew in common usage in the second half of the twentieth, helped not insignificantly by the assiduous compiling, between 1928 and 1995, of a mammoth ten-volume academic work called the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*. Begun by a small team of French Jesuits, its 1500 contributors came to include many of the leading theologians and masters of the spiritual life of the twentieth century. The concept of 'spirituality' (singular and plural) took its place in mainstream religious discourse. Today its breadth and grab is wide, covering not only traditional paths of the Christian spiritual life, but also those of non-Christian traditions, and indeed non-theist ways of experiencing and understanding life and the cosmos.

In Marist discourse, the word was not in general use until the last part of the century. Even as late as Brother Basilio Rueda's time as the Brothers' Superior General (1967-85), in the renovation and innovation of the post-Vatican II period, it remained more usual in the Marist world to speak of the 'spirit of the Institute' rather than 'Marist spirituality'. This was the same term that Brother François had used back in 1848 when he composed a seminal Circular on the distinctive identity and character of the Marist Brothers.

While he might not have known or used the word 'spirituality', Marcellin was, of course, more than familiar with the other word – 'Marist'. Yet, even though he and his co-founders of the Society of Mary had coined this adjective in their seminary days to describe the new movement of lay people, brothers, sisters and priests that they intended to begin, Marcellin did not use it extensively. He preferred to talk of the 'work of Mary' and the 'Brothers of Mary'. The two words together – 'Marist spirituality' – would have struck him as strange.

The concept of the 'spiritual life' was, however, something with which Marcellin was quite at home. Indeed, it was the project of his life. His theological studies in the seminary, and later his personal library, were replete with authors who addressed this subject explicitly and at depth. His reading of them was considered and life-long. For example, the influential works of St Francis de Sales – *The Devout Life* and *The Treatise on the Love of God* – were two of his most thumbed. Possibly no writer was more shaping of the way that Marcellin grew spiritually than de Sales. Marcellin was influenced also by many others, notably two Jesuit theologians of the seventeenth century, Alonso Rodriguez and Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure, and he was wont to quote each of them. But they, as did Marcellin, tended to eschew putting any label on the spiritual life other than that of 'Christian'. Their primary focus was on experience of God, on knowing and loving God, and on a person's response to that knowledge and love. The 'spiritual life' was quite clear in its meaning and parameters: it was Christocentric, and concerned with how to grow in awareness, alignment and congruence with Jesus Christ.

While the centuries had produced a number of distinctive strands of spiritual wisdom – such as Augustinian, Benedictine, Carmelite and Franciscan – labels were not typically given prominence by writers and spiritual directors from individual traditions. There was no concept of these as distinct ‘spiritualities’ as we may understand the concept today. There was a single spiritual path: that of the gospel of Jesus. Indeed, any spiritual way that became identified by some other brand – such as Jansenism or Quietism, or even generic ‘mysticism’ – was often treated as suspect.

Marcellin was the beneficiary – as are we – of centuries of accumulated and tested spiritual wisdom. Many of the books that he studied drew on the traditional understanding of the spiritual life as a three-stage, or at least tri-faceted, inward spiritual journey often known by the terms ‘purgative’, ‘illuminative’ and ‘unitive’. This conceptual framework came from the fifth century theologian who has to have a claim for the most curious name in the history of Christian writers: Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. But let’s not linger on this ancient chap’s odd name, but rather on what he wrote. To some extent what Dionysius proposed was a Christianising of Plato’s ideas of moving from the lower-order ‘active’ way of living to the higher-order ‘contemplative’ way, but like other spiritual masters, Dionysius’s ideas were drawn more from his own experience of a growing intensity in his relationship with God than study of Platonic sources. Many in the East and West built on these ideas during the medieval and early modern eras – giants of the spiritual life such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Catherine of Siena and Francis de Sales. The concepts continue to be used to this day.

We can come back to this way of conceptualising and understanding a person’s growth in the spiritual life, and consider it in greater detail, but the point to make here is that Marcellin knew it well. He studied it. We sometimes can be tempted to think of the Founder as a holy but modestly educated country priest, with a big heart and an attractive personality, who rolled up his sleeves and got on with things, and was an inspiration to the many who came to know him. We can undervalue the level of his education, the breadth of his reading, and the time he spent throughout his life in both study and contemplation. Marcellin was twelve years in seminary formation, through to his late twenties – the equivalent of secondary school, university and graduate school today. He engaged with the great ideas of his time, both sacred and secular. He studied the spiritual and theological classical books in a country and an ecclesial milieu that had been at the vanguard of theological discourse and seminary education for hundreds of years. He developed and maintained a useful collection of books, and shared them with others, including his Brothers. The key Brothers he gathered around him – François, Jean-Baptiste and Louis-Marie – he ensured to be men who were not only widely read and erudite but intuitively attracted to learning. What we have come to call ‘Marist spirituality’ was consciously informed and indeed distilled from the spiritual wisdom of the centuries.

There were, of course, other sources of what became Marist spirituality than simply the reading of Marcellin and the founding group. We can point, first, to Marcellin’s family and his upbringing: the teaching and example of his parents and aunt; the influence of priests such as Alirot who baptised him and Laurens the curate at Marhles; Soutrenon, a hard-working curate whom he came to know during his year in St-Sauveur-en-Rue as a fifteen year-old; Perrier and Gardette, his seminary rectors. Each these priests had his own heroic story of resistance and resilience from the years of the Revolution. Both Marcellin’s family and his clerical mentors had their impact on Marcellin’s developing personality and character. Then there were his younger Sulpician-trained professors in Lyon, men such as Cholleton, Cattet and Mioland. He had his friend and spiritual guide Duplay, along with his fellow Marists. They all sparked something in one another, these young idealistic men and that grew to become the Society of Mary, the Marists. Third, to the influence of all these people, we add the needs that Marcellin perceived in church and society and how he responded to them. Several of the early Brothers, including his official biographer, used the same French verb to describe how Marcellin was affected by the educational, social and spiritual situation of people: *affliger*. Literally it means ‘afflicted’, but carries the sense of being moved to his very core. The poor evangelised him.

All these factors had their influence on what we sometimes clumsily call Marcellin's 'charism'. His charism was not something that Marcellin *had* or *possessed*, not a commodity. Rather it was who and how he *was*, who he was gifted to be and to become. Charisms are better understood as each person's graced way of being in the image and likeness of God. As the first Brothers were attracted to gather around Marcellin, to form community together and to share ministry, then a *spirituality* began to take shape.

A spirituality is different from a personal charism. A spirituality – as we typically use the term today – can be taught and learnt. Indeed, it needs to be. Its distinctive and graced ways of personal discipleship of Jesus, of relating and forming community, and of bringing the Good News to others, can be articulated and can evolve. It must do both in order to stay relevant and vital, and not become something only for the church history books. It develops a language and a characteristic cultural style; it has its collected wisdom and wisdom figures, its heroes and stories, its sacred places and books, its intuitive and chosen ways of incarnating Christ-life and for naming how it does that. It is rooted in a living community of faith.

That has all unfolded in our Marist story over the last two hundred years. That is not long in ecclesial terms, just a couple of centuries. Although a new tradition, Marist spirituality did not start from scratch, appearing magically like cosmic kryptonite from some undiscovered spiritual planet. Like all new spiritual movements, it drew on what had preceded it – indeed it is this that helps to form any founder. Like other movements, its novelty was in how it drew from various sources in a distinctive way and innovated in others, in order to address new needs and new contexts with relevance and effectiveness. The Carmelite tradition was one that was influential for Marcellin, albeit less often acknowledged than some others such as Sulpician, Salesian, Franciscan or Ignatian.

Then, as for any new spiritual movement in the Church that is likely to last longer than just one or two generations (the fate of most), we Marists soon enough developed a literature, a strong self-identity, a growing collected wisdom, and accepted intuitions that could be taught and appropriated by the next generation. And which could inspire them with a love of Jesus and impel them to share it in effective ways. In the three decades that followed Marcellin's death, when there was an exponential eightfold growth in the size of the community – most of whom never knew Marcellin or the founding group – all of that unfolded richly. Nonetheless, it was still quite nascent thing before the 1870s. The spread across the world that was to unfold in the next few decades would sow Marist seeds both widely and deeply. This ensured that the Marist way quickly became unbound from cultural and social restrictions of one time and place.

It was, though, not to be until over a century later that the term 'Marist spirituality' began to be used with any frequency. As it did, it happened quite naturally, organically really, and almost without comment. When Brother Charles Howard, the then Superior General published the first Circular specifically on this subject in 1991, the actual concept of 'Marist spirituality' was taken as a given. People were more interested in how he defined it. With all respect to this wise Marist leader, his definition was a little all-over-the-place. What he did offer, however, was a window into how the Marist way of the gospel was being lived and expressed in many cultures and countries. The consistencies and emphases were striking. Of course, there was a growing and rich collection of other Marist documents and research projects that had been developing before and since Vatican II. Although these might not have used the exact term 'Marist spirituality', they were developing some shared conceptualisations and an attractive language for the Marist way.

It was to take another decade or two for these characteristics to be refined and sharpened, at least in terms of the language used to describe them. That happened toward the end of the first decade of this century. In 2008, when the reference text called *Water from the Rock, Marist spirituality flowing in the tradition of Marcellin Champagnat* appeared, it was something of a watershed moment for you and me as Marists. It was the first time for more than a century and a half that we had been offered a concise description of what we would call Marist spirituality. The first one had emerged from the pen of Brother François, Marcellin's first successor, in a four-part Circular he wrote between 1848 and 1853. François did not use either the word

'Marist' or the word 'spirituality'. The latter had not yet been coined; the former might have appeared to him to be an indulgence. He was concerned with Jesus and with bringing his gospel to young people; that was his focus. It is important for us to keep that as *our* focus – as does *Water from the Rock* – but we do have it now in contemporary language and addressing contemporary contexts. It is a rich document.

The articles that follow explore each of the six characteristics that *Water from the Rock* proposes as constitutive of Marist spirituality, in the tradition that has developed from Saint Marcellin Champagnat. It is worth noting that there are now several identifiable Marist spiritualities, each of which has the right and responsibility to claim that name – just as there are different strands of Franciscan, Ignatian, Benedictine, Dominican or other spiritualities in the church. Ours is that which we share together as a living community of faith that takes its inspiration from Marcellin.

Water from the Rock has these features of our shared spirituality:

- God's presence and love
- Trust in God
- Love of Jesus and his gospel
- In Mary's way
- Family spirit
- A spirituality of simplicity

There is nothing set in concrete forever and always about these traits, or indeed the number of them. They are not the only way we could slice our spiritual cake. There are other prisms we could use, other perspectives we could take. And it won't be its final or definitive description. Indeed, any spiritual tradition that stops evolving, stops innovating, stops discerning, or stops writing is one that is not being continually re-contextualised by its living faith community; it is destined for the history section of the church bookshop. What we can say, nonetheless, is that the authors of *Water from the Rock*, during some years of wide and structured consultation with all parts of the Marist world, have distilled something of great worth for our time.

The following articles look at these features one by one. They touch into the historical sources of each, from where it came, as well as its applicability to today. It is to be hoped that what is offered may prompt further nuancing, further sharpening, for that is a sign of vitality in spiritual movement.

1. The Presence and Love of God

Water from the Rock introduces the first characteristic of Marist spirituality – ‘God’s presence and love’ – in a single, short paragraph. It is the briefest of the text’s introductions to the six lenses onto our spirituality that it proposes:

Today, those of us who follow in the footsteps of Marcellin and his first disciples are seized by their same inner dynamism. We develop a way of being, loving and doing, in the spirit of our origins. Gradually, day by day, we deepen our experience of the loving presence of God within ourselves and in others. This presence of God is a profound experience of being personally loved by God, and the conviction that he is close to us in our daily human experiences.¹

That description, as rich as it unquestionably is, presents the spiritual life as rather gentle and benign, with phrases such as ‘gradually’, ‘day by day’, ‘experience of loving presence’, ‘he is close to us’. Marcellin actually had a much tougher time of it. So many – if not all – of the masters of the spiritual life seem to have had followed similarly testing paths as they have sought to progress more deeply in their spiritual lives.

It is well for us to recognise that Marcellin’s personal spirituality was something that did indeed grow and mature: the eight year-old boy impressed by the heroism of fugitive priests, the idealistic sixteen year-old minor seminarian, the inspired twenty-seven year-old ordinand, the indefatigable thirty-two year-old curate, the cancer-ridden fifty year-old founder – we need to view differentially. Far from the fanciful image of baby Marcellin with a flame flickering above his cot as one predestined for special holiness – as the strained hagiography of Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet would have us believe – Marcellin was like each of us in his need to discover, to reflect, to discern, to err and to change. Ultimately, the change to which we are all called is a fundamental one, a life-defining orientation of heart and mind, a *metanoia* (cf. Mark 1:15). For Marcellin, this journey was at times torturous, even quite gutting. ‘Purging’, the classical spiritual writers might say.

But more of the lumps and bumps of Marcellin’s personal journey later. Let us first consider the phrase ‘the presence of God’, an expression that has enjoyed a prominent place in our Marist spiritual rhetoric since the founding time.

Sources of the “practice of the presence of God”

We can smile when we read Marcellin’s quip in a letter to the nineteen-year-old Brother Avit (a strong-willed Brother with a take-no-prisoners personality who later went to become one of the great chroniclers of our early history). Writing to him at the beginning of Lent in 1839, the Founder sardonically suggests:

If the practice of the presence of God is recommended by all the masters of the spiritual life for people living in the world, it is surely non-negotiable for a religious. Try it out sometime ...²

¹ *Water from the Rock*, #16

² Letter 247, Letters of Marcellin Champagnat.

Why do I go keeping harping on this same subject, you may ask? He wrote in another spot. *Because it is the basis of the spiritual life.* An abiding cognisance of God's presence was at the heart of things for Marcellin. Another of his biographers, the practical-joker Brother Sylvestre, writing almost forty years after Marcellin's death, recalled the man he had known when Sylvestre was still a teenager:

*The frequent remembrance of the presence of God was always Fr Champagnat's favourite practice. We could say that it was the soul of his soul.*³

'His favourite practice', the 'soul of his soul'. Perhaps we see it most strikingly from Marcellin's own pen in his 'Spiritual Testament', or his 'spiritual will': what he wanted to leave us as our spiritual inheritance. He began this important document with his customary phrase: *Here, in the presence of God ...* Then, further on, as he turns to talk specifically about Marists' spiritual lives, we read these words:

*I beg of God and desire with all my heart that you persevere faithfully in the holy exercise of the presence of God. It is the soul of prayer, of meditation, and of all virtues.*⁴

They are strong words.

The 'exercise' or the 'practice' of the 'presence of God' was a thing at the time, regarded almost as a synonym for whole of one's spiritual life. A popular book with that very title – *The Practice of the Presence of God* – was a work that would have been attractive to Marcellin because it offered such an accessible, affective and immanent spirituality. Written by a Discalced Carmelite, Frère Laurent de la Résurrection (1614-1691; usually simply called in English 'Brother Lawrence'), the book was compiled after the friar's death by one of the many people to whom he offered spiritual direction. That this person happened to be the Vicar General of Archdiocese of Paris might have had something to do with the book's publishing success.

Lawrence, a former soldier, joined the Carmelites after considerable life experience and did not seek ordination: he contented himself for forty years as cook, pot-washer and sandal-maker in a new 100-member priory in Paris. Not that he was uneducated; rather, the contrary. He was quite well read, especially in his own Carmelite mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Yet he developed a compelling simplicity for explaining what living in the presence of God meant, the fruit of decades of his own experience. For him, it came down to an intimate affair of the heart, and a continual conversation between him and God. His life was his prayer, and vice-versa.

*The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are calling for different things at the same time, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees before the Blessed Sacrament.*⁵

We are reminded of Marcellin's words found in a letter he wrote from Paris in March 1838 as he was occupied with running all over town pursuing his application for legal authorisation for the Brothers:

³ *Memoir of Brother Sylvestre*, Appendix, Ch.2

⁴ Spiritual Testament of Marcellin Champagnat, in J-B Furet, *Life of Marcellin Champagnat*

⁵ *Practice of the Presence of God*, Fourth Conversation.

*I am still in Paris, seeing this one and that one, with all my errands seeming to do little to speed up our major business ... Yet I find greater solitude in the middle of Paris than at the Hermitage ... I carry you all in my heart.*⁶

The Practice of the Presence of God, published less than a century before Marcellin's birth, comprises a series sixteen letters Brother Lawrence wrote to people to offer them spiritual advice, along with a record of four conversations he had with Joseph de Beaufort (the Vicar General), and some of his maxims. It is a modest little work, and still available.⁷ Lawrence urges people to be intentionally, affectively and continually attentive to God's close presence. There was joy in that, for him: sustaining joy, quiet joy.

In his spiritual maturity, Lawrence became dismissive of the value of personal disciplines, penances, and even set prayers if they did not serve to nurture in a person a sense of the loving presence of God. Let us sit with a few pearls of his wisdom:

We need only to recognise God as intimately present with us, to speak with him every moment.

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God; those only can comprehend it who practise and experience it.

Let us occupy ourselves entirely in getting to know God. The more we know him, the more we will desire to know him. As love increases with knowledge, the more we know God, the more we will truly love him. We will learn to love him equally in times of distress or in times of great joy.

We should establish ourselves in a sense of God's presence, by continually conversing with him. What a shameful thing it is to quit conversation with him, to think of trifles and fooleries.

We should fix ourselves firmly in the presence of God by conversing all the time with Him ... We should feed our soul with this and from that derive great joy in being his. We should put life in our faith ... Lift up your heart to him during your meals and in company ... One need not cry out very loudly; he is nearer to us than we can imagine.

Think often on God, by day, by night, in your business and even in your diversions. He is always near you and with you; leave him not alone.

*There is needed neither art nor science for going to God, but only a heart resolutely determined to attach itself to nothing but him, and to love him.*⁸

Lawrence's intuition was that spirituality is essentially relational. A loving relationship. God is companion, friend and confidante – always there, in our innermost self. We are absorbed in God, and God in us. How to 'live in the presence of God' was the same for him as how to build, sustain and develop any close interpersonal relationship. It was all absorbing for him, but also outwardly impelling – love radiated, love shared. To go anywhere, however, it needed to be intentionally and consciously pursued. That is the same for any relationship, of course. When we speak of the 'Theocentrism' in Marist spirituality, it is important to understand it not as something primarily cerebral or philosophical but essentially relational.

A writer who certainly did have a direct and defining impact on Marcellin, Francis de Sales (1567-1622), was also deeply influenced by the Carmelite mystics. He was also keen, like Brother Lawrence, to promote the notion that an intense spiritual life was not something to be confined to abbeys and convents, to religious

⁶ Letter 181, *Letters of Marcellin Champagnat*

⁷ A good edition of the book is that translated by John L. Delaney (published by Doubleday, and available in paperback and Kindle from Amazon). This edition has a helpful Foreword from Henri Nouwen and an Introduction from Delaney.

⁸ *Practice of the Presence of God. Passim.*

and clergy. This emphasis on a personal and affective spirituality, and every person's capacity to nurture it, was an important feature of the century of the 'Catholic Reformation' following the Council of Trent. Later, we labelled that which developed as the 'French school of spirituality', a somewhat misleading term but one that does recognise that many of the movers and shakers of this spiritual revival were indeed French. Among them are familiar names such as Vincent de Paul and Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, and perhaps others who may be less familiar to some, such as Pierre de Bérulle, Madame Acarie, Jean-Jacques Olier, Jean Eudes, and Jane-Frances de Chantal. Our Marist spirituality grew directly out of this milieu; all of these spiritual masters and others were known to Marcellin. They helped him to frame and to ponder the experience of the presence of God in his life, and how he taught others about it. A giant among them, and the one who possibly had most impact on our strand of Marist spirituality, was Francis de Sales.

De Sales' first major book, *The Devout Life*, was aimed at a general readership; it treated the fostering of a sense of God's presence in daily living. His second, *Treatise on the Love of God*, took his readers more deeply into their personal experience of God. We will delve more deeply into the spirituality of Francis de Sales and how it informed what has become known as 'Marist spirituality'. Suffice it to say here that his essential thesis was that he understood the love of God as something inscribed into the human heart as its fundamental desire. The itinerary of a person's spiritual life is a journey of discovery for how to fulfil this desire, and to become ecstatically consumed by the liberating and irresistible love of God. Indeed, the book was conceived as a commentary on the *Song of Songs*, an epic love poem. The only response to such love is to love in return, to become a loving person.

Marcellin's seminary studies led him to be much influenced also by the writings of the Spaniard Alonso Rodriguez SJ (1526-1616) whose one book *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection* was widely read and studied in the seventeenth century, and the Frenchman Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure SJ (1588-1657), a more prolific author and renowned spiritual director. Both men explored the 'practice of the presence of God', albeit not quite in the same way. From Rodriguez, Marcellin was taken by the concept of

*the whole world filled with God, as it is, so people can imagine themselves in the midst of this infinite ocean of God, surrounded by him, like a sponge in the midst of the sea.*⁹

Although, Marcellin drew much from Rodriguez, it was the more mystically oriented Saint-Jure to whom he seemed more drawn. Marcellin was a contemplative, by natural disposition and by conscious choice. Ironically enough, this most pragmatic of men did not have an especially pragmatic or tick-the-box approach to his spiritual life. For Marcellin, it was not a matter of climbing any ladder of holiness or being dutiful, not about what he *did* but rather *with whom* he was in relationship. From the writings of each of Brothers François, Jean-Baptiste and Sylvestre, we learn that one of Marcellin's most repeated pieces of Scripture was Acts 17:18

For it is in God that we live and move and have our being.

Sylvestre tells us that Marcellin sat often with Psalm 139:

⁹ Rodriguez, *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection*. Sixth Treatise, Ch. 2

Seeing his serenity, his centredness and his sense recollection one could well believe that he was always conscious of the presence of God. I remember that when he was leading the meditation he always began with the words of Psalm 139: 'Quo ibo a spiritu tuo?'¹⁰ He prayed it aloud in such a tone of voice, emphatic and solemn, that it produced an inexpressible impression and such a sense of recollection that you were afraid to breathe.¹¹

In the language of the time, his approach was more mystical than ascetical. In this, he differed by some good measure from his biographer, Brother Jean Baptiste.

Unfortunately, Jean-Baptiste, despite all that we owe him as a chronicler and biographer, can be criticised for the way he re-interpreted the spirituality that Marcellin fostered in the first generation of Marists. In the second part of *The Life of Father Champagnat*, he devoted twenty-four chapters to describe the Founder's character and personal traits. His purpose in doing this was to depict the ideal Marist, to present Marcellin as an exemplar of how to live as a Marist. One of these chapters addressed itself to 'how Fr Champagnat kept himself in the presence of God'. A close textual analysis of it reveals that Jean-Baptiste has almost certainly based the whole chapter on a section of one of the notebooks of Brother François, who in turn seems to have composed his notes from a talk or talks given by Marcellin on the subject of the presence of God, parts of which Marcellin has obviously drawn directly from Rodriguez and Saint-Jure. No doubt, this was deliberate and well intentioned on Jean-Baptiste's part. However, while he improves the elegance and composition of François' notes, he changes its emphases. He presents the 'practice of the presence of God' as just that: a set of practices, things to do. Further, as he writes of Marcellin's idea of God's being 'everywhere', he employs the phrase 'God sees me' (which is nowhere evident in Marcellin's own extant writings); he offers it as something of a deterrent. That is to say, the practice of the presence of God is useful to keep us fearfully off the pernicious road to sin. This was not Marcellin's primary emphasis.

A vignette in the biography of Brother Jean-Pierre Martinol (the first Brother to die) is more instructive for pointing us to Marcellin's intuitions and the kind of spirituality he fostered in the first Brothers. It comes from the earliest years at La Valla. Young Martinol, twenty years of age and in the workforce for some years by that time, comes to join the small community in 1819 or 1820. He is struck by the way the Brothers are a long-time silent each morning, and he is troubled that he doesn't know how to 'do' that. Let us pick up the story:

One day [Jean-Pierre] asked, 'Father, can we pray to God without speaking?'

'Yes, but why do you ask me this question?'

'Because, every morning, I see you and the Brothers remain still for a long time, deep in contemplation, without saying a word. I understand that you are praying, but I don't know how to do this, which grieves me.'

'And what do you do during this time?'

¹⁰ Sylvestre quotes the last of these opening lines of the Psalm:
O LORD, you have probed me, you know me:
you know when I sit and stand; you understand my thoughts from afar.
My travels and my rest you mark; with all my ways you are familiar.
Even before a word is on my tongue, LORD, you know it all.
Behind and before you encircle me and rest your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is beyond me, far too lofty for me to reach.
Where can I hide from your spirit? From your presence, where can I run?

¹¹ *Memoir of Brother Sylvestre*, Appendix, Ch.2

"I recite my rosary and tell God, "I give you my heart and I love you."

"You can very well continue with this prayer, but I will also teach you how to pray like the Brothers."

... To the young man's question, 'How can one take actions without speaking?' Marcellin responded by giving the example of the mother who looks at or who thinks of her child with love, without telling the child. 'Yourself,' said Father Champagnat, 'do you not love the good Lord when you see a crucifix?' When the postulant answered affirmatively, Marcellin explained that in this way he could pray to God without speaking, every morning, as did the Brothers.¹²

The image of prayer as an intimate loving relationship, a loving gaze: this is the disposition of a mystic, a contemplative. It is revealing that Marcellin is still relatively young at this point, not yet thirty. His spirituality will deepen considerably, as we shall see, but already we sense that living in the presence of God is an affair of the heart for him.

Another insight comes from Brother François's notes – taken from Marcellin's talk(s) on the subject of the 'practice of the presence of God'. In his exercise book, François has written down the five means or pre-conditions that he has learnt from Marcellin for deepening a sense of God's presence:

Purity of heart

Prayer

Silence and retreat

Order your actions to the will of God; search for God in everything

Contemplate God in all his creatures

They are good, and worth our taking heed, but they are really not surprising. We could take each one, and develop it, but probably they explain themselves well enough. Textbook stuff. More intriguing are the little phrases that François has added next to each one – no doubt noting down comments of Marcellin himself. Particularly teasing is what he jotted next to 'purity of heart': two Scripture references – Matthew 5, and the *Song of Songs*. The reference to the Beatitudes is predictable – *blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God*. But the *Song of Songs*? A celebration of heartfelt yearning and of young love. How might that shape or change our image of Marcellin? After the word 'prayer', François has written 'humility' and the French word 'douceur', which means gentleness, sweetness, softness.

Using the imagery of an intimate and loving personal relationship for appreciating how Marcellin would have you and me come to sense God in our lives is perhaps the most helpful way for appreciating the spiritual legacy he has left us. We have all been in relationships, fallen in love. We know about initial attraction, first flush, young love. But we know there is much more, needs to be much more. We know that a relationship is not essentially about doing things or proving oneself; that's not its basis. If we are in love, nonetheless, there is much we will want to do, time we will want to give, priorities we will want to make, disciplines we will willingly impose on ourselves. Equally, we know a relationship that is to endure cannot be built on anything less than complete honesty and gift of self – what the Scriptures might call purity of heart. We know also about the ups and downs we will experience, the heartaches, the trials, the moments of doubt perhaps, and the times of forgiveness and recommitment. The intensity. All of that played out in Marcellin's spiritual journey, the fruits of which have helped to shape the distinctive spirituality that today we call *Marist*.

¹² *Biographies de quelques Frères*, p.34

The influence of Francis de Sales

To understand St Marcellin Champagnat's spirituality, and the spiritual tradition which is his legacy, we need to appreciate the spiritual fundamentals proposed by St Francis de Sales (1567-1622). If you don't get Francis de Sales, you won't get Marcellin Champagnat.

That is not to suggest that de Sales was the only shaping influence on Marcellin, and how Marcellin understood 'God's presence and love' in his life. Last month we mentioned some other significant ones. There were others in addition to these, notably the formative influence of his family in his first fifteen years, and other leading figures of post-Reformation Europe whom he read, such as St Alphonsus Ligouri. The spirituality that emanated from Le Puy was also defining for Marcellin, recognising that his home region was in that diocese and the orbit of its spiritual currents up until the time of Napoleon – influences such as St John Francis Regis and the spirituality of the Sisters of St Joseph (who had a house in Marhles, and to whom both Marcellin's aunt and great aunt belonged) being worthy of mention. The writings of the Spanish nun and mystic María of Ágreda were significant for him later on.

Indeed, the spiritual milieu of the time – as all times – was complex and heterogenous. It is misleadingly simplistic to talk of 'French spirituality' or the 'French school of spirituality'. There were, for example, Jansenist or at least strongly rigorist and ascetical emphases being pushed from some quarters. There was a current of more pessimistic Augustinian thought that emphasised nothingness before God, and that sometimes skewed towards an unhealthy self-abnegation. There were also some loud revisionist voices: let's go back to the way it was (or imagined to be) before the King lost his head. These rigorist and restorationist currents certainly washed through the seminary in Lyon when Marcellin was a student there. But he mostly eschewed them.

One reason he did so was his attraction to what Francis de Sales had to say.

Many spiritual families besides we Marists have deep Salesian spiritual bloodlines running through them. The Sisters of the Visitation (whom Francis founded with St Jane de Chantal, and from whose Rule Marcellin drew when writing that for the Marist Brothers), the Passionists founded by St Paul of the Cross, the Salesians of Don Bosco, the Oblates of St Francis de Sales, the Fransalians, and the Daughters of St Francis de Sales are just some examples. Yet each of them has its own distinctive spiritual emphases, language, tradition and culture. Their founders were attracted to various insights of Francis de Sales, bringing these into dialogue with their own situations and pastoral priorities; each continuing spiritual family then grew a shared spirituality that spoke compellingly to its members and to their specific way of sharing in God's mission. What in particular was it about de Sales that grabbed Marcellin?

Let's start in a perhaps unexpected place. Modesty. The third of our 'three violets'. The more obvious spiritual attitude with which we could begin might be humility. Just about every master of the spiritual life, from the desert fathers and mothers onwards, has emphasised humility as the basis of the spiritual life. Before them, and indeed before Jesus, the Hebrew Scriptures emphasised this fundamental attitude of heart. Of course; no argument. Or, we could take simplicity, which in fact was something of a novel concept that Francis de Sales promoted for nurturing one's spiritual life, and which has become key in our own Marist tradition. Indeed, it is one of the six characteristics of our spirituality named in *Water from the Rock*, and we will explore it in a later article. But let us turn our attention to arguably the most neglected, or perhaps misunderstood, of the 'three violets' – modesty.

It is clear that, while Marcellin might have coined the metaphor of 'violets' to describe them, given as he was to the use of colourful imagery drawn from farming and nature, the spiritual dispositions themselves come straight from Francis de Sales. For the third one, though, Francis had another word: *douceur* in French. It

has the sense of gentleness, sweetness, lightness of touch, pleasantness.

Tough taskmaster that he admittedly was, it is interesting that Marcellin was drawn to a spiritual attitude that was so essentially meek. It reveals much of his sense of God in his life, and his own relationship with God, a gentle and loving God. A life-giving God rather than a life-sapping one. An early Brother – Dacien who was young when he knew Marcellin – gives us a window into this in a testimony taken almost fifty years after the Founder's death:

His tone of voice, his sharp and sometimes severe glance, often intimidated me; but in the confessional I no longer heard the voice of the master, but only the loving tone of the gentlest of fathers.¹³

In conventional spiritual wisdom, the early steps of a person's spiritual journey are known as the 'purgative stage'. This is what Marcellin would have been taught. It's what he would have read in Rodriguez, Saint-Jure and others. This stage is the time for stripping away all that encumbers further progression. 'Mortification of the senses' was an expression that was commonly used at the time and, indeed, for much longer. Literally, a killing of feelings. How many people have had their psycho-emotional wellbeing stunted and maimed by spiritual directors who have misunderstood this concept, or who have imposed it bluntly? This was not Marcellin's approach; there are myriad examples, rather, of his kindness, his patience, his understanding and his encouragement, especially of the younger Brothers. Baby-steps were fine, and lots them made for a decent journey. For this reason, he was attracted to de Sales' idea of the 'little virtues', which he adopted.

This is not to imply that Francis de Sales was any kind of spiritual namby-pamby who shrank from the need for discipline and decision in the interior life. He drew on both his personal experience and on the wisdom of the ages – from giants such as Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Catherine of Siena – to affirm the need for radical and demanding personal change if progress in the spiritual life was to take place. It could be a rough and black ride at times. But this is not where he began. This was not his starting point. That is key.

For de Sales, it was, rather, all about the heart. And the heart was all about desire. Desire was not something about which to be fearful or in denial. It was to be befriended, not squashed. Indeed, desire was the key to understanding the human condition, made essentially in the image of God. Later Thérèse of Lisieux – another Carmelite – would write in the same vein. All desire was ultimately a desire for love, and love was God. Love was it for Francis. This is what grabbed Marcellin. He was intuitively attracted to the notion that growth in holiness was not, in the first place, about striving for perfection through disciplined acts of mortification, fasting, hours of praying, or proving oneself in one way or another. It was about the heart. This was the underlying premise.

Francis taught that a desire to love God was inscribed on the human heart as its primordial desire. It was a desire that he described in almost erotic terms – something that was seductive, irresistible, passionate. The journey of a person's spiritual life was to become entirely captured by this love that was God, and to be consumed by it. In *The Treatise on the Love of God*, he drew especially on the *Song of Songs* for imagery to describe this. Growing in holiness was about falling more deeply in love, and then responding in love. God, he wrote in *An Introduction to the Devout Life*, does not see perfection consisting 'in the multiplicity of acts that we do to please him, but why and how we do them . . . doing them in love, through love and for love.' The ultimate response was to become a loving person, because a genuine experience of love in God can elicit no other response.

Here we tread into the subtle but profound difference between someone who is driven, obsessed or fanati-

¹³ *Témoignages sur Marcellin Champagnat, Enquête Diocésaine*, Vol.1, #12, 1889.

cal, and someone who is a lover. The intensity of the fanatic is tied up in self and self-righteousness; that of the lover is bound up in the other and other-centredness. It is in the latter that we find ‘modesty’ at its most essential – a disposition not to impose oneself on the other, not to be a shouter and attention-seeker, not to control or possess, but to seek to give life to the other. Both the fanatic and the lover will go to extraordinary lengths, take risks, be moved to exercise discipline and restraint, but for very different purposes and to very different ends.

‘Presence’ and ‘love’ of God: twin Johannine dimensions of Marist spirituality

It is no surprise that Marcellin, so attracted by the intuitions of St Francis de Sales, would find himself most at home in the Johannine Scriptures, and especially the First Letter of John. Here we find Marcellin’s go-to place in the Bible. In two Circulars he wrote at the beginning of 1836 and 1837 – by then as a quite spiritually advanced person in the last years of his life – the words of John and his own words mingle indistinguishably. ‘Carissimi’, he calls his Brothers, ‘my beloved, my very dear brothers, let us love one another’. He goes on in both letters to write of his tender concern for them, the way his heart is moved by them, his deep desire for their spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing. ‘Cherished and well-beloved, you are constantly the special object of my love. All my desires and wishes are for your happiness.’ These are the words of someone who, in Salesian terms, has been consumed by love and can do nothing else but only want to share it. Four years later, in his Spiritual Testament, we find almost the same words.

We can imagine Marcellin sitting frequently with the First Letter of John, letting these words of Scripture become his own words, his very self. ‘Whoever has not loved, has not known God.’ (4:7) ‘We shall become like him when we see him as he really is.’ (3:2) ‘This is the message we have heard from the beginning: love one another’ (3:11). ‘God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God’ (4:16) ‘There is no fear in love’ (4:18)

Thus, in Marist spirituality, ‘presence of God’ and ‘love of God’ must go together. It is misleading, perhaps, to use the expression the ‘practice of the presence of God’ if it implies some action or activity or discipline that is not integrally bound up with a loving relationship. It is also important that ‘God’s presence and love’ is named as the first of the six characteristics of Marist spirituality, because everything else comes from this dual experience. It is our relationship with God, and God with us, that is at the source of what we want to do or be.

Marcellin Champagnat was also attracted by the grounded approach of Francis de Sales. In this, they seemed to be of similar cut: intuitively drawn to the interior life, but always looking for how this is lived in the practical everyday. They were both incarnational in their emphases.

So, like Brother Lawrence, we find Francis de Sales, advocating a continual mindfulness of God and, indeed, an ongoing conversation with God, in the activity of the day. Francis called this making little ‘spiritual retreats’ during each day:

Throughout the day, as often as you can, place yourself in the presence of God ... ‘Where are we, my soul? Our real place to be is with our God’ ... Remember then to retreat often into the solitude of your heart, even while physically in the midst of your business ... Our Lord inspired Catherine of Siena to make, as it were, a little interior oratory in her soul where, in the midst of all her exterior work, she could withdraw mentally and enjoy the fruits of this holy solitude ... So withdraw often into this retreat of your heart so ... you can enjoy heart to heart conversations with God¹⁴

¹⁴ Introduction to the Devout Life, Part 2, Ch.12

But it is not something to do dutifully, as much as something to want heartfully:

We withdraw into God because we aspire to God; we aspire to God because we want to withdraw into God . . . So, raise your mind often to God . . . A thousand times a day give your heart, fix your interior eyes on his goodness, hold out your hand to him as a child does to its mother.¹⁵

Here, he echoes Saint-Jure

We have to withdraw into ourselves . . . and there to experience the divine essence that pervades our soul and body and fills us entirely . . . We need to let ourselves be taken up with profound respect, deep humility . . . We are in awe. We adore, bless, praise and glorify this God of all goodness.¹⁶

It is, he wrote, to ‘taste God in ourselves’.

Such mindfulness and immanence are not difficult concepts to grasp for someone who is in love. It is only natural to think often and to yearn to be with. So, attentiveness is necessary:

First, one must have a realisation that God’s presence is universal; that is to say, that God is everywhere, and in all, and that there is no place, nothing in this world, devoid of God’s holy presence, so that, even as the birds on the wing meet the air continually, so we meet with that presence always and everywhere. This is a truth which all are ready to grant, but all are not equally alive to its importance and lapse into carelessness and irreverence.

In the first official Rule of the Marist Brothers, published in 1837, for the ‘method of prayer’ Marcellin drew directly on de Sales’ method for continually turning to God, being always conscious of God.

To be well disposed to make one’s meditation, it is necessary to remain continually in the presence of God . . . so that the soul is always ready to unite itself to God, to stay close to him; otherwise there will be nothing but difficulty, and a lot of time lost when one tries to recollect oneself for the time of meditation. The spiritual masters call this continual presence of God the remote preparation for meditation.¹⁷

Indeed, in this section on the Brothers’ method of prayer, this is the first thing mentioned, using de Sales’ exact phrase ‘the continual presence of God’. No doubt, Marcellin knew well what de Sales had written about developing such abiding consciousness of God: ‘Without it, there can be no contemplative life, and

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Ch.13

¹⁶ *De la connaissance et de l’amour de Notre Sauveur Jésus Christ*, Bk.3, Ch7 #4

¹⁷ *Regle des Petits Frères de Marie*, 1837, pp.67-68

even the active life will be badly lived.’¹⁸ So the Marists’ 1837 Rule went on to make this expectation of the Brothers:

They will not be content with this half hour of meditation, but will try to continue it through the activity of the day, mindful of the presence of God and by making many small spontaneous prayers.

In a letter to the Vicar General of Lyon, Jean Cholleton (his former Moral Theology professor and later fellow Marist), Marcellin wrote in more grounded terms about what would happen to someone who neglected to nurture a sense of recollection and retreat in their life: ‘A fish cannot live long out of water.’¹⁹

Some of the best insights into what ‘God’s presence and love’ meant for Marcellin come to us from the pen of his first successor, Brother François. Very different from Marcellin in character, temperament, interests and skills, François was still able to see himself as a ‘living copy’ of the Founder, and he urged his confreres to allow Father Champagnat to ‘shine through’ them. What he sought to develop among this second Marist generation – most of whom as soon as ten years after Marcellin’s death had never known the Founder personally – was an integrity and consistency in their shared spirituality. This would be rich in the affective, mystical, spirituality of the heart that is so characteristic of Francis de Sales.

François, unlike Marcellin, was a writer. We have hundreds of his personal letters, many of his notebooks and journals (which he kept assiduously) and, of course, his official communications as Superior General. It is in one of his Circulars to all the Brothers – what has come to be known as the ‘Circular on the Spirit of Faith’ – that we find a structured and deliberate attempt to outline what today we would call a ‘Marist spirituality’. It was François’ conscious intention to describe what should be distinctive about those who would follow Marcellin’s way to the God.

François himself was a man with a profound interior life, something that had obviously been nurtured in him by Marcellin. What leaps from his writings is a spirituality that is markedly affective, relational, mystical, Scriptural, mission-oriented and Christocentric. There is much that can be said about the depth and richness of this signature Circular of François, but let us sit with just several small extracts from it and what it had to say about ‘God’s presence and love’.

The Christian is ... surrounded and penetrated with the holiness and the majesty of God: his providence ... his power ... his goodness and his mercy ... his justice ... his will ... for in him we live, and move, and have our being (Acts 27:28)

We are always in the gaze of the living God ... who fills heaven and earth with his immensity (Jer 23:24), and that we are penetrated and surrounded on all sides by his divine essence.

The four means ... for nurturing [a spirit of faith] are: assiduous reading and meditating on the Word of God; a spirit of prayer; frequent communion; and the holy exercise of the presence of God.

Let us be attentive to see God in all his creatures, since they are the outcome of his goodness ... But, above all, let us seek him within ourselves, in the depths of our hearts; for it is here that he dwells as in his sanctuary ... Let us often retreat, therefore, to this inner cell, this temple of our soul, there to find God.²⁰

¹⁸ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Ch.12

¹⁹ Letters of Marcellin Champagnat, #45, 8 September 1834

²⁰ This Circular was published in four instalments spread over Circulars that Brother François wrote between 1848 and 1853. The extracts cited here are taken from Parts 1, 3 and 4. *Circulaires des Supérieurs Généraux*, Vol.2, Nos.1, 5 and 11.

His notebooks and personal journals are replete with gems of spiritual wisdom, no doubt the fruit of his own prayer. Here are just a few excerpts:

'Where can I run Lord from your spirit?' David cried, 'and where can I flee to hide from the light of your face? If I climb to heaven you are there and if I descend into hell you are present. If I go to the ends of the sea, your hand guides me and your right hand upholds me. The darkness would not be dark for you, night would be as light as day.' (Ps 139) But alas, how blind we are! We spend almost all our life unmindful of a God who is present and from whom alone we must await our happiness and who alone must govern all our mind's thoughts and all our heart's affection. He is in our midst and we do not know him! (Jn 1)

Nothing is impossible for God. We have received the Spirit of the children of God and we cry "My Father!" (Rom.8:15). The Holy Spirit prays in us.

Have confidence: 'It is I; fear not.'

It is to excite trust in us that God wants us to call him Our Father. It is the tender name which Jesus teaches us to give him. This is how you will pray: Our Father who is in heaven (Matt 6) When you pray say: Father (Lk 11) And St Paul adds that we have received the spirit of the children of God through which we shout: my Father, my Father (Rom 8). Because you are his children, he says again, God has sent into your hearts the spirit of his son which makes you cry out: My father, my father (Gal 4). We pray then the best of all prayers which seeks only to spread his freedom in us, his cherished children. How could we lack confidence? It is the Holy Spirit who prays in us.²¹

And, from one of the Sunday night conferences that he gave at the Hermitage in his latter years, after his retirement as Superior General:

It is not enough for us to pray once in a while, or even often, during the day. Prayer needs to become part of our very being, become incorporated into us, take root in us, become mingled so to speak with our very flesh and blood, so that like the psalmist, our heart and our body may tremble with love when we think of the living God. (Ps.86)

To 'tremble with love' in 'heart and body'. A powerful image. A lover's image.

The Lucan portrayal of Mary as an archetype of discipleship

Learners of languages often get tripped up on 'false friends' – words that look or sound much the same in two languages but, in fact, have different meanings. In French, for example, 'magasin' has nothing to do with

²¹ Brother François instructions and notes are contained in three notebooks in the General Archives of the Marist Brothers, catalogued as Numbers 307, 308 and 309.

a printed publication but is the common word for a shop. 'Actuel' in the same language has more of a sense of 'current' or 'present' than of 'actual'; so we say that Pope Francis is 'le Pape actuel'. Sometimes one needs to be especially careful, for example 'embarazada' in Spanish doesn't mean 'embarrassed', but 'pregnant'.

Words also can change their meaning or their usage over the centuries without changing their spellings. Again, we may misread a word of which we think we know the meaning, because we are not alert to its etymological evolution. 'Conversation' is one such word, both in English and French. When Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection or St Francis de Sales wrote in the seventeenth century about maintaining continual 'conversation' with God as way of enhancing the presence of God in their consciousness, they did not mean chatting idly to while away the hours. At that time, the word had a sense that was closer to its Latin root, 'conversatio'. It was used to refer to where one usually dwelt, and with what or with whom one lived. The word carried a sense of abode and of relationship, and importantly, also of movement: literally, 'con-' (with whom or what), '-versor' (one turned, was busy, or journeyed).

One's 'conversation' in this late medieval and early modern usage described one's habitual way of being and doing, with what one was mostly occupied, and with whom one lived and connected. For example, a monk would have been in 'monastic conversation'.

When, as a seminarian, Marcellin sat down to study the writings of Pierre de Bérulle, this is the sense of 'conversation' that he would have had to bring to his reading. Cardinal Bérulle – contemporary and friend of Vincent de Paul and Francis de Sales, founder of the Paris Oratory, the one who introduced the Carmelite reform to France, and someone who had a permeant influence on Western European spirituality – was big on Christian 'conversation', as he described it. Bérullian thinking helped to form the spiritual emphases of French Catholicism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, those that in turn helped to shape Marcellin and the Marist spirituality that is his legacy. Bérulle's writings became one of the staples of seminary studies.

Pierre de Bérulle proposed that Jesus's primary orientation was to be 'in conversation' with others and with his Father. By this, he didn't mean that Jesus talked a lot. He meant, rather, that Jesus was one with them, drawn to others wherever he found them, intimately involved with them as his ordinary place to be and, critically, offering to go with them to somewhere new. Of course, verbal interaction was an important element of this – because it allowed for challenge and discernment to take place – but to be 'in conversation' was something bigger than just that. Bérulle explained that Jesus went beyond the externals, piercing into the core of people's hearts in order to free their hearts from whatever it was that impeded their appreciation of God's love for them. He also used the expression that Jesus had a 'vie voyageère' which we may translate as a 'journeying life'. That is to say, Jesus's 'conversation' with people went somewhere. And where it went was deeper.

Like others who figured in the founding of the 'French school' of spirituality, Bérulle was especially drawn to the Johannine Scriptures. As we know, John's Gospel is structured around Jesus's encounters with people – with Nicodemus, with the Samaritan woman, with the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda, with the adulterous woman, with the blind man, with Martha and Mary, and most especially with his closest disciples – who come finally to be his 'friends'. Ultimately, in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus brings them to his own dwelling, his Father's house, his own family – into Jesus's own conversation with his Father, so richly presented in what we usually call the Last Supper discourse. The Beloved Disciple at the foot of the Cross, symbolic of each of us, is made Jesus's own sibling. The people in these encounters – each of them spiritually blind, thirsty, lame, confused or disbelieving – are the ones with whom Jesus 'converses' and 'journeys'. His 'conversa^{ti}on' with them is transformative.

From our Marist beginnings, we can see that Marcellin offered his followers a similar invitation to enter into a transforming and abiding intimacy with the Divine. The call was to come to dwell in God, and to develop a deep consciousness of the indwelling God. Let us dip again into Brother François' writings to find a window into the kind of spiritual intuitions that Marcellin fostered, noting both the immanence and the affectivity of them. In his notebooks, François interweaves the fruits of his own ponderings with ideas and quotations from a number of spiritual masters:²²

God in me: the centre and resting place of my soul . . . This presence of God is a source of consolation for the just, and a support in the stress and strain that seeking perfection may cause. We see God in the depths of our heart, as our centre and our resting place.

We in God: the natural element of our soul. Outside of God, we feel as out of place as a fish out of water or a dislocated limb. God is our natural element. We abide in God. If you take a fish out of its natural element, water, it will suffer, even if you put it in a basin of gold and precious stones. In the same way, whatever a person does, he will find his true resting place in God alone.

God is present in me, in my very breath. When I pay attention, said St Augustine, that your eyes are always on me and that you watch over me day and night with such care, and when I imagine you gazing on all that I do, penetrating all my thoughts, and observing all my plans, I am filled with amazement. It is as if in heaven and earth you had no other creature but me to govern.²³ . . . St Ambrose and St Bernard said that just as there is no single instant when we do not enjoy the fruits of the goodness and mercy of God, there should not be a single instant when we do not hold him present in spirit. St Gregory adds that being mindful of God should become like our very breathing.

Let us try, little by little, to develop the habit of recollecting our spirit that gets dissipated, and our wayward heart that gets lost in its search for comfort. Let us try to draw our spirit back from outside to within ourselves, as often and as faithfully as possible, there to see God, listen to him, and converse with him.²⁴

Which brings us to Mary.

Bérulle proposed Mary as the exemplar for how people should take up this life of Christ and live 'in conversation'. For him, the attentiveness and the responsiveness of Mary – to both God and neighbour, in the biblical imagery of the Annunciation and the Visitation respectively – captured the heart of it. Mary was the model of a disciple filled with the plenitude of a loving and merciful God, bursting forth with it in Magnificat song. In fact, the expression 'Mary in conversation with her neighbour' became one theme in seventeenth century spiritual discourse. Bérulle liked to present Mary as the one who 'treasured and pondered', the woman of prayerfulness and attentiveness, who could do nothing else but go out to converse with others about what was in her heart.

These Marian images from the Lucan Scriptures – not only of Annunciation and Visitation, but also of Pen-

²² These are from the Notebooks of Brother François #308, pp.916-22. Several of the passages from this part of his Notebooks are also found in Ch.5 of the *Life of Marcellin Champagnat* by Brother Jean-Baptiste

²³ Cf. Rodriguez, *Treatise on the Presence of God*, Ch.1.

²⁴ François then adds this citation: *Bourdaloue: Retreat 5th day: Consideration; Rodriguez, Christian Perfection, Part I, 6th Treatise.*

tecost – became archetypal ones for Marcellin and the founding Marists. Steeped in emphases that they had gleaned from Bérullian thought and from other writers they encountered in the seminary, they took Mary as model. Her personification of what it meant to be a disciple of Christ was drawn most especially from Luke. The spiritual tradition that has developed from them beckons Marists to identify with Mary as she is presented in the Gospel of Luke and in Acts, in much the same way that the Beloved Disciple is presented in the Gospel of John as the model of discipleship. Marist spirituality proposes the Lucan Mary as emblematic of Marists' discipleship of Christ: Mary in the first two chapters of Luke, and the first two chapters of Acts. Indeed, Mary and the Holy Spirit are the only two characters who appear in the opening chapters of both Books: a deliberate literary link. *To be Mary*, to embrace God's presence and love in a Marian way, is really the essence of Marist spirituality.

Chapters 1 and 2 of the Lucan Gospel – the so-called 'Infancy Narrative' – is bookended by reference to the Temple, which a late first century reader would have recognised as an allusion to the traditional dwelling place of God (by the time of the Gospel's writing, of course, destroyed). Zechariah's meeting with the angel occurs there in the Temple, as does the 'Nunc Dimittis' prayer of Simeon, the prophecy of Anna, and Jesus with the teachers of the Law (Lk 1:5-25; 2:67-79). (And the final verse of the final chapter of the Gospel ends there – Lk.24:53). Yet, Mary's most extraordinary encounters with the Divine, and the revelation the Divine, in these opening chapters take place not with the Chief Priest in the Holy of Holies but with lowly people and foreigners in ordinary places – in Nazareth, in the hill country of Judea, and in a cave in Bethlehem. In the sequel – the Acts of the Apostles – Mary waits with the Apostles in the Upper Room, the place of Eucharist (which by tradition is located above the Tomb of David on Mount Zion – again God's dwelling place). The significance of the allusion is clear: Mary herself is now the Ark of the New Covenant, the new place where the presence of God is met. In Mary, graced with God's favour. In Mary, whose whole being rejoices in God. In Mary, who waits in faith for the Spirit. The bottom-of-the-social-scale shepherds see the Divine from their fields; at the end of chapter 2, Jesus ends up again in Nazareth, in the Galilean back country. Extraordinary things happen in the ordinary: an angel visits, a virgin conceives, a barren woman gives birth, a dumb man speaks.

Paragraphs 44 to 90 of *Water from the Rock* offer a powerful and insightful Marist exploration for how the Marian disposition portrayed in Luke 1:26-38 – the Annunciation passage – could play out in our lives. These rich paragraphs merit frequent re-visiting. They can lead us to foster in ourselves what it means to be treasurers and ponderers of life's events – discerners of the movement of the Spirit in our lives, contemplatives alert to the extraordinary presence and love of God in our everyday. In the hyper-sensory world in which we find ourselves today, they call us to be still and to listen, and suggest ways for us to be so.

The dynamic of 'visitation' – or in Bérullian terms, 'conversation' – also runs through these initial chapters of both of the Lucan books: an angel visits (twice), Mary visits Elizabeth, the neighbours visit Elizabeth after the birth of John, both Mary and Zechariah praise God for visiting his people. Annunciation and visitation go together, as Christ-life takes flesh.

Yet there is a stinger lurking in all this gushing of joy and epiphany, one that is central to appreciating Mary's place as a model of discipleship, and for how to deepen our sense of the presence and love of God. It comes in Simeon's prophecy (Lk.2:25) in a clause that seems at first to be a little parenthetical to his main point: 'and a sword will pierce your own heart, too.'

At one level, this line presents itself simply as a compassionate acknowledgement of the anguish that is ahead of Mary who as a mother will see her son suffer betrayal and execution. But there is a deeper reading of this verse, one that is concerned with how Luke presents the ideal of Christian discipleship, and Mary as the paragon of this. Recurringly Luke comes back to the core of what it means to be a disciple: it is to be someone who is attentive to the word of God, obedient to it, and acts on it (cf. Lk. 6:47; 8:21; 11:28). The mother of Jesus is portrayed as being and doing just that, linked to each of these verses. Luke then tells us that such hearing and responding involves the daily 'taking up of the cross' (Lk. 9:23-25). It means a leaving

behind of all that we 'own' or, inversely, all that owns us. The first four disciples to be called hear and respond by doing this – Simon, James and John, and Levi (Lk. 5:11; 28). Discipleship is not possible without being dispossessed (cf. Lk. 14:33; Acts 2:45). Some, like the rich nobleman, have difficulty with this (Lk. 18:23); others, like Zaccheus, can forsake all their self-righteousness and embrace it. So Jesus comes to stay in his home (Lk. 19:1-10).

This way of understanding discipleship was explicitly applied in the formative years of Marist spirituality. In his *Circular on the Spirit of Faith*, in which Brother François consciously sets out to describe what should be distinctive about the Marists, we find this:

It is ... to think, to speak and to act according to the Gospel ... To be a disciple of Jesus Christ does not simply mean some pious practice ... but to understand properly these words of our Saviour: Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me (Luke 9:23). ... It is the conforming of our thoughts, our judgements, and our actions with the thoughts, judgements and actions of our Lord.

... Where among us are the truly poor in spirit, the truly humble of heart, the true lovers of the Cross of Jesus Christ?

.. the very spirit and character of our small Congregation ... our distinctive characteristic, must be of humility and simplicity ... after the example of the Blessed Virgin, our Mother and our Model ... Nothing but a lively faith in the words and example of Jesus Christ ... can dissipate our illusions of vainglory, prevent false calculations of pride, and show us that true glory ... is found only in humility, simplicity and modesty.²⁵

Water from the Rock uses the phrase 'journey in faith' as the title for the chapter in the text that unpacks the Annunciation passage. It is the same expression that Bérulle used, and it speaks to something important: our experience of the 'presence and love of God' is not to be a static or mountain-top one. It is, rather, a journey. It is a life journey that is disruptive, disarming and dispossessing. The conditions of the journey call us to leave aside all that we might have imagined for ourselves – scattering the proud with all their plans, sending the rich empty (Lk. 1:53;55) – and to discern another way forward. It is to be vulnerable, to expose one's heart to be pierced, for there is a Word that seeks to make its home in our heart.

It is a journey also that needs to be discerning. A disciple is not a doormat. Mary, in Luke's account of the Annunciation, wonders and questions. Her 'fiat' comes only after that. Nor is her assent born in any way from fear of the consequences of resisting. Again, Luke makes this clear: both Zechariah's and Mary's responses come from a heart-space where they are not afraid (Lk: 1:12; 30), for God's visitation of his people is about freeing them from fear (Lk. 1:74). Jesus leaves them with his peace, and with assurance of no reason to fear, as long as they have come to faith (cf. Lk.24:36-49). François, in the Circular cited above, names a 'spirit of faith' as the kernel of being a Marist.

A journey in faith implies growth in faith. As we have seen previously, the wisdom of the centuries has traditionally framed this as a three-step process or a tridimensional experience: the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive. While people have differed in their naming and enumerating of these steps or spaces, and the degree to which spiritual growth might be a nuanced and centripetal journey inwards rather than a definitive and linear process up a ladder, the basic premise is the same: the spiritual life has movement and deepening, a journey towards an increasing singleness of heart. In our Marist language, we may prefer to

²⁵ Taken from the first instalment of the Circular. *Circulaires*, Vol.5, No.1

call this 'simplicity of heart'. The journey certainly involves purging, discipline and decision, but not in any Pelagian sense. Mary did not conceive the Christ-life within her through her own agency. The overall direction is towards becoming more and more marked by the intimacy of total union with the Divine of which Mary sings in the Magnificat.

My own experience suggests that it is a journey that is neither even nor uninterrupted. I am reminded of an older Dominican friar who spoke to us in the first year of our training to be Brothers. He shared his observation of seeing many young people like us, readily pledging to give their whole heart to God, then spending the rest of their lives taking it back bit by bit. I recall being quite disillusioned at his comments. He was right, nonetheless, in that over time we can allow barnacles to collect on our hull, and the passion of our youth to grow dull. The young can be far less accommodating to compromise than those who have grown tired and jaded. Avoiding such spiritual sclerosis, ridding our heart of the accretions that can grow it, is a continual process. The heart needs to be pierced again and again. At least, I have found it to be so.

It is to be hoped, through it all, that the 'patient endurance' of which Teresa of Ávila speaks will gradually and ever more surely obtain all that the heart desires. For the older heart, the heart that has endured, the gentler heart, will be more ready to be open to the peace the Lord.

In the end, perhaps as it was for Mary, all our spiritual journeying brings us to be, quite literally, *at home* with the words of Gabriel in Luke that announced the presence of God incarnate: 'Rejoice ... the Lord is with you'. Conversation ensues.

2. Trust in God

'Nisi Dominus ...'

Anyone with a passing knowledge of Marcellin Champagnat would know how frequent was his recourse to these two Latin words from the opening verse of Psalm 127: 'Unless the Lord ...'²⁶ We find the phrase *Nisi Dominus* written in his letters, in the side columns of his notebooks, and peppered through his conferences; many of the early Brothers attest to how often the Founder spontaneously came out with the words. The sentiments of first part of this Psalm were at the core of the prayer that became his life. They have come to have a special place in our shared Marist spirituality to this day.

Unless the Lord build the house, the work of the labourers is useless

Unless the Lord look over the city, in vain do the guards keep vigil

In vain is your early rising, and your going late to rest ...

Often enough, however, Marcellin's characteristic trust in God – in 'Providence', as it was sometimes expressed – is simplistically understood. 'Trust in God' – which *Water from the Rock* names as the second trait of our living Marist spirituality – was, however, anything but facile for Marcellin. Indeed, it emerged from the deepest spiritual wrestle of his life. That is the case for each of us, or needs to be: the coming to a place, as a discerning and critically thinking adult, where one trusts God implicitly in the midst of all of life's pains and puzzlements, is rarely preceded by plain sailing. Marcellin's mature sense of trust – childlike (as the Gospels tell us) but not childish – were the mark of his later years as a genuine mystic. Understanding this 'trust in God' is a huge key for unlocking the richness of Marist spirituality, but we need to appreciate what it meant for Marcellin or, rather, what it came to mean to for him.

For reaching this understanding, we may not be helped by Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet, Marcellin's official biographer, and the nineteenth century's approach to hagiography that he employed. Jean-Baptiste devotes a whole chapter of his book to the topic, naming 'trust in God' as one of the attributes that most defined Marcellin.²⁷ But it is a disappointingly shallow analysis that he provides there. The chapter carries a catalogue of fortunate and unlikely blessings that came Marcellin's way: new recruits at critical moments; timely donations from benefactors; successes against the odds. The author contrasts this providential flourishing of the Marist project with some rather unflattering assessments of Marcellin's aptitude to lead it. His point is, of course, that it all prospered because it was God's work and not the whim of human imagination nor the fruit of human effort. He cites some of Marcellin's favourite expressions: 'When we have God on our side, nothing is impossible'; 'You insult God by asking him for little'; 'The bigger the obstacles we face, the stronger should be our confidence in God'; 'Put your confidence in God and count on him; he will help you, bless you, and see to all your needs'; 'I have the purse of Providence; the more you take out, the more it contains'; 'Providence is my strong-box. That's where I find the money'; and other sentiments along similar lines.²⁸

²⁶ Most biographies of Marcellin and most of the early Marist literature refer to this Psalm as 126, as Marcellin did himself, since this was the numbering used in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible which was in common use at the time, and which aligned with the Greek Septuagint. Most modern translations follow the traditional Hebrew numbering, in which this is Psalm 127. 'Nisi Dominus' are the first two words of the Psalm in Latin, which is the language in which Marcellin would have usually prayed it – 'Unless the Lord ...'

²⁷ Ch.3 of Part 2 of *The Life of Marcellin Champagnat*.

²⁸ *Ibid, passim*, except for the last of the quotations which comes from the *Memoir* of Brother Sylvestre.

One reading of such statements is that they smack of arrogance, the kind of smug self-assurance that religious fanatics exude when they claim that their cause is righteous and that they have God on their side. ‘Oooh,’ I hear you snap, ‘you can’t be saying that Marcellin was an arrogant fanatic. He was such an amiable and well-regarded guy. And he said so much about humility.’ Sure. But, there was a lot more to Marcellin than that, just as there is a lot more to the spiritual tradition that is his legacy.

Let us touch into Marcellin’s spiritual journey in a little more detail.

His innate talent was to be a leader, and by natural inclination Marcellin was a doer. We see these attributes from early in his time at the minor seminary. He got out and did things, and he easily gathered others around him. People were attracted to him, and inspired by him. These were personal traits that served Marcellin well as a founder. They are the kind of qualities that leaders need. There was a degree of bullishness in this, a can-do and will-do attitude.

And Marcellin certainly could do and did do. We celebrate the images of him at the rock-face, pick in hand. Brother Laurent in an early Memoir, tells us that it was Marcellin

... who built our whole house at La Valla ... When there were some big stones to carry, it was always he himself who carried them. It took two of us to put them on his back. When he came in at evening, his clothes were often torn, and he was covered in sweat and dust. He was never happier than when he had worked long and hard. Many times I saw him working in the rain and snow. When we others had left our jobs, he continued to work, and often bareheaded despite of the harsh weather.²⁹

The French can be more ambivalent about such people than those of us more immersed in an Anglo-American culture that often admires the risk-taking entrepreneur and people with a boys-own, sleeves-rolled-up, daring-do approach to life. Even in our local Marist history, we honour those who have dreamed big, maybe broken an egg or two to make their omelettes, presumed permissions that had not been received, and built grandly. Think only of the great sandstone edifice that the early Brothers in this country erected prominently atop Hunters Hill in Sydney, dreaming of a boarding college of 500 students when they had barely 70 on the books, and next-to-nothing in the bank; or the move in Adelaide from a couple of wooden buildings in Largs Bay to the generous estate at Glenelg; or the shifting of the boarders cramped on the verandas of the Brothers’ monastery and postage-stamp hillside at Rosalie in Brisbane, to the sprawling grounds of a former seminary at Ashgrove in a city still recovering from the Great Depression; or similarly from Subiaco to Churchlands in Perth. The building of the Chapel at St Gregory’s College and the digging out of its Olympic-sized swimming pool are part of that Marist community’s folklore.

Marcellin was like that. The French, though, had clinical, albeit colloquial, diagnosis for people who displayed such behaviours: *la maladie de la pierre*, literally ‘rock sickness’.³⁰ It was seen as a psychological disorder, what may be labelled today a ‘syndrome’. They concluded that Marcellin suffered from it, a compulsive builder. One of the administrators of the seminary, Nicholas de la Croix d’Azolette (later Archbishop of Auch), was one of a number of influential critics of Marcellin during the construction of The Hermitage in 1824-25: ‘You build in vain,’ he warned him. ‘You will become the butt and laughing-stock of everyone.’³¹

²⁹ *Memoir of Brother Laurent*, written probably in 1841, just after Marcellin’s death in response to the invitation from Brother François for the Brothers to send in their memories of the Founder. The little script of Laurent is the oldest pen portrait we have of Marcellin.

³⁰ The term is also used for kidney stones, but there is no connection between the two usages.

³¹ Cf. *Origines Maristes Vol.4* p.191 – reported by Fr Terraillon. Br Jean-Baptiste also records this, without naming the bishop.

And just a year after the first section of the Hermitage was completed, they seemed to be right.

The year 1826 was Marcellin's *annus horribilis*. In hindsight, it was also the year that made him, but that was far from clear at the time. Everything seemed to be collapsing around him: serious debts were mounting and the creditors were moving in; senior clergy in the Diocese of Lyon were conspiring against him in a prolonged campaign to discredit him, culminating in a formal 'apostolic visitation' of the Hermitage; he lost his two most capable Brothers – his first recruit (Jean-Marie Granjon) dismissed after what seems to have been worsening mental illness, and his clerk-of-works for building the Hermitage (Jean-François Roumesy) leaving to join another group; the other founding member of the community at Lavalla (Louis Audras) was wanting to pack his bags and head to the seminary; the first two Brothers to die had passed away at young ages the previous year, while a novice died in 1826; and most cutting of all, his two fellow-priests at the Hermitage left – Jean-Claude Courveille, who was original leader of the Marist group at the seminary, departed suddenly under a cloud, taking two Brothers with him, while another who was there at the pledge of Fourvière, Etienne Terrailon, refused Marcellin's request to be the executor of his will and, feeling there was wasn't much future in Marcellin's project, left to do inland missionary work. On top of that, Marcellin's physical and emotional health had deteriorated to the point of collapse. On returning from a visit to schools on Christmas Eve, he fell apart. He became bedridden, for weeks, and people expected that he would die. It looked hopeless. He was just 37 years of age.

This was truly Marcellin's 'dark night of the soul', in the sense that St John of Cross conceptualised it. We have probably all heard that expression from the great Carmelite mystic – his *noche oscura* – but it is often employed loosely to describe any period of difficulty. What did John of the Cross mean by it? And later, another Carmelite, Thérèse of Lisieux? Let us first dispel what they didn't mean: they didn't mean having a particularly tough time of things. Nor did they mean slipping into clinical depression, what we Australians colloquially call 'the black dog'. Nor did they mean not being able to see the way forward for the present moment, although the Spanish 'oscura' does also have this sense. John of the Cross coined the expression to convey an experience of being absolutely disarmed and denuded, of being purged of all accretions, masks, defences, self-assurances, possessions, everything. To be brought to nothing. For John it had two phases – first a purging of the senses and, second, a purging of the spirit. That is where Marcellin found himself.

He was certainly under stress. Some of the classic symptoms of stress are clear in his letters: he feels alone; he believes that he has to do everything himself, and immediately; he doubts his own worth and his ability to move forward.³² We see recurring in his letters a tell-tale phrase: '*je suis seul*' or '*je suis le seul*': I am alone. I am alone against the wind. It's all up to me. Stress 101. But what was the cause of this emotional condition? That is the important question. What exactly was his torment? What ate him up? By nature, Marcellin was one to churn things over; he didn't let concerns go easily. The depth of his compassion and empathy was matched by a depth of anxiety. He felt deeply. Some would say, that is no coincidence that it was a stomach cancer that he developed in the 1830s.³³ What was it that struck him down in 1826?

It was not, per se, the debts, or the 'desertions' (his word), or the criticisms, or his failing health. It was, rather, what they signified for him. His essential torment was an anxious wrestle with this question: 'Am I doing God's will?'

As a young priest, he had had no doubt that he had been doing so. Of course he was about the will of God,

³² See Letters 3, 4, 6 and 7 (in *Letters of Marcellin Champagnat*) written to senior clergy in the diocese, each of with similar content and feeling. They appear as drafts in his notebooks, so they provide a good insight into the space in which he found himself.

³³ Allow me to make an additional comment by way of footnote. I do it this way because my comment is moot, perhaps tendentious. It concerns the Enneagram, and where Marcellin's might have found himself on the construct of the spiritual life. Although it is an inherently fraught presumption to name where someone else other than oneself might be on the Enneagram, I feel confident that Marcellin was an Eight, and a healthy, 'redeemed' Eight. As such, his fundamental direction spiritually needed to be to surrender power and control to God. It may be instructive to understand his spiritual maturing from this perspective. It is also interesting to note that as an Eight he would have found himself in the centre of 'gut' space on the Enneagram. He was a man of the gut, unquestionably.

he felt: bringing education to the ignorant, sustenance to the deprived, healing to the wounded, Word and Sacrament to all who were otherwise denied them. Simple. If things did not go as well as expected, from time to time, then it was a matter of his working harder and praying more fervently so that they would. This was Marcellin in the first seven or eight years of his time at La Valla, and then the construction of The Hermitage. He was a driven, confident and passionate minister of the gospel. Whereas others often saw him as stubborn – his spiritual director apparently gave up on him as being too self-willed – he might have regarded himself as resilient and not easily discouraged, just the kind of person that a fractured and wounded church needed.

Then it came apart. All his work risked coming to nothing, falling in like a house of cards. It was in this period of his life that Marcellin really came to a spiritual humility.³⁴ From Brother Sylvestre's *Memoir*, we learn that Marcellin came to see what he called 'pride' as his 'predominant passion'.³⁵ It is worth noting that Sylvestre only knew Marcellin in the last ten years of the Founder's life – in his spiritual maturity. Yet from seminary days until his last days, we see evidence in his resolutions and his personal writing of his tussle with 'pride'. It is, though, as a man moving into mid-life that it really hits Marcellin. It is a Marian moment. Like Mary at the Annunciation, he is brought to ask, 'How can this happen?' 'How can Christ be born in me? It's impossible.' Only then, like Mary, can he reach the point of not only hearing but being wholly captured by the angel's assurance that with God the impossible is possible, and only from God can 'the child be holy'. That is when he can he say, with Mary, 'Fiat!' 'Let it be done *to me* as *you* have said.'

This stage of trust, to which Marcellin arrives as a mature man, becomes thereafter the core pursuit of his life. Each of his biographers writes of it. His driving force is to be aligned with what God wants. He calls it '*le point capital*', the main thing. Marcellin reaches the point where his desire 'to be' dwarfs any impulse 'to do'. That is not to imply that he becomes idle. Quite the contrary; he works with even greater resolve and spends his energies just as unsparingly. But it happens from a spiritually different space. Jean-Baptiste encapsulates it for us:

*When he was undertaking a good work, only one thing preoccupied him: to know whether it was God's will. 'I don't care a whit about the embarrassment of possible failure; I am more frightened of being unfaithful to God than being despised by people.'*³⁶

Unfortunately, Jean-Baptiste does not really give us a sense of Marcellin's spiritual growth. He retrofits the Marcellin of the last ten years of life onto the young curate and the indefatigable stone mason. Yet that does not deny the validity of his description.

Brother François offers us a richer and more nuanced understanding of this quality of trust as he learned it from Marcellin. At one point in his journals, so frequently infused with Scriptural references and allusions, he takes us to Mark 6:45-52 – the disciples on the Sea of Galilee rowing against a strong wind when they grow frightened at the sight of what seems to be a ghost walking across the water towards them. The one verse written by François is Jesus's words: 'Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid'. God is present in the very midst of the disciples' struggles and doubts, an encouraging and calming presence. For François, Jesus was at the heart of his very being. The trust born of this recognition – for François as

³⁴ In his *Memoir* – which was written primarily to support Marcellin's cause for beatification when it was being considered by the Diocese of Lyon – Sylvestre returns to the theme of 'humility' more than any other. He uses the words "humility" and "humble" over seventy times in the narrative, and unambiguously describes this trait as the single most distinctive characteristic both of Marcellin and of his intention for the spirit of the Marists Brothers. He links humility with the other two traditional Marist virtues of simplicity and modesty, and he cites Marcellin's use of the metaphor of the violet to explain their significance.

³⁵ *Memoir of Brother Sylvestre*, Ch.2

³⁶ J-B Furet, *op.cit.*, Part 2, Ch.3

for the disciples in the boat – was not of a tub-thumping bravado, but more a deeply rooted serenity. It is perhaps instructive to note the French word that François used for ‘trust’ was ‘*confiance*’, a word that links the concepts of trust and confidence as two dimensions of the same heart space. François centres his *confiance* in God and ‘God’s desire’, not in himself. It is, rather, all about God for him: ‘God desires our good with an infinite desire,’ he journals. He goes on to ponder God as ‘Father’ – being drawn Luke’s account of the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2), to Paul’s sense of God as ‘abba’ in Romans (8:15) and Galatians (4:6), and finally to John 15.

This is instructive. If we want to understand Marcellin’s sense of trust in God, and what this trust means in contemporary Marist spirituality, this is where we need to end up: John 15:1-17. This is where François leads us; this is where we need to be to appreciate what *Water from the Rock* says about trust. It is all about abiding relationship and fruitful oneness. The whole four chapters of the Last Supper Discourse in John (14-17) delve profoundly into the oneness of Jesus with his Father, the disciples with Jesus, and the fecundity of the Spirit who comes, but it is the first part of Chapter 15 that is especially helpful for us for exploring what ‘trust’ means for Marist spirituality. It is here we find the final ‘I am’ of the fourth Gospel.

Let us look at this familiar text:

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.
He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit,
and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.
You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you.
Remain in me, as I remain in you.*

*Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine,
so neither can you unless you remain in me.
I am the vine, you are the branches.
Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit,
because without me you can do nothing.
Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither;
people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned.*

*If you remain in me
and my words remain in you,
ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.
By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit
and become my disciples.
As the Father loves me, so I also love you.
Remain in my love.*

If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love,

*just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.
I have told you this so that my joy may be in you
and your joy may be complete.
This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.
No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

*You are my friends if you do what I command you.
I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing.
I have called you friends,
because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.*

*It was not you who chose me,
but I who chose you
and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain
so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.
This I command you: love one another.*

This is not the place for an extended exegesis on one of the richest passages from one of the richest books of the Bible. Innumerable doctoral theses have spilled ink unpacking it. Each line drips with meaning and profundity. But let us imagine Marcellin, or François, or indeed any great Marist we may have known in our life, sitting with this passage, as well they must have, and coming to appropriate personally the truth of it: that any fruitfulness they may have, any asking they may do, and all their joy, are fundamentally rooted in friendship with Jesus. Without that, nothing. Zilch. Nada. But it is more than human friendship: the absolute intimacy of abiding, of remaining. In love. Abide in my love, says Jesus. This is where Marcellin arrived spiritually, and the Johannine Scriptures caught it most effectively for him. This is the kind of spirituality he hoped would be his legacy.

Trust, as it is framed here, is both fruitful and joyful. The converse we know sadly too well: distrust leads to cynicism, jaundice and despair. And barrenness.

It is in the light of John 15 that we can best come to the two paragraphs from *Water from the Rock* that introduce the Marist characteristic of trust in God:

17. Marcellin's relationship with God, combined with knowledge of his limitations, explains his unbounded confidence in God. The depth of this trust amazed those who worked with him, and scandalised some who judged his actions as reckless. In his humble way, Marcellin saw God at work, and so acted with courage and commitment. 'Let us not offend God, asking him very little. The bigger is our demand, the more we will be pleasing to God.' Marcellin's oft-expressed invocations 'If the Lord does not build the house' and 'You know my God' were the spontaneous expressions of this confident trust.

18. We endeavour to develop our relationship with God so that, just as for Marcellin, it is our daily source of renewed spiritual and apostolic dynamism. This vitality makes us daring, despite

our short-comings and limited resources. Drawing from Marcellin's experience we embrace the mysteries of our life with confidence, openness and self-giving.

Trust in God is founded on relationship and humility, as it was for Mary. Like Mary, and like Marcellin, the Marist is assured not to fear. This is not a glib assurance, but one that comes from deep spiritual encounter, and from which emerges both a joyful serenity and a life-bringing fruitfulness. God incarnate. God abiding. It is not plain sailing; it was certainly not for Marcellin. It was not for Mary. But the deeper the ask, the deeper the trust.

3. Love of Jesus and his Gospel

Jean Villelonge was born in 1810 in Saint-Genest-Malifaux, less than ten kilometres from Marcellin's hometown of Marlhès. The Champagnat family was well known in those parts, not least from the prominent role that Jean-Baptiste Champagnat, Marcellin's father, played in local affairs before, during and after the Revolution. We don't know what drew young Jean to apply to join Marcellin's nascent group of Brothers. Perhaps he had heard of the dynamic work of the youngest surviving Champagnat boy who was now a young curate over in Lavalla, or perhaps it was the arrival of the first two Brothers in Marlhès in 1820, just at the time that Jean would have begun to prepare for his first Holy Communion. In any event, it was just four years after that, in early winter, that he made the good day's walk over the Pilat range down to Lavalla, and moved himself into the crowded little house there. Two years later, in the chapel of the newly constructed Hermitage, he received the Brothers' habit as a novice and was given the religious name of Dorothée (not one that works so well in English!). Only twelve years later, at the age of 27, he was sadly to die of pulmonary tuberculosis.

The fruit of those dozen years was an enduring legacy in the spirituality that emerged from the first generation of Marists. Brother Dorothée may seem to have been an unlikely source of such influence. Never the scholar, the young man asked not to be a classroom teacher, and he was put in charge of the cows at the Hermitage. He was known for his caring and hard work with the herd, and also for his sense of humour, his grounded wisdom, and his deep piety. In his spiritual profundity and young death, he is a little reminiscent of Thérèse of Lisieux; in his rich sense of the abiding love of God while carrying out his chosen lowly occupation, another Carmelite comes to mind: Brother Lawrence.

The story is told of Dorothée's being accused one evening in a Chapter of Faults of being distracted during Mass.³⁷ The perhaps sanctimonious young Brother who admonished him said that he had observed that Dorothée didn't turn the pages of his missal during Mass, but 'amused himself by looking at a picture'. Father Champagnat, who was presiding at the ritual, asked Dorothée to go to his room and get the picture. When he returned, he presented the Founder with a holy card that depicted Jesus on the Cross. It was smudged and faded from being kissed often. Marcellin, of course, found no fault and praised Brother Dorothée for his 'unmeasured' love of Jesus.

Lest we be tempted to think that Dorothée, as a young adult man, retained a facile, sentimental or spiritually arrested relationship with Jesus, his biographer pre-emptively assures us otherwise. The incident in the Chapter of Faults is preceded by three accounts of conversations that reveal a genuine profundity in Dorothée's apparent simplicity. The first, which took place while he was looking after some cows in the field, was with a visiting priest. Initially dismissive of what he may have suspected were rote answers from an unlearned cowherd, the priest finally came away thinking he has just spoken 'with a Doctor of the Church'. 'Where should one seek the love of God,' the priest had asked. 'In the heart of Jesus,' replied Dorothée. 'And how long do you spend each day in the heart of Jesus?' the priest continued. 'As long as I can, but always less than I would want.'³⁸ It was about desire and relationship for Dorothée, and purity of heart in each.

³⁷ The 'Chapter of Faults' is a ritual of mutual accountability in religious communities that traces its origins to the earliest days of monasticism; it had become well established by late medieval times, and a common element of the Rule of most religious orders. It involves the public admission of a transgression of the rules or customs of the community, done in the presence of the whole community – usually a self-admission, but it could be also an accusation by another community member – then a public sanction given by the superior of the community. By the 19th century, the practice had been influenced by the rigours of Jansenism and had become rather petty and legalistic in many places. By and large, it fell into disuse after the reforms of Vatican II.

³⁸ *Biographies de Quelques Frères*, Ch.3, p.40

The second conversation was with Marcellin himself (with whom he spoke often and at length apparently). It followed a reading at lunch from *The Imitation of Christ*, during which Dorothée seemed to be inattentive.³⁹ Upon being quizzed by the Founder, Dorothée confessed to being captured by a single feeling that the reading evoked in him: that Jesus' whole life was an embrace of the Cross. 'These words made such a vivid impact on me,' said Dorothée, 'that I cannot describe it.' The biographer goes on to say – no doubt reflecting Marcellin's own response – that Dorothée, like Paul in I Corinthians 2:2, 'knew only Jesus Christ, and him crucified . . . He busied himself only with Jesus . . . His passion stayed with him everywhere . . . as he worked in the fields, he burned with love.'⁴⁰

The third conversation is also with Marcellin. One of Dorothée's daily customs was to make the Stations of the Cross in the chapel, on his own. While Marcellin affirmed this practice, he thought that Dorothée might not be making the most of the exercise because he didn't use a book or set prayers. 'At each station', said Dorothée when questioned, 'I contemplate Jesus before my eyes. Then I tell him I love him.' Marcellin is reported to have had nothing to add or suggest. Dorothée didn't need any written aide; his method was 'excellent'.⁴¹ It is easy to imagine the words of Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure coming to Marcellin, for Saint-Jure was such a key author in his own formation: 'The love of Jesus Christ makes us love contemplative prayer.'⁴² It was in contemplation of Jesus that we can 'taste God in us.'⁴³

From the short life of Brother Dorothée there are more examples we could draw that reflect the intensity of his spiritual life – the counterpoint of his humility and awe in the presence of a loving God in whose immense presence he felt absorbed, and yet his close intimacy and simple affectivity in his relationship with Jesus. While such spiritual emphases were characteristic of the main currents of post-Reformational French spirituality in which Marcellin was formed and in which he wanted the first Marists to be immersed, it is instructive to look at what Marcellin emphasised especially and, even more pointedly, how and through whom he sought to have this spiritual formation take place.

For over a quarter of a century, at Lavalla and then at The Hermitage, there were only two novice masters. The entire first generation of Marists were, as novices, under the care and influence of these two men chosen by Marcellin. Who were they? Why did Marcellin select them, and keep them for so long? Other people certainly had a hand in the formation of the novices – not least, Marcellin himself of course – and the role of novice master was not quite as critical it may be today, but it is nonetheless insightful for us to look at who these two novice masters were. The first was Brother Louis, Jean-Baptiste Audras who was the younger of the first two to move in on 2 January 1817 while still in his teens. The second, Brother Bonaventure, arrived in 1830 as a man already in his mid-twenties. We could say a great deal about both – each one a genuine mystic – but let us highlight a few things about Louis.

Brother Louis was given first place in the collection of short biographies of sixteen of the early Brothers published in 1868 in what today we would call a 'sequel' to the biography of Marcellin Champagnat twelve years before.⁴⁴ (Dorothée was the third.) The purpose of the book was to portray important elements of

³⁹ Following the tradition of monastic communities, it was common practice that main meals at The Hermitage were taken on silence while one of the Brothers read from a spiritual text. The late medieval devotional classic, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471) was a staple of religious houses. Indeed, this book itself was significant influence for shaping the spirituality of Marcellin and, subsequently, the Marist spirituality which became his spiritual legacy.

⁴⁰ *Biographies de Quelques Frères*, Ch.3, p.41

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.42

⁴² *De la connaissance et de l'amour de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ*. Ch VI

⁴³ *Ibid*. Ch.VII

⁴⁴ It was written by the same author, Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet, and called *Biographies de Quelques Frères*. The first English edition did not appear until 1936, slightly edited, and with the addition of a summary of the life

the founding Marist spirituality as they were lived out by some of the first Brothers. The spiritual quality attributed to Louis was a 'burning love of Jesus'. It is telling to note that this was the first characteristic of Marist spirituality named in the book.

How this was lived by Brother Louis, and how it was understood by Marcellin, is, however, more nuanced than a simple or tritely expressed 'love of Jesus'. An incident related in the book tells us a great deal: an account of a session of spiritual direction given by Marcellin to Louis.⁴⁵ It is an intimate but intense conversation, and quite extended. Marcellin really puts Louis under the hammer. Many Brothers reported how gentle Marcellin was as a spiritual director and confessor, but this conversation is different. It reflects the depth that Marcellin senses in Louis and, as a master of the spiritual life, Marcellin intuitively knows how far he could take him. It is not responsible for a spiritual director to play with the emotions of the one being accompanied, so Marcellin is in tricky territory here. But he knows what he is doing, because he knows Louis so well. It is a journey that Marcellin himself has taken, a journey inwards that involves one's whole being.

'Do you love Jesus with all your heart, Brother Louis?' Marcellin asks. 'Do you love with him your conscience, Brother Louis?' 'Do you love Jesus with your mind?' 'With your will and all your strength, with the sweat of your brow, as St Vincent de Paul put it?' 'Brother Louis, do you love Jesus with your words?' Each question is followed by Marcellin's expounding on the implications of what an affirmative answer would entail. The passion builds. The biographer describes Marcellin as being 'on fire'. He pulls no punches. Then, a most interesting question: 'Brother Louis, do you weep? He who does not weep loves Jesus but a little! Blessed are those who weep.' It is an intense way in which to address spiritual humility, but intensity and love go together. Marcellin wants to take the master of his novices deeply, very deeply, into his interior self.

Then Marcellin comes again with the same series of questions, this time in rapid succession like a series of boxer's jabs, left and right: 'Brother Louis, do you love Jesus with all your heart? Do you love Jesus with your mind? Do you love Jesus with all your strength?' Finally, a knock-out right hook: 'Brother Louis, if Jesus asked you, "Do you love me?", as he asked Peter, how would you answer? Could you truly say, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you?"' Brother Louis, we are told, 'was moved and touched to the point of tears by that series of questions, but Father Champagnat himself remained just as impassioned.'

Marcellin has brought Louis to a critical moment. He has been silent throughout and is now spent. He responds in a *cri de cœur*, ' "O Father!" he cried at the last question, "I dare not assure Jesus that I love him, but it seems to me that I desire to love him, and with all my heart".'

Desire.

Marcellin knew that the spiritual life was all about desire, and what we do with it. This was a key theme of Francis de Sales, his favourite spiritual writer, one that Marcellin had embraced.⁴⁶ He had done so because

of Brother François who, of course, was still alive when the French edition was published. In the original 1868 French edition, as well as the 16 Brothers whose lives are recounted, there are an additional 27 to whom reference is made because of particular aspects of their Marist living.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pp.25-31

⁴⁶ Another source that explored the role of desire in the spiritual life (at least implicitly), and that was influential in the shaping of Marist spirituality, was the book by the eighteenth century French Minim friar [Michel-Ange Marin](#) entitled *Vies des pères des déserts d'Orient, avec leur doctrine spirituelle et leur discipline monastique*. ('Lives of the Desert Fathers of the East, and their spiritual doctrine and monastic discipline'). In some ways it is in the same genre as *Biographies de Quelques Frères*, and one may well wonder if it influenced Brother Jean-Baptiste in shaping that latter book. Certainly, in his Preface to the *Life of Father Champagnat*, Jean-Baptiste consciously puts the Marists in the tradition of the Desert Fathers. Originally published in 1761, a new edition appeared in 1824. It was therefore a spiritual text with some currency and regard during the founding Marist period. Its emphases are arguably more ascetical than mystical – hence its being referenced here as a footnote rather than in the main

it was the prism through which he had come to make some sense of his own experience. That Louis was getting in touch with his heart's desire, owning that desire, and wanting to feed it healthily, that was where Marcellin wanted to bring him. It was seeking to sate the thirst rather than thinking that it had been done already. Marcellin eschewed any self-righteous claims of spiritual perfection. He was then able to take Louis deeper. We read of the four means he goes on to propose to Louis for him to nurture his love of Jesus:

- First is to want it. Marcellin quotes de Sales, 'As much as your desire increases, so does your love . . . The desire to love is the beginning of love.' What an insightful counsel at a time when desire was often feared and repressed.
- Second is to have 'purity of intention' in acting. By that, he explained, acting only out of love and good will. Using a metaphor that would have been rather novel, Marcellin assured Louis that that would be 'like going to God in a railway train'. The first railway in France was between the towns of Saint-Etienne and Saint-Chamond, and its building would have been a source of great marvel at the time. Marcellin contrasted this with the tepidity of a snail.
- Third is to show love in action. Again quoting de Sales, Marcellin tells Louis that, 'Love is something learned by loving, by doing loving things.'
- Fourth is to contemplate often the Passion of Jesus. It would be impossible to meditate deeply on this 'without being consumed by divine love.' For de Sales, 'Calvary was the mount of lovers.'

We learn that, 'These counsels made such an impression on Brother Louis that he would never forget them. It was a turning point in his life.'⁴⁷ Although Louis himself did not leave us much by way of a written account of his spiritual journey, it is reasonable to infer that what is encapsulated in this conversation with Marcellin (even if it be perhaps a little confected) is a spiritual awakening, akin to Marcellin's own emergence from his dark night. Certainly, Louis' biographer leaves us with an image of a veritable mystic:

*From then on, his whole life became an exercise in love and some time before he died, he said to a Brother from whom he had nothing to hide, 'O Brother! How sweet love is! How strong love is! If only you knew, such waves of love which break against me! . . . Love is all I need, and henceforth I only wish to study, contemplate and love Jesus, my Saviour, my love and my beatitude.'*⁴⁸

The Christocentrism of the 'French school of spirituality' was one of its most distinctive features, and became naturally embedded in its particular strands, of which Marist spirituality became one. These two early Marists – Brothers Dorothee and Louis – provide us with examples of how it was expressed and honoured in the founding time. A major contribution of the Bérullian tradition, as part of the broader Catholic Reformation in Europe, was to foster a better integration of theology and spirituality, something that is amply evident in these Brothers. Pierre de Bérulle was in turn influenced by both the deeply Christocentric and the mystical emphases of Teresa of Ávila and the Carmelite reform which he was instrumental in introducing into France. Other early shapers of the French school who had a major influence on Marcellin – notably Francis

text. Nevertheless, its emphasis on the embrace of the Cross, on forsaking all else in this pursuit, and on gradual maturing in the spiritual life, does find echoes in the Spanish mystics. *Water from the Rock* does not really explore the monastic dimension of Marist life and spirituality, but it is undeniable that this was explicitly fostered in the years after the building of The Hermitage.

⁴⁷ *Biographies de Quelques Frères*, p.32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.32

de Sales and Vincent de Paul – were known additionally for both the *affective* and the *practical* dimensions they emphasised in Christian living, and were able to articulate this in their writings which Marcellin studied and appropriated. It was a spirituality of the heart, with a rich accompanying theology. Indeed, the French gave us the ‘Sacred Heart of Jesus’, a metaphor for the incarnated Divine that combines both the immanent and the transcendent in a powerful way. Marist spirituality drew from all of this as Marcellin was graced to shape his own spiritual way, and to inspire others to follow him in it.

Arguably, the nascent Marist spirituality of Marcellin and the first Brothers is best captured in the writings of Brother François. While Brother Jean-Baptiste was the prolific writer and polished in his style, he may be criticised for his poor synthesis of ideas and construction of themes. He was more of a collector and curator than an interpreter or synthesiser. He was more polemic and even apologetic in his approach. He was also a shameless plagiarist, although this was not the crime then as it is today. François, on the other hand, was able more effectively to cohere the spiritual legacy of Marcellin. While his notebooks and journals are unsurprisingly more a hotchpotch of ideas, quotations and reflections, his Circulars and his formal correspondence are more integrated and considered. This is the case with his *Circular on the Spirit of Faith*.

What strikes a modern reader – after all the nineteenth century cladding is stripped away – is the Christocentric essence of this document. Recall that François’ stated aim in writing it was to describe what was the essential ‘spirit of the Institute’ (what we would more usually call today ‘Marist spirituality’). His thesis is that this essence is living ‘the spirit of faith’ which he defines as discipleship of Jesus. In delving into this theologically and describing its practical expression, he does not mention Marcellin Champagnat once, not a single instance in the four instalments of the Circular. This is even more surprising when one knows both the deep affection and the profound respect that François had for the Founder. But not a mention of him in describing the spirituality of the Marist community. Indeed, the proposition that Marcellin would have been a focus in such a document would have seemed as ridiculous to François as it would have been to Marcellin himself. For both men, the main game, the only game, was Jesus Christ – crucified, risen and alive. Simple.

The Christocentric spirituality that François explores has both the affective immanence and the theological richness that is typical of the French School. It was the French who gave us the *Sacré Cœur*, the Sacred Heart, that powerful metaphor that captures the divine in the human, and vice versa. In Bérullian tradition, François is at once in awe at the immense grandeur of God but in personal relationship Jesus Christ who ‘deigns to call himself – and actually is our companion! our friend! our brother!’⁴⁹ He draws particularly on St Paul, summing up the third part of the Circular ‘by saying, with the Apostle, that . . . *Christ will be formed in us* (Gal.4:19) and *we shall live in him and by his Spirit* (2 Cor.5).’⁵⁰

It is in the fourth part of the Circular that the theology is sharpest and the sense of what living in Christ means is most captivating. François, as always, draws extensively from Scripture to do this, not least from Galatians. Indeed, if we really want to be in tune with the spirituality that Marcellin helped to flower in François and the founding generation, then it is well to spend some time with the Letter to the Galatians. François writes:

Let us spend our meditations in searching and penetrating [the teachings of Christ], appropriating them, and making them, as it were, a part of ourselves, as if they had been written for us alone. It is thus that the thoughts of Jesus will become our thoughts, that our judgements will conform to those of the Divine Master ... we shall truly enter upon the life of Faith, the life of the Son of God himself. I live now, no not I, but Christ lives in me, thinks, judges, loves, hates, and does all in me. (Gal.2:20)

⁴⁹ *Circular on the Spirit of Faith*, Part 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Part 3.

The spirit of prayer and the spirit of faith ... are one and the same thing. A person of prayer will ever be a person of faith ... The great source of the spirit of faith is Jesus Christ. The great secret to acquire, preserve, and perfect this virtue within us consists in approaching nearer to Jesus Christ ... Our chief occupation in prayer, therefore, should be the study of Christ.

Both the theologian and the spiritual master, François writes from his own experience, and does so with considerable feeling:

Oh! If once we had entered deeply into the heart of Jesus and tasted a little of his ardent love, we should know by experience what it is to have the spirit of faith, to live the life of faith ... and all the things of the world we reject as filth and rubbish to gain Jesus Christ and possess him alone ... I recommend this meditation, in a special way, to each and all of you

The allusion to Philippians 3 is obvious, as is Hebrews 12 in the culmination of the Circular:

Let the life of Jesus Christ ... be the rule of our own life; let the sentiments of Jesus Christ be our sentiments; let his affections become our affections; let all our actions have no other principle than his will, no other end than his glory, let them be performed in him, for him, with him, and according to him, in order that, in life and in death, in time and in eternity, Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our Faith, be all in all to us. Amen!

It is clear that François has spent a great deal of time with the Pauline Scriptures. They have become an indistinguishable part of him. That the first Marists were so immersed in Scripture, and that they defined themselves in terms of Scriptural imagery and themes, is a lesson of itself. In the France of his day, there was a great amount of pietism and religiosity from which Marcellin could have drawn, but he went to the source, to Scripture. The books of Johannine and Pauline corpus were his spiritual habitat.

That was the space in which he nurtured in himself and his fellow Marists a spirituality of the heart. That is why he chose Louis and Bonaventure as novice masters. They were not his most capable and competent men – not the ones to be chosen as directors of the biggest schools or as the major superiors to deal with the administrative challenges of a quickly growing organisation. They were people of with heart spirituality, people who understood this oft-cited sentence from Francis de Sales:

Since the heart is the source of actions, as the heart is, so is what you do. ... I have wished above all else to engrave and inscribe on your heart this holy, sacred maxim, LIVE JESUS!⁵¹

We get an insight into Marcellin's priorities from this excerpt from the biography of Brother Bonaventure:

There was a time when Brother Bonaventure used to give a short teaching to his novices after

⁵¹ Francis de Sales, *An Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, 23.

their morning meditation which took place in the sacristy.⁵² Father Champagnat would go there to make his preparations for Mass. He was so struck and delighted by the depth of the Brother's instruction and the way in which he spoke of God that he could not help but express to the members of his Council how impressed and delighted he was. 'Brother Bonaventure is outstanding,' he said to us one day. 'Listening to him, you feel that his heart is aflame with the love of God. It is impossible for me to continue my preparation for Mass when he speaks. Unwittingly, I catch myself listening to him. I don't know where he finds the beautiful things which he says to his novices, but I think that those young men are very fortunate to have such teachings. This Brother is a saint and he speaks like a saint. Listening to him, you are convinced that he says only what he feels and does. In his case, it can be truly said that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

Again, we have a genuine mystic. His was not a spiritual life based on shallow sentiment, but on an ever-deepening conversion of heart. It showed itself in emotional expression; how could it not? But its core was solid. After his long tenure of almost two decades as novice master, Bonaventure worked for the last dozen years of his life in the dairy at Saint-Genis-Laval, the new General House, then a village some distance from Lyon and in a rural setting. His biography captures something of the mature man:

At the end of his life, his piety and his fervour were so intense that he had difficulty in containing his feelings. A year before his death, he said, 'I enjoy journeys because, alone on the roads, I can pray to God aloud and give full reign to the feelings of my soul. I am sometimes so carried away by joy and love that I stop to look at the sky to my heart's content or to sing the Te Deum, the Magnificat, or the Laudate, to invite all the animals to bless and praise God who is so good, so loving.'

A little too saccharine or unbridled for modern taste? Perhaps. But the fact it was written as an exemplar of Marist spirituality at a time (1868) when the currents of secularisation were rather militant and growing on the one hand, and conversely there was a defensiveness among many in the Church that was increasingly expressed in cold, almost Jansenistic or Pelagian terms on the other hand, tells its own story. Bonaventure tended to neither. The first Marist generation had a self-perception that unashamedly celebrated the mystical, the affective and the relational. These were spiritual qualities that they honoured in one another. At the same time, theirs was a grounded and outwardly directed spirituality. Bonaventure embodied both for them. While a person of clearly deep interiority, a great part of his biography is also devoted to the portrayal of a person of magnanimity, kindness, tenderness, joy, solicitude and selflessness. A man in whom Christ-life bloomed.

Crib, Cross and Altar

'Do you know,' Marcellin asked his first followers, 'why I want you to be faithful followers of Jesus at his crib, on Calvary, and at the altar? Because it is there that you will find the love of Jesus ... God is love says Saint John (1 Jn 4:8).'⁵³ He goes on:

⁵² Before the renovations to the Hermitage in 2010, the sacristy was quite a large room. The novices would have done their meditation there, while the rest of the community would have done it in the nearby room now called 'the Room of the First Community' and previously 'La Salle des Fresques'.

⁵³ *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, p.43. Brother Jean-Baptiste devotes an early chapter (Chapter 6) to this theme.

Yes, everywhere God is love, but especially at the crib, the cross and the altar. It is most especially in these three places that his infinite love becomes reveals its true essence. It is in these three places where, more than anything else, he inflames the human heart with his divine love. It is in these three places that our hearts, in their poverty, can best understand and feel how much God loves us. 'I have come to bring fire to the earth,' Jesus says, 'and how I want that it be kindled' (Lk 12:49) and set the hearts of all people on fire.⁵⁴

Marcellin speaks of the 'crib, cross and altar' as the 'three great hearths' where 'all the great saints' went to set their own hearts on fire. Then, mixing his Scriptural metaphors a little, he adds:

The person who goes regularly to those three sacred fountains will become like the tree planted near running water, which as the prophet says, bears fruit every month of the year.⁵⁵

He becomes rather passionate about it:

Oh, Brothers! Go to these fountains of our Saviour and draw from them abundantly! Did you hear that word, draw? Don't think that grace will be measured out to you there, or given to you stingily, or that you have to wait for it. Stop complaining that you ask for it but don't get any. It's not the priest who gives it to you; it's not even the generous hand of Jesus who bestows it. It's you. Yes, it's you yourself who draw it freely. You can take as much as you want, so if you have only a little, it's your own fault. It's because you're using a container that's too small: your heart is too closed, not open enough to love. So, go to the Saviour's fountains, go there often, and always draw from them freely and abundantly.⁵⁶

The expression 'crib, cross and altar' has always enjoyed a prominent place in the discourse of Marist spirituality. 'The first three places', Marcellin called them, and he seems to have made frequent reference to them. We have seen a number of times in this series how much he sourced his own spirituality in the writings of Francis de Sales, with their emphasis on a spirituality of the heart, and indeed how he used de Sales' books with the first Brothers. Yet, even as he gave de Sales' classic *Treatise on the Love of God* to Brother Louis to read, Marcellin counselled that 'the Blessed Virgin, the crucifix and the church bell' would take him even closer into God's heart than would the book:

'Are not these three before all our eyes to for us to bring to mind the mysteries of the Incarnation, of the Redemption and of the Eucharist, the three great marks of the love of God?' he said to Brother Louis.⁵⁷

Water from the Rock, devotes five of the six paragraphs in which it introduces the third characteristic of Marist spirituality – 'Love of Jesus and his Gospel' – to the crib, cross and altar. So, with all this focus and

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Biographies de Quelques Frères*, p.19

emphasis, we may be excused from thinking that Marcellin himself coined the expression. He didn't. Indeed, it had been around for centuries.

It was, for example, very important for Alphonsus Ligouri, someone whom Marcellin read and whose emphases in pastoral and moral theology influenced him. Indeed, the 'crib, cross and altar' remain central to Redemptorist spirituality. If we were to attribute its origin to anyone, however, perhaps two other Italians, Francis and Clare of Assisi, might have a claim on the honours, half a millennium before Alphonsus. They consciously put the 'crib, cross and altar' at the heart of their spiritual lives, their experience of the immanence of a loving God; these three elements are still at the core of Christ-centred Franciscan discipleship. Indeed, it was Francis who first gave us the visual image of the Christmas crib.

Six hundred years later, a diocesan priest in Lyon who had become a Franciscan tertiary, and who had something of a conversion experience in meeting the poverty and disempowerment of the young people he found on the streets of that city, wrote of these three ways meet Christ.⁵⁸ Antoine Chevrier, younger than Marcellin but a contemporary of many of the founding Marist generation in that part of France,⁵⁹ was shaped by the same writers and influences of the 'French school' of spirituality.⁶⁰ He would have read, as probably did Marcellin, the book on the spiritual life published in 1668 by the French Jesuit Amable Bonnefons *The Three Journeys of the Soul: to the crib of Jesus incarnate, to the cross of Jesus crucified, and to the altar of Jesus sacrificed*.⁶¹

Like Marcellin, Antoine Chevrier was no doubt moved by the writings of Vincent de Paul who found the face of Christ in the poor. Vincent, one of the giants of the first generation of the French school was less at ease in the private salons of Paris – with the likes of Pierre de Bérulle and Madame Acarie – than he was on the streets. Vincent, as was Marcellin later, was more attracted to the practical love espoused by Francis de Sales.

Indeed, there is an underside to the Bérullian school that was somewhat elitist, and even embarrassed by the poor. But in Vincent's writings we find the opposite:

If you consider the poor in the light of faith, then you will observe that they are in the place of the Son of God who chose to be poor. Although in his passion he almost lost the appearance of a man and was considered a fool by the Gentiles and a stumbling block by the Jews, he showed them that his mission was to preach to the poor: He sent me to preach the good news to the poor. We also ought to have this same spirit and imitate Christ, that is, we must take care of the poor, console

⁵⁸ For an exploration of Chevrier's theology based around the incarnation, redemption, and the Eucharist, and its sources in European spirituality, see: Yves Musset, *Le Christ du Père Chevrier* (The Christ of Father Chevrier). Desclé, Paris, 2000. Chevrier's own writing is best captured in his book *Le Vritable Disciple, le pêtre selon l'évangile ou le véritable disciple de notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (The True Disciple, the priest according to the gospel or the true disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ). Edition Emmanuel Vitte, Paris, 2014.

⁵⁹ Blessed Antoine Chevrier certainly had formal contact with two men associated with the Marists in their early years, Jean-Marie Vianney and Pierre-Julien Eymard. He consulted often with Vianney. He met with Pierre-Eymard (after the latter had left the Marists) and considered linking his work in Lyon with that of Eymard in Paris. Undoubtedly, he would have known well the work of the Marist Brothers in Lyon since they served the same districts, albeit Chevrier's main focus with older young people than that of the Brothers at the time. Chevrier founded the Priests of the Prado (now associated with the Conventual Franciscans) and the Franciscan Sisters of the Prado. His work with the poor is celebrated in the frieze above the main doors of the Basilica of Fourvière. In fact, his is the first figure in the frieze; and Marcellin the third.

⁶⁰ For example, we see references to Rodriguez and Saint-Jure, and the clear marks of Bérullian emphases and concerns.

⁶¹ The title of the book as published: *Les trois voyages de l'âme devote, à la crèche de Jésus incarné, à la croix de Jésus crucifié, à l'autel de Jésus immolé*.

*them, help them, support their cause. Since Christ willed to be born poor, he chose for himself disciples who were poor. He made himself the servant of the poor and shared their poverty.*⁶²

It is not enough to give soup and bread. This the rich can do. You, rather, are the servant of the poor, always smiling and good-humoured. They are your masters, terribly sensitive and exacting masters you will see. And the uglier and the dirtier they will be, the more unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them. It is only for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give to them.

We must serve the poor, especially outcasts and beggars. They have been given to us as our masters and patrons.

It is profound theology, and of intuitive attraction to Marcellin. In writing to Brother Jean-Marie in 1823, for example, Marcellin updates him on the situation in Lavalla and tells him that they have ‘many poor people’, to which he adds ‘thank God.’ The kind of love that Marcellin sought to nurture in himself and others was the kind of love he saw revealed in Christ. The Pauline concept of *kenosis* – of emptying of self – is central for understanding what he experienced in meeting Christ in the ‘first three places.’

For Marcellin, there was more to conversion of heart than just being caught up in an ‘awesome wonder’, as the old hymn goes, at the *kenosis* of Christ in the crib, cross and altar. Yes, there was evoked a humble awe – something that was a feature of the ‘French school’ and especially of the Sulpician spirituality that was a major influence on Marcellin at the seminary – but it was not the end of it. We find the heart of what Marcellin drew from Pauline theology as a theme that runs through Brother François’ *Circular on the Spirit of Faith*: it is that ‘Christ is formed in us’ (Gal. 4:19). Or, as Paul says at the start of Galatians, ‘Christ is revealed in me’ (Gal 1:16). Not *through* me or *to* me, but *in* me. Galatians unlocks the core theology that underpins Marist spirituality. It is to allow Christ-life – the very life of God – to become incarnate in me; to allow love to become incarnate in me. ‘I live now, not I but Christ lives in me.’ (Gal. 2:20).

This is the Gospel.

This is the Gospel that Marists ‘love’, as this third characteristic of Marist spirituality in *Water from the Rock* calls them to do. It is loved, because Jesus Christ is love incarnate. There can be no other response to the Gospel of Christ, as Marcellin understood it, than to love it. Or, more pointedly, to grow in love, to become God’s love incarnate. The consequence is that Marist spirituality – as Christian spirituality more generally – inherently involves giving of self for others in love. It is other-centric. The second half of the verse Galatians 1:16 is as important as the first half: Christ ‘is revealed in me, *so that I could proclaim him among the Gentiles.*’ Love is formed in me so that I can bring love to where love is not.

This proclamation of Christ’s love is pursued through who I am rather than what I preach. Marcellin understood it this way. Indeed ‘preaching’ was a style of evangelisation that Marcellin expressly didn’t like.⁶³ Although we have no record of his having read the famous dictum of Francis of Assisi – ‘preach the gospel everywhere; use words only if necessary’ – we can imagine that Marcellin would have heartily affirmed it. It would have made absolute sense to him. When we say that Marcellin put an emphasis on ‘good example’ as means of educating – which unquestionably he did – we can risk underselling what he meant. Marcellin

⁶² Writings of St Vincent de Paul (Epist. 2546: *Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, Paris 1922-1925, 7). It is also used in the Office of Readings for his feast day (27 September).

⁶³ In *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, Ch.5 (just before the chapter on the crib, cross and altar) we find a list of ten ‘kinds of Brothers’ that ‘Father Champagnat did not like.’ One among them are ‘les frères prêcheurs’, ‘Preacher Brothers’.

had a more powerful way to say it: 'A Brother is a living Gospel', he told his first followers.⁶⁴

Stay with that concept for a moment; plumb its meaning. It is very Pauline. Paul speaks of the Spirit bringing forth in us the life of God, revealed in kindness, patience, compassion, tolerance, peacefulness, resilience, forgiveness, endurance, gentleness, unity, hope, joy, gratitude, and so on. This is what Christ-life looks like. This is love incarnate; this is God incarnate; this is God's Good News incarnate. In emphasising to the first Brothers the importance of their example to the young people whom they taught, Marcellin suggested that their lives could be a kind of 'continual catechism', so that each of them, as a 'gospel worker' (*ouvrier evangelique*)⁶⁵ would be

a living Gospel, in whom each student can read how to imitate Jesus Christ and be a true Christian. In a word, you should live in such a way that you will be saying to those whom you teach what Paul said to the Corinthians: 'Take me for your model, as I take Christ' (1 Cor 11:1).⁶⁶

Marcellin, in requiring them to show good example, was not merely urging them to be careful about their words and behaviours. Much more than that, he was telling them as educators that they were the Gospel itself. It was their 'love, faith, and purity of heart' that would be 'read by their students'.⁶⁷ The implication is that the integrity of the Marist is not sourced simply in a person's actions aligning with his or her words. Genuine Marists are, more deeply, people whose interior lives have fired them, an interiority in which they have encountered Christ at the crib, cross and altar. Marcellin quotes Vincent de Paul in saying that people will respond with their hearts when the one evangelising speaks with words that burn with divine love that come from the heart, something that is fired and sustained only by prayer.⁶⁸ As the Founder saw it, people who are attentive to their inner selves, and meet Christ there, will become like St Paul who can only exclaim 'Woe unto me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor 9:16).⁶⁹ He could do or be naught else. Or, in Marcellin's own words, as they came to be written into the Brothers' Rule:

To make Jesus Christ known, to make him loved, this is the whole purposes of the Institute. If we were to fail in this purpose, our Congregation would be useless.⁷⁰

It is for this reason that Marcellin regarded the work of the teacher so highly. Following Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, he used the term 'ministry' to describe the teacher's work. This was unusual, if not controversial. At the Council of Trent, the term '*ministerium*' had been reserved exclusively for the ordained priesthood, and a theology developed around the sanctity and very ontology of the clerical state. De la Salle saw it differently,⁷¹ as did Marcellin. If the educator was the one who lived among young people and whose own life was the

⁶⁴ Brother Jean-Baptiste begins his collection of Marcellin's teachings – the book we know as *Avis, Leçons, Sentences* – with a chapter entitled 'What is a Brother?' according to Father Champagnat'. This expression is taken from that chapter.

⁶⁵ *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, Ch. 37

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Marcellin cites 1 Tim 4:12,16 to make this point. *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, Ch.22

⁷⁰ Brother Jean-Baptiste, *The Life*. Part 2, Ch.6. Successive editions of the Brothers' Constitutions have included these words, typically in the opening paragraphs. The 1986 Constitutions were typical: in Paragraph 2 the phrase 'to make Jesus known and loved' is described as the purpose for which the Institute was founded.

⁷¹ St Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, in his *Meditations*, writes extensively of the ministry of teaching. He draws on

Gospel that brought these people to a knowledge and love of Christ, then what could be more important? Marcellin, indeed, was given to using quasi-eucharistic language for the ministry of the religious teacher: 'Break open for them the holy bread of religion,' he wrote to the Brothers.⁷²

Brother François went further. He described Jesus as a catechist, and as a model for catechists. Rather than preaching, Jesus sat among people and conversed with them: this was how the Brothers should be, François proposed, if they were to model themselves on Jesus. More than that, they would be exercising

*... a ministry that Jesus has, as it were, divinised through exercising it himself. He passed this sublime mission onto the apostles, who transmitted it to their successors, in whose name we act.*⁷³

The religious educator therefore acts *in persona Christi*, not in any hierarchical sense but as a living Gospel, an incarnation of divine love. Of its essence, the Gospel is news, and news is to be shared. For the Marist, this sharing happens through education of the young, so that each young person could become a good Christian and a good citizen. Frequently, in the writings of Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste, the ministry of teaching is described with words such as 'sublime', 'exalted' and 'esteemed'.⁷⁴ Like Marcellin, François roots the life of the educator in a personal love and knowledge of Christ. This is not to be any infantile or overly emotive relationship for the person, but one that is expressed through the maturing and flowering of the best of the human spirit. François draws heavily from Colossians 3 and Romans 6 to describe a person's coming to a new life in Christ. It is from this that someone can become a genuine expression of the gospel of love.

Lest we be beginning to feel that all this language is a little presumptuous – who am I to be using such elevated narrative about my imperfect efforts? – let us recall who these first Brothers were. The people whom Marcellin, François and Jean-Baptiste were extolling as 'living gospels' and affirming in their 'sacred' tasks and 'divine' work of educating, were, by and large, roughish young men, of limited education and professional readiness, mostly from the most modest of circumstances. Then, also, let us not forget who it was that Jesus chose. Talent, intelligence, refinement, personal resources – these were not the criteria which Marcellin sought in the first place. It was humility. He certainly attended with considerable effort to developing the personal and professional development of his Brothers, but it was a spiritual disposition to which he gave priority.

But not with overnight success! A survey of the extant letters of Marcellin to his Brothers reveals they were a motley mob. 'Rough stones', Marcellin once called them, and included himself in that category. Yet this did not dissuade him from the highest of regard for both them and their work. His approach was to encourage and to call them to see the extraordinary purpose of their ordinary efforts. They were 'sowers of the gospel', he told them:

Note that I said sower and not reaper. Why? In order to teach some of us who complain about their lack of success and who think that the children do not get anything out of their teaching, because the latter don't seem very pious, or stay away from church services and the sacraments, or drift

Scripture, especially St Paul, e.g. 1 Cor 2-6; 1 Cor 12:4-30. For him, the Brothers were certainly 'ministers' as they were 'co-workers with Christ'.

⁷² Letter 63, Circular to the Brothers, 19 January 1836.

⁷³ Brother François here is drawing directly on Rodriguez (*Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection*, Part 3, 1st treatise, Ch.2), no doubt introduced to him by Father Champagnat.

⁷⁴ This is recurring through François' notebooks (cf. #308). It is a theme of Brother Jean-Baptiste's treatise *The Apostolate of the Marist Brother* (see Ch.3) and peppered through the last five chapters of *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*.

*with the current of poor example as soon as they have left school. Listen, those of you who talk that way. The season for harvesting crops is not the one when you cultivate the ground to make it fit to produce them. The seed doesn't spring up the minute you drop it into the furrow. For a while, it almost seems lost; but bad weather and even all the rigours of winter do not destroy it. Even while you are complaining, the seed is sprouting in the hearts of your children, and it will appear on the surface in its own time.*⁷⁵

Marcellin wanted, he said, 'Gospel workers' – people who could be sowers of the Gospel through they themselves being the Gospel. And for that, there could be no better expression than the maxim that Jean-Baptiste de la Salle promoted with his Brothers: 'Live Jesus in our hearts!', the response being: 'Forever!' At the top of the pages of Marcellin's most personal correspondence, he wrote the letters 'VJMJ'. It was something novel: while putting 'JMJ' on a page was a common enough Catholic practice (one that people of a certain age would well remember from their days in Catholic schooling), the preceding 'V' was unusual. At the time in France, groups tended to have mottos which they abbreviated to a series of letters like this. Marcellin seemed to have coined 'VJMJ' for his motto, and this was continued by the Institute of the Marist Brothers on its official documents for a long time afterwards. We cannot be certain, however, what Marcellin meant by the 'V'. Was he using it in the sense that the French might exclaim 'Vive le Roi!' (Long live the King!) or 'Vive la France' (Glory to France!)? Possibly. But he might also have intended it in the sense that de la Salle and de Sales did: Live Jesus! And do that by living in the spirit of Mary and of Joseph.

We may never resolve that little riddle, but we can be in no doubt that 'bringing Christ-life to birth' in oneself and in others 'and nurturing its growth', as *Water from the Rock* puts it,⁷⁶ was at the heart of the spiritual life as Marcellin wanted to foster it. In everyone.

⁷⁵ *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, Ch.1

⁷⁶ *Water from the Rock*, ## 11; 26.

4. In Mary's way

Where does a Marist even begin when it comes to Mary? It's our name, our identity, and our purpose: we are the 'Mary-ists'. That was the name that Marcellin and his idealistic companions coined for themselves as they imagined the Society of Mary more than two centuries ago.

An obvious and helpful place to begin would be Scripture – we could go to the Lucan imagery of Mary in the Gospel and Acts, especially the Annunciation, the Visitation, and Pentecost; looking at the interplay between virginity and fecundity, the action of God's Spirit, and the themes of joy, mercy, fidelity, holiness and justice. Or we could draw on the symbolism of the Johannine image of Mary as 'mother of Jesus' at Cana and Calvary; or Paul's 'born of woman'; or the image of Mary as the 'new Eve', and dip into the Book of Revelation. There is much to plumb there. Then, in our Marist world we have recourse to some rich documents on the theme of our Marian identity, especially from the last five decades.⁷⁷ Another option would be to tap the centuries of Marian theology, or explore the plethora of popular Marian piety and customs. Or, we could approach the question by delving into the perspectives offered by the array of titles and imagery that dogma, teaching, tradition, culture and art each gives us. It is an immense treasure chest of insight and wisdom, built over generations of experience of Christian discipleship, scholarship, and religious imagination. While the emphases and approaches of some of these options may leave us a little curious or even uncomfortable, each has some validity for its own time and community.⁷⁸ So where to begin?

Let us start where we mean to end: with Jesus Christ.

The term that each of the Marist founders was given to using to describe what he or she was about goes to the heart of it. In the writings of Marcellin Champagnat, Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn and Jean-Claude Colin, and others of the first generation, we find recurring reference to *l'œuvre de Marie* – 'Mary's work'. That is how they understood their *raison d'être*: they were seeking to be participants in Mary's work. And what precisely was this 'work'? *Water from the Rock* frames an answer in this way:

*The Marists understood their project to be a sharing in Mary's work of bringing Christ-life to birth, and being with the Church as it comes to be born.*⁷⁹

Bringing Christ-life to birth. Christ-life? To birth? Here we touch something at the core of Pauline theology. One important key for unlocking his Letters is Paul's understanding of 'living in Christ', and of the Spirit working in us to bring this life to birth.

Borrowing from the 1986 Constitutions of the Marist Brothers, *Water from the Rock* goes on to say that

⁷⁷ For example: the *Marial Document* published after the watershed post-Vatican II General Chapter of the Marist Brothers in 1967-68; the Circulars of several Superiors General of the Marist Brothers – *A New Space for Mary*, Brother Basilio Rueda, 1976; *In Her Arms or in her Heart*, Brother Seán Sammon, 2009; *He Gave Us the Name of Mary*, Brother Emili Túru 2012; and the first Circular of the current Superior General, Brother Ernesto Sanchez, *Homes of Light*, 2020.

⁷⁸ Many of these approaches to Mary were explored in the author's 2019 series for *Christlife* - 'Marian Today. Holy Today'.

⁷⁹ *Water from the Rock*, #11

*'we share in the spiritual motherhood of Mary' as we take our part in bringing Christ-life to the world of those whose lives we share, [nurturing] that life in the ecclesial community.*⁸⁰ To share in 'Mary's spiritual motherhood', now there's a concept and a half!

In one of his letters, Marcellin goes even further.⁸¹ As he offers some counsel to one of the Brothers, he asks him why 'Mary' isn't enough for him. Marcellin seems to be using 'Mary' as shorthand for both the Society of Mary, and the work of Mary. It is a revealing turn of phrase, and a profound one theologically. What Marcellin infers is that Mary is not just someone to whom to be devoted and to be affectively close – which was unquestionably the case for the early Marists – but that their core identity and purpose was actually *to be Mary*. They saw themselves as the Mary-figures for the people whom they served. Mary's essential role, as theirs, was to 'bring Christ-life to birth' and to 'nurture its growth', to employ the phrasing of *Water from the Rock* written two centuries later. As for Mary, this was something that began in themselves interiorly as they opened themselves trustingly and vulnerably to the Spirit, and then was borne to others with joy, mercy, humility and fidelity.

The group of ordinands with whom Marcellin aligned himself to form the Society of Mary had been exposed in their seminary studies to what might be called a quite 'high Mariology'. This was typical of the French school. 'High' does not mean that they were trained to pedestalise Mary with unduly exalted honour or as an object of independent devotion. Whatever might have been the popular devotional customs of the rural areas from which most of them came, the Marian theology they were taught situated Mary as bound inextricably with God's mission in Jesus. That was her primary identity. They would have understood that Mary had no place theologically in or of herself. 'High' Mariology can be considered analogous to 'high' Christology: theologians sometimes speak of a spectrum of perspectives on Jesus Christ, from a so-called 'higher' Christology that focuses on the 'Christ of faith' or 'Lord of history', to a 'lower' Christology that seeks more to understand the 'Jesus of history'. It is not a matter of one end of the spectrum's being more correct or of greater worth than the other; both are valid and important. One enlightens the other.

Similarly, with Mary, there is a range of lenses for seeing her – from a focus on her eternal role as figurative mother of God's love incarnate, to one that touches more into the concrete experience of Myriam in first century Jewish Palestine. It was the former that found itself the subject of the theology textbooks that the first Marists studied. The very same is captured in the paragraphs of *Water from the Rock* cited above. Mary's essential role is her maternity of God incarnate, not only exercised once in human history two thousand years ago, but carried on eternally. It is Mary who brings forth the living Christ who seeks incarnation in every person in every time. This is the idea that captured the minds and hearts of Marcellin and his companions, and to which they gave their lives. It is something that was famously distilled four centuries before by the German Dominican theologian Eckhart von Hochheim, usually known as Meister Eckhart, in these words:

*What good is it to me that Mary gave birth to the son of God fourteen hundred years ago, and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God. God is always needing to be born.*⁸²

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, #26

⁸¹ Letter 42 in *Letters of Marcellin Champagnat* edited by Br Paul Sester, Rome 1991. The letter is to Brother Cassien Chomat who had joined the Brothers in middle-age, in 1832, as an experienced and successful schoolmaster, and a man of solid character and principle. Marcellin had been his spiritual director for some years before that. This letter is received by Cassien during the summer of 1834 when he has apparently been disheartened by that the behaviours of some younger Brothers did not match his own more mature principles.

⁸² Another German, but someone from our own time and a Marist, has written powerfully on this theme: Fr Fritz Arnold SM. See his book *Like Mary: Towards Christian Maturity in the Twenty-First Century*, Columba Press 2001. And an article by him: 'You Should Become Mary and Give Birth to God: Giving Birth to God, a theme in Christian Mysticism'.

While Eckhart himself might not have been on the curriculum at the Saint Irénée Seminary in 1812-16, certainly this emphasis in Marian theology was. Contemporary missiology might put it in terms of realising *missio Dei*: making real, in time and place and people, the timeless and boundless mission of God or, better, the mission that *is* God. Love.

Jean-Jacques Olier, a disciple of Pierre de Bérulle who went on to found the Sulpicians, who in turn trained just about all of Marcellin's professors at the Saint Irénée, wrote of Mary as a *sacrament* of pure mercy and life that is God.⁸³ Mary as a sacrament! That presents itself as a theological concept that sounds rather contemporary, but it is one that comes from the 1600s and about which Marcellin would have most likely read. Olier develops Bérulle's emphasis on Mary's *maternity* and puts it in terms of Mary's *fecundity*.⁸⁴ Mary's role is life-bringing because she is so completely at one with the God who generates all life. He proposes this as an exemplar for all Christians.

Part of the genius of the Marist project, from the time of its conceiving, was to integrate this exalted Marian theology with a sense of Mary that was grounded, human and immanent. Today we may have better language for it than they did back in nineteenth century France. *Water from the Rock* uses some of this, describing Mary as 'our sister in faith', as 'first disciple', and as a 'woman with dust on her feet.'⁸⁵ Such language probably makes it easier for us to identify with Mary, or as Mary.

At the same time, let us be careful not to be too reductionist. Chefs can use a good 'reduction' in their cooking, to offer both intensity and complexity of flavour to their cuisine. The same is not always true in spirituality or theology. The risk of going to readymade or easily-applied labels is that we end up with understandings that are facile and simplistic. We Marists can be as guilty of this as anyone. We are quick to dismiss politicians, and the market research people in their back rooms, who love to throw around formulaic slogans of three or four words. But we can do the same. For example, it is common in some Marist quarters to hear people describe the 'five characteristics' (or, worse, the five 'pillars') of Marist education that are taken from one of the eight chapters of *In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat*, as if these five descriptors of style represent either the essence, or even the extent, of Marist education (overlooking rest of that text, notably the previous chapter that discusses Marist educators as sowers of Good News – arguably something of significantly greater definitional importance!). We could equally be critical of the framing of this very series, based as it is on the six characteristics of Marist spirituality that are named by *Water from the Rock*. Can Marist spirituality be reduced to six dot-points?

We Marists have other little phrases; 'being the Marian face of the Church', for example, is one that we have used in the last decade or so, appropriating it from the Balthasarian theology promoted by Pope John Paul II. What does the phrase actually mean? Or another one: going 'in haste' with Mary, 'into the hill country'. Marcellin himself had favourite terms. Most would know that he was fond of the expression *Notre Bonne Mère* ('Our Good Mother'); and sometimes he and others used the expression 'Ordinary Resource', one that has less currency these days. In decorating the new chapel at the Hermitage in 1836, the Founder cherry-picked fourteen titles for Mary taken from a Marian litany, his choices making an interesting study in themselves. There are and will be other phrases and terms. Most of them are not 'little phrases' at all, of course, but attempts to encapsulate much deeper ways of describing Mary and her place in Christian living. The challenge

⁸³ Olier, J.J. *Le catéchisme chrétien pour la vie intérieure*. p.59. See Letter 304, in Volume 2 of Olier's *Lettres*.

⁸⁴ He develops this concept in the book *Introduction à la vie et aux vertus chrétiennes*, the last book he wrote and reflective of his mature thinking. Interesting, it was still in print in Marcellin's time, a new edition coming off the presses in 1830.

⁸⁵ *Water from the Rock* #29. While the first two of these descriptors have wide currency in today's Marian discourse, the third is distinctively Marist. It comes from the Circular of Superior General, Brother Charles Howard, 'Marist Apostolic Spirituality' (Marist Brothers, Rome, 1992).

is, like appreciating a good reduction in French cuisine, to take time to savour both the intensity and the complexity that the phrase or title may represent.

The fact that the two millennia of Christian history and imagination have generated such multi-faceted scriptural, doctrinal and figurative language, imagery and cult around Mary is argument itself against a simplistic understanding of Mary, or of 'Mary's way'.

Mary is perhaps best understood through the pivotal verse of John's Gospel – 'I have come that they may have life, life to the full' (10:10). Mary is the epitome of this: humanity in its fullness. She is so because she is one and entire with the desire of God, with God who is mission, who seeks to be love incarnate.

Whether you prefer the synoptic Gospels' language around 'hearing and obeying', or the triumphal fantasy literature of the Book of Revelation, or deep dogma such as the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption, or the poetry of the Magnificat, or the inexhaustible efforts of artists and composers, or the gentle rhythm of the Rosary, or wherever it is that portrayal of Mary has most cogency and immediacy for you, it will come back to the same thing: to be Mary, is to be you, the most authentic and most alive you. It is, as Brother François wrote in his signature Circular on what it was to be a Marist, to be someone who can read Galatians 2:20 and recognise yourself in the verse.

The new 2020 Constitutions of the Marist Brothers present Mary as the one who welcomed and lived deeply the mystery of God's love that *in time became flesh* (cf. Jn 1:14).⁸⁶ The corollary is that Marist spirituality is intrinsically missionary, carrying the fullness of life to others. In Luke, the Annunciation and the Visitation are two sides of the same coin. Mary is not the creator of life, but the bearer of life (consistent with understandings of human biology at the time that the seed of life was entirely from the male).

The Bérullian theology that Marcellin learnt put this in terms of 'conversation', as we have seen in a previous article: the Christian is called to be like Mary in conversation with, or in 'visitation' with, one's neighbour. Bérulle described this as being continually moving from one's interior self to the exterior, from one's encounter with God's Spirit to an encounter of joy with the other, so that Christ will be born in time and place and people. To be Marian can never be to be caught in a self-absorbed spiritual ecstasy. Mary waits, listens, ponders, dialogues and receives, then she sings. Her whole being sings, as the words of the Magnificat put it. The Annunciation/Visitation later finds a parallel in Luke with the account of Pentecost.

Water from the Rock puts it this way:

*Today we continue to be convinced that to follow Jesus in the way of Mary is a privileged way of bringing our Christian journey to fullness. With a heart filled with compassion, we share this experience and conviction with children and youth helping them to experience the maternal [life-bearing and nurturing] face of the Church.*⁸⁷

In 1886-87, the then elderly Brother Sylvestre wrote a memoir, a kind of short biography of Father Champagnat. Sylvestre's contact with Marcellin had been as a quite young Brother in the 1830s and as somewhat of a rascal. Indeed, he remained quite the lively character all his life. For the most part, the memoir repeats incidents and events that Brother Jean-Baptiste included in the official biography written in 1856, which Sylvestre augments with some personal anecdotes. But he also offers several fresh insights. One of these comes at the end of the book. Sylvestre tells us that Marcellin was fond of calling Saint John the 'first Marist'. The Beloved Disciple, the personification of the perfect disciple, the one mystically closest to Jesus, this is how

⁸⁶ *Constitutions of the Marist Brothers*, 2020 #8.

⁸⁷ *Water from the Rock*, #28

Marcellin understood what it was to be Marist. At the end of the book, it is with Mary that Sylvestre leaves his reader, as Jesus left John. The final proposal to his readers (the Brothers at the time) was that, to become living images of the Founder, they needed strive to be genuine 'brothers of Mary'.

What is 'Mary's way'? No concept makes a more frequent appearance in contemporary Marist identity discourse than the imperative to follow Mary's way: to be 'like Mary', to minister 'in the manner of Mary', to go 'with Mary', to 'live Mary's spirit', and so on. The *Rule of Life* for the Brothers, for example, published at the start of 2020, mentions Mary sixty-four times, and in almost every case carries this sense.⁸⁸ Mary's way is to bring life. It is to be life-giving in and through the most human of everyday circumstances and interpersonal relationships, and to do so through mercy, joy, justice and a sense of harmony and consonance with the living God.⁸⁹ That Christ may be born, in faith. That there be life in all its fullness.

⁸⁸ *Wherever You Go, A Rule of Life for the Marist Brothers*, 2 January 2020.

⁸⁹ The Circular *Homes of Light*, released on 8 September, carries the subtitle: *caring for life, generating new life*. Brother Ernesto discusses this role of Mary, and by consequence of Marists generally, to bring life and to do so by creating 'homes'. Marists are home makers. He offers a down-to-earth exploration of what 'maternity' means in this context, using the image of 'light' for God's will or God's mission.

5. Family Spirit

There may be nothing more characteristic of the Marist way than what we have always called, from the time of St Marcellin, our 'family spirit'. This is something about which any Marists can usually speak without hesitation. It will come from their lived experience. It's Marist DNA. Walk into to any Marist community, school, project or gathering and it will be amply evident to you, and quite tangibly experienced. You will see it, and indeed feel it, in the warmth of the place, in the welcome and hospitality, in lack of pretence or arrogance, in the sense of belonging and the broad inclusivity of that, in people's care and kindness, in trust and respect, in hanging-in there with the one in difficulty, in intuitions that are nurturing rather than exacting, in a deep desire to reconcile and heal what is fractured rather than punish or ostracise, and in the priority and character of interpersonal relationships. People will be known, and loved. They will talk about feeling to be part of a 'family'. They will use that word, and do so both easily and genuinely, as the best way of describing their daily experience. They may even have a photo of the table from La Valla displayed prominently somewhere.

Often enough, they will be ready with additional phrases to describe what they mean. They may be able to quote from the Marist education reference text, *In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat*, and tell you that the adults there relate 'to each other and to young people as the members of a loving family would intuitively do', that their approach to young people is to be 'a brother or sister to them.'⁹⁰ They are likely to be able to quote Marcellin himself, and tell you that to educate the young, 'first you must love them, and love them all equally'.⁹¹ They may be able to quote from Marcellin's biography:

*The spirit of a [Marist] school ought to be a family spirit. Now, in a good family, sentiments of respect, love and mutual trust prevail, and not fear of punishments.*⁹²

They may recall the first Brothers asking if they could call Marcellin *Père* ('Father') rather than *Monsieur*.⁹³ They may point you to Marcellin's 'Spiritual Testament' with its emphasis on love of one another, the phrasing offering a seamless interweave of the lofty theology of the First Letter of John with the lived enthusiasm and unity of the first Christians in Luke's Acts of the Apostles.⁹⁴ Or they may cite one or more of the many other examples in our early documents that extol love, and family-style ways of teaching and ministering. Our founding story is replete with them, as is our ongoing lived experience of Marist life and mission.

Of all the attributes or self-descriptors that we customarily employ in Marist discourse, 'family spirit' is not only the one that is arguably the most defining, but it may also be the most original. This was Marcellin's term. While he drew extensively from the writings and emphases of people such as Pierre de Bérulle, Jean-Jacques Olier, Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, Vincent de Paul and, especially, Francis de Sales, to shape what became known as Marist spirituality, none of these people made much or anything of the precise expres-

⁹⁰ *In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat, A Vision for Marist Education Today*, ##107, 108.

⁹¹ Cf. *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, Ch.41 'What is a Teacher?'

⁹² *Life of Marcellin Champagnat*, Part 2, Ch.22, p.530.

⁹³ Although it is now customary in the Catholic Church to give the appellation 'Father' to all priests, before the mid to late nineteenth century this title was reserved to members of religious orders (and, even then, not all religious orders). In France, a priest was called 'Monsieur' like any other man, or, more formally 'Monsieur le Abbé'. A parish priest's title was 'Monsieur le Curé', like a town mayor was 'Monsieur le Maire'. Brother Jean-Baptiste tells us that the first men at Lavalla, after Marcellin moved into the house in 1818-19, asked if they could call him 'Father Champagnat'. Interestingly, none of the other founding Marist priests presumed to use this appellation for himself, including J-C Colin, until they took vows for the first time in 1836, after the Society of Mary had been approved by the Holy See.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Part 1, Ch.22 p.239; I John 4:7ff.

sion ‘family spirit’. There is much from these theologians and pastors that favours gentleness, friendship, practical ways of loving and relating, even intensely so. They use the word ‘family’ from time to time in describing the church in general or a religious community in particular. But not ‘family spirit’ as such. Today’s Salesians do use the term, and in much the same way as do we Marists, but this usage comes from St John Bosco in the nineteenth century rather than from the one who inspired him, St Francis de Sales. Drawing on the spirituality and teachings of de Sales – as Marcellin had done in France several decades before – Don Bosco wanted his oratory for disadvantaged youth of Turin to be marked by what he called ‘a family spirit’.

One possible documentary source for the concept championed by Marcellin is in a book that had an enormous influence on elementary school education in France during the same period that the new currents of ‘heart’ spirituality – later called ‘the French school of spirituality’ – were beginning to run strongly. Written in Paris by teacher and priest Jacques de Batencour in 1654, *L’Escole Paroissiale* (‘The Parish School’) was the first treatise on the ‘petite écoles’ for which parishes had responsibility to establish after a royal edict of Louis XIV in 1698.⁹⁵ There is much that could be said about the ‘petite école’ movement in the century before the French Revolution, but suffice it to say that the movement in general, and this text in particular, were major influences on the work of Jean-Baptiste de la Salle and his founding the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and also of Charles Démia who took responsibility for expanding and regularising elementary education in the Diocese of Lyon. Both these seventeenth century projects helped to shape Marcellin’s in the nineteenth, more especially that of de la Salle as it came to be formalised in the manual *La Conduite des Écoles Chrétiennes* (‘The Conduct of Christian Schools’).⁹⁶

Batencour begins the first chapter of his book with these words:

*Just as the heart is the first thing to come alive in a person and the last to die, and is the seat of the soul, so must the Master be the heart of the school, animated by the spirit of God who gives spiritual life to all his small family . . .*⁹⁷

The school is described as a family, the teacher as its heart, or soul. The book then goes into considerable detail on the practical implications that flow from this starting premise. Arguably, the contents of *L’Escole Paroissiale* find more echoes in the first Marist teaching manual – *Le Guide des Ecole* (in English called ‘The Teacher’s Guide’)⁹⁸ – than does the Lasallian *La Conduite*, even though the opposite is conventionally considered to be the case. Yet, even so, the exact phrase ‘family spirit’ is not used.

Marcellin’s opting to use *the family* as the root metaphor for both school and community is not only original, it was also unusual in the religious discourse of the time, even within the founders of the Society of

⁹⁵ The full title of the book is: *L’Escole Paroissiale, ou la manière de bien instruire les enfants dans les petites écoles* (The parish school, or the way to instruct children well in [parish primary] schools). The ‘petite écoles’ were charity schools for children of poor families, and part of a move in France to introduce universal education for all children – under the direction of local clergy, and as unambiguously Catholic. De Batencour was a priest of the Community of Priests of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet in Paris, a group responsible for a number of educational projects in that part of the city, and in the orbit of Olier over the Seine in Saint-Sulpice. Charles Démia later studied in this Community (and also at Saint-Sulpice), and took his learnings back to Lyon to implement and develop.

⁹⁶ All three projects – those of de Batencour, de la Salle, and Démia – led to books of practical manuals, based on the lived experience of teaching in schools. *La Conduite*, first published in 1706, was closely used by Marcellin’s Brothers in their first two decades.

⁹⁷ *L’escole paroissiale*, Chapter 1.

⁹⁸ The first edition was produced by the General Chapter of the Marist Brothers in 1853, thirteen years after Marcellin’s death. It appeared in English in 1931.

Mary.⁹⁹ It was indeed more common for the family milieu to be considered as a danger rather than as an ideal for the development of a child's faith and religious practice. The school with its faith-filled teachers was seen to be the place where the taints of the world and the deficiencies of parents – as both nurturers of faith and as teachers of literacy and numeracy – could be redressed. This was certainly a motivation for the Lasalian project, and for others around France. Nor were first Marists were blameless on this score: in both the writings of Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste, there is reference to the need for Brothers to take the place of parents who were neither capable or available to give proper Christian education to their children.¹⁰⁰

Marcellin, however, does not seem nearly as disposed to this negative opinion of the family experience. On the contrary, he draws deeply on what he calls 'family life' to imagine what a good school and a good religious community could be. We can only conclude that did so because of his own experience of family life. We know how close he remained to his family.¹⁰¹ We know how frequently, and with what intensity, he spoke and wrote about love. To do so, he must have known love. Deeply and abidingly.

The image of the kindly and gentle father, for example, appears recurringly in early Marist documents as an ideal both for the teacher and the superior of the community, as does that of true brotherhood. We know that Marcellin drew on the Rule of the Sisters of the Visitation (founded by Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal) when writing the first Brothers' Rule in 1837. Francis de Sales advocated what he called 'friendship' among the Sisters, wanting them to be genuine sisters to one another, in joy and humility.¹⁰² It was for these Sisters that de Sales first wrote his famous *Treatise on the Love God*, which Marcellin prized so highly.

Douceur was a central concept for de Sales and for Marcellin,¹⁰³ not neatly translatable into English but a word that carries a sense of gentleness, kindness, patience, softness of touch and deep respect towards others. The *Teacher's Guide* almost equates *douceur* with family spirit.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the concept of 'family spirit' is even more important for Marcellin as a defining feature of the Brothers themselves, before it was a descriptor of the kind of schools they conducted. It was central for Marcellin:

After visiting a certain community of the Institute, Father Champagnat was not at all satisfied

⁹⁹ There is a fascinating reference in the *Memoires* of Father Mayet, a chronicler of early Marist history, especially among the Marist priests. He records a remark that Jean-Claude Colin made at a General Council meeting in November 1846: 'Gentlemen, most of us have country backgrounds, and poor education and we call this simplicity; that's easy to say. We further say, "That's family spirit". Do you know what this points to? To a lack of education.' He said these words forcefully. *Doc.136, p374*.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, the Notebook 307 of Brother François where he expounds on the goal of the Institute: 'The Brothers take the place of parents close to the children. Their schools are sanctuaries that God has prepared for the children, to preserve them from the corruption of the world ... Most parents are not capable of giving their children Christian instruction, whether this be because they are too busy, or even more, because they are impious or not very religious. God has raised up the Brothers to replace them.' In *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, Brother Jean-Baptiste has almost the same words, and presents the Brothers as 'substitute parents'. He quotes St Cyprian: 'How many children today could say with St.Cyprian, "Our own parents have proved to be murderers. We owe them our bodily life, but within our families we quickly lost the life of grace, because those who brought us into existence neglected to instruct us in the truths of salvation and to teach us to fear God!"'

¹⁰¹ See, for example, his letter to his last brother's widow at the time of Jean-Baptiste Champagnat's death in 1838. (Letter 180). It is a letter of deep emotion, and reveals how involved he was his family's affairs, and how natural it was for him to visit them. We know how he and Jean-Baptiste financially helped their other brother, Jean-Pierre Champagnat, and how Marcellin took in Jean-Pierre (and some of his children) at The Hermitage in 1833, after the break-up of Jean-Pierre's marriage and his personal difficulties. He and two children were buried there.

¹⁰² See *Spiritual Conferences of Francis de Sales*, especially No.10. Find a good translation by William Ruhl OSFS at: www.oblates.org/spiritual-conferences/

¹⁰³ The lengthy (but unpublished) treatise which Brother Jean-Baptiste wrote in 1849 on the Marist approach to education, allocates three chapters to the subject of 'douceur'.

¹⁰⁴ *The Teacher's Guide*, Ch.16, p.53 (1931 edition).

with what he had seen, so he told the Brother Director, 'I am not pleased with your community.'
'What did you notice that was wrong, Father?'
*'Your community has no religious life, no family life. Happiness cannot be found there.'*¹⁰⁵

In seeking to describe the essence of community, Marcellin's first recourse was to seek to understand it in terms of love, and how love is described in Scripture. We know that his go-to Scriptures were in the Johanne corpus, especially the First Letter of John. Also important for him was St Paul. An entire chapter on community in *Avis, Leçons, Sentences* is also given to Paul's famous passage in I Corinthians 13.¹⁰⁶ He also like to emphasise the importance of being one in heart and mind, and being drawn to straight-shooting verses from the First Letter of Peter that put this in practical terms.¹⁰⁷ Francis de Sales intuitively made a great deal of sense to him for the same reason: de Sales emphasised what loved looked like in practice. Marcellin, for example, took up de Sales' practical 'little virtues' in communal living, and made them his own.¹⁰⁸ They have remained important in Marist culture as descriptors of what family spirit looks like in practice.

Water from the Rock encapsulates much of the above in how it introduces the spiritual trait of family spirit:

*Marcellin and the first Brothers were united in heart and mind. Their relationships were marked by warmth and tenderness. In their discussions about living together as Brothers they found it useful to compare the spirit of their community life to that of a family. Like our early communities, we are inspired by the home of Nazareth to develop those attitudes that make family spirit a reality: love and forgiveness, support and help, forgetfulness of self, openness to others, and joy. This style of relating has become a characteristic of our way of being Marist.*¹⁰⁹

But, importantly, the text takes us deeper:

*Wherever the followers of Marcellin are present, working together in mission, this 'family spirit' is the Marist way of communal living. Its wellspring is the love that Jesus has for all his brothers and sisters – all of humanity. Through this spirit we offer an experience of belonging and union in mission.*¹¹⁰

'Family spirit' is not simply a way of describing Marist cultural mores; it is also a pathway into Marist spiritu-

¹⁰⁵ *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, Ch.31: 'What a religious community should be like.' (*Avis, Leçons, Sentences* is a compilation of conferences given by Marcellin, published in 1868 by Brother Jean-Baptiste, some 28 years after the Founder's death. Just how much is Marcellin and how much is Jean-Baptiste, we cannot be sure. But this Chapter seems quintessentially Marcellin.)

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* Ch.32.

¹⁰⁷ Some verses from this Epistle that appear in Marcellin's writings and talks include. 1 Pt. 1:22; 2:1-3; 3:8-12; 4:8-11; 5:5

¹⁰⁸ In *Avis, Leçons, Sentences* devotes a chapter to the 'little virtues' (Ch.28) and enumerates twelve of them as building blocks of community life: tolerance; turning a blind eye; cheerfulness; empathy; keeping an open mind; sensitivity; affability; gentleness and politeness; sensitivity; commitment to the common good; patience; humility; and equanimity of soul and character. There is, however, no definitive list. Indeed, *Water from the Rock* names them differently, p.108. The point that Francis de Sales wanted to make was that it was small, concrete things that made love real.

¹⁰⁹ *Water from the Rock*, #30

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, #32

ality. While all the characteristics that we have been exploring of Marist ministerial style and the Marist way of forming community are true and important, they are the means and end of something else. They lead to and come from somewhere. That somewhere is Jesus. Or God's mission in Jesus.

Family-related imagery is, indeed, an important figurative device that permeates both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Divine love is often described in terms of a father's or mother's love for a child – intense, intimate and unfailing. For Paul, God is *abba*, something he knows at core of his being. Various books of the Bible take us to both the closeness and betrayal of siblings, the joys and heartaches of lovers, and the betrothal and infidelity of spouses. The nature of God is revealed in familial figures of speech, as are the complexities of the human heart.

But it is in Marcellin's favourite Gospel, that of John, that *family* becomes a key motif for revealing the incarnate and indwelling God.

The movement of the Fourth Gospel invites the reader to move from not knowing or recognising Jesus, to becoming a disciple, to becoming a friend, and finally to becoming a member of Jesus' household. For there are many rooms in the Father's house.¹¹¹ This is where the Beloved Disciple finds himself in the culmination of the Gospel at the foot of the Cross: 'Woman, behold your son';¹¹² that is, Jesus is saying 'This is my brother.' In the Semitic mindset, this was huge. Family was – and to this day is – primary to one's personal identity. While offering hospitality to guests and strangers was one thing, to be recognised as one of the family was at another level entirely. Yet, in the Last Supper Discourse, this is what happens: '... we will come to you,' says Jesus, 'and we will make our home in you.'¹¹³ Our *home*, what a powerful concept! Whoever dwells in love, dwells in God – the great theme of the Johannine school. This is the new Temple, the new place of encounter with God. The new temple is an inclusive place, not one that is only open to the High Priest in the Holy of Holies.

Each of the Synoptic Gospels gives us a similar image which, because of its familiarity to us, may lose some of its figurative punch. But to Semitic hearers, with their understanding of the fundamental role of family, the punch was paradigmatic in its newness. Let us take Luke's version:

*Jesus' mother and brothers came looking for him, but they could not get to him because of the crowd. He was told, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside wanting to see you. But he said in answer, 'My mother and my brothers are those who bear the word of God and put it into practice.'*¹¹⁴

There would be no more arresting way for Jesus to say that a person is one with him. That the first Christians then came to call one another 'brothers and sisters', as we see in Paul's letter and in Acts, amplifies this. We Christians continue to use the same terms in our liturgy and in other ways to this day, but perhaps its power has been tamed. It is indeed a profound concept. The new Encyclical of Pope Francis – *Fratelli tutti* – opens its meaning for us in a contemporary context.¹¹⁵

There is a telling parallel in Marcellin's teaching about the kind of community he wanted. In one of the Founder's conferences recorded in *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, we read of the 'kinds of Brothers that Father

¹¹¹ John 14:2. For an exploration of these concepts in John's Gospel, see the works of Mary Coloe PBVM, especially *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007

¹¹² John 19:26 .

¹¹³ John 14:23.

¹¹⁴ Luke 8:19-21. See also: Matt 12:46-50 and Mark 3:31-35.

¹¹⁵ *Fratelli tutti*, 3 October 2020. www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/index.html

Champagnat did not like'.¹¹⁶ There were ten types. Unsurprisingly, he did not warm to lazy Brothers, or fickle ones, or proud or vain Brothers. He had no time for 'preacher Brothers' or 'executioner Brothers'. There are a few others, but one is a little intriguing: Marcellin didn't like those he called 'servant Brothers'. 'Loving friendships', which Marcellin said he wanted to mark the relationships of the Brothers, would not occur if people had the self-concept of being a servant, however dutifully he may discharge his duties. For Marcellin, a servant Brother was someone who did not see himself as one of the family but, rather, had a sense of being in 'someone else's country', without a feeling at home with his brothers.¹¹⁷ He would not become true friends with them, or find love. It seems to come straight from John.

Interestingly, and even perhaps unwittingly, Marcellin seems to have distanced the Marist way from a significant theme in French spirituality of the time: what was called *anéantissement*, literally 'annihilation', which had a sense of sharing in Jesus' self-emptying servitude.¹¹⁸ While, of course, this is a rich concept theologically, and a theme of the Pauline letters, it had become perverted in some quarters to mean a kind of unhealthy self-effacement or self-abnegation in servitude. It smothered rather than enlivened what it meant to be human. We can imagine, on the contrary, how well John 15:15 – 'I do not call you servants' – sat with Marcellin. Living with and for others was where a person came alive, indeed where and how one discovered 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10).

The intuitions and language of Marist spirituality consequently came to favour immanent and family-related emphases. *Water from the Rock* puts it this way:

*From our family spirit develops a spirituality that is strongly relational and affective. Marcellin's preferred ways of relating to God and to Mary were through familial terms: Jesus in his 'Sacred Heart,' Mary as 'Our Good Mother.' The relationships he encouraged among the Brothers, and between the Brothers and their students were described in similarly fraternal and loving ways. Among today's Marists, with the expanded presence of women, the image of sister has enriched the ways Marists relate, and define their ministry. Essentially, our relationship to one another is being brother and sister.*¹¹⁹

In the decade or two after Marcellin's death, the curriculum of initial training for the Brothers became more regularised and strategic. It needed to be; there were now not one but several novitiates around France, and an exponential growth in the number of novices, most of whom had not known Marcellin or the early Brothers. So, a little handbook was developed for the novices, called the *Manuel de Piété*.¹²⁰ It comprised a series of catechism-like questions and answers, and a collection of Marcellin's favourite sayings. A chapter of this little gem is devoted to family spirit. It begins thus:

Q: What is family spirit?

A: For a Brother, family spirit is:

¹¹⁶ *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, Ch.5

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ For a treatment of this concept, see William Thompson's essay 'Theology and Spirituality of the French School', in *Bérulle and the French School*, Paulist Press, NY, 1989.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, #31

¹²⁰ Compiled first in the 1840s, perhaps principally by Brother François, the oldest extant version we have comes from 1855. It nevertheless contains much that appears to be part of the living and immediate memory of the Institute and close to what Marcellin himself taught. These extracts are from Chapter 9 of Vol.2. The book later evolved into *The Principles of Christian Perfection* which was used in Marist novitiates well into the 20th century.

1. *the distinctive spirit of his Institute;*
2. *a mix of feelings of respect, love, trust and belonging which he has towards his superior as his father, the members of his Institute as his brothers, and the Institute itself as his family and his shared possession*

It goes on to make clear that all religious institutes have the same general purpose and character, but each has its own particular 'spirit', what we may call today its 'spirituality'. For the Marists, this 'spirit of the Institute' was 'family spirit'. And what makes up this spirit, another question asked. The answer and follow-up question are:

A: *It is a spirit of humility, of simplicity, and of modesty.*

Q: *From where does this spirit come?*

A: *From Mary; because since we have chosen her specially as our Mother and as we carry her name, it is only right that we acquire her spirit, that we imitate her virtues, and that, in going to God and doing good, we follow the way that she has followed.*

The 'three violets' of humility, simplicity and modesty, and the reference to having a primarily Marian disposition, take us back to the spiritual core of the Marist way. To live out a family spirit as a Marist person is essentially a spiritual orientation. At its best, Marist spirituality offers people – including young people – a space in which to feel at home, to belong. It is accessible rather than dense, immediate rather than distant; it speaks to the heart. It comes from the heart. It is sustained from the heart. Like a family.

6. A spirituality of simplicity

After about forty thousand words in this little series on Marist spirituality, enmeshed in an unpicking of an intricate weave of historical, theological and ecclesial threads, it is to risk irony to propose that the most defining trait of our spirituality is, in the end, simplicity. But let us not confuse being simple with being simplistic.

To live and act from a simple heart – or, as Marcellin was once described as having, *un cœur libre* (a free or unencumbered heart)¹²¹ – is one of the more complex challenges that the gospel brings us. For most of us, it becomes the project of a lifetime, one that goes to the essence of the *metanoia* to which each of us is called, and called again. So often, however, we develop an expertise in subterfuge, even with ourselves – tempering that call, shrinking from it, kidding ourselves. ‘Happy are the pure in heart’, we read in the Beatitudes, ‘for they shall see God’. A straight-forward thing, surely? The key to it all. Then why can it be so difficult to realise in our lives?

When we come to ‘simplicity’ we have something that, at least at one level, we Marists think that we do well and like to recognise in ourselves. And that’s true. As with ‘family spirit’, here we touch into something written deeply into the Marist genetic code. Lack of pretence, integrity of character, openness in relating, genuineness of intention, an accessible and uncomplicated way of Christian living, an unfiltered joy – these are all markers of an authentic Marist person and a vital Marist community. Simplicity. What you see is what you get. No masks, no power games, no duplicity. No argument with any of that.

We extend it to valuing people for who they are as fellow human beings rather than what they do, or which positions they happen to occupy. All good work is worthy. In the spirit of a Founder who defied the niceties of the clerical customs of the time by rolling up his sleeves and putting himself on the end of a pick, we are uncomfortable with hierarchical cultures or with people standing on ceremony. We can read a piece such as this, written by Brother Laurent, and readily honour it as part of our founding story:

*When [Father Champagnat] came in at evening, his clothes were often torn, and he was covered in sweat and dust. He was never happier than when he had worked long and hard ... At the beginning we were quite poor. We had bread that was the colour of the earth, but we always had enough.*¹²²

Or this from one of the townspeople:

*Our curate is not haughty: you can say what you like to him.*¹²³

¹²¹ From a letter of Jean-Louis Duplay tendered in evidence to the diocesan enquiry for the introduction of the cause of the beatification of Marcellin Champagnat, Session 44 (15 Dec 1890). *Témoignages sur Marcellin Champagnat, Enquête Diocésaine, Oct 1888-Déc 1890*. Father Duplay (1788-1877) was almost the same age as Marcellin, although several years ahead of him in the seminary. He came from Rebaudes (Jonzieux), near Marcellin’s hometown of Marlhes. They became good friends in the minor seminary at Verrières. Duplay later became Rector of the Seminary of Saint-Irénée in Lyon and Marcellin’s spiritual director and confidant. He knew Marcellin intimately.

¹²² *Memoir of Brother Laurent*. This unpublished text of just a few pages in a notebook was written, probably in 1841, by one of the first Brothers, Laurent Audras. It is the oldest recorded account of the Lavalla years and the character of Marcellin himself. Laurent moved into the nascent community at Lavalla at the end of 1817 at the age of 23. He had been a farm-hand: a stocky, ruddy-faced, barely literate fellow. He seems to have become one of the lively personalities of the founding group – an indefatigable catechist, a passionate teacher, a great communicator and entertainer.

¹²³ Evidence of Brother Aidant given to Session 28 (27 May 1889) of the enquiry for the introduction of the cause

Such straight-forwardness in personal relationships became a feature of the Marist way from the start. Indeed, the characteristic ‘family spirit’ depended on it, as indeed did Marcellin’s whole approach to education in which the interpersonal relationship between teacher and student was pivotal. A noted Marist scholar from the last century, Brother Alexandre Balko, was strongly of the opinion that simplicity is the most distinctive feature of Marist education. He wrote extensively on it.¹²⁴

Balko took a passing expression that Marcellin used in one of his early letters to build a whole paradigm of Marist education. He claimed that Marist educators have a characteristic ‘*bon enfant* style’ in their ministry. What did he mean? This rather odd term comes from an almost throwaway line in the letter where Marcellin tells his correspondent that the young students in the town of Tarentaise in 1823 had described Brother Laurent as a *bon enfant*. In the official English translation of Marcellin’s letters published in 1991, done by American Brother Leonard Voegtle, *bon enfant* was translated as ‘nice guy’.¹²⁵ A rather American expression. It is probably not possible, however, to offer any easy English translation of it – and Balko purposely didn’t in his own English translation of his writings. This is because what Marcellin was doing was quoting the kids of Tarantaise who, like young people of any time or any culture, had their own expressions, their own cant, for describing their assessment that someone was one of them, one with them, okay by them. Their judgement was that Laurent fitted this category. He would have only done so because his students found him approachable, personable, open, unpretentious, understanding, able to relate easily with them, friendly, fair, someone who spent time with them, and ‘got’ them – all the timeless criteria that any young people would intuitively apply. In Tarantaise, in 1823, such a person was a *bon enfant*. Balko argued that a *bon enfant* approach to education was to become defining of the Marist way. It was to find ways to be personally present in the lives of young people, understand their world, and to be accepted, even liked, by them.

The reference text for Marist education, *In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat*, captures a sense of this style in other words:

*Our simplicity expresses itself primarily through contacts with young people that are **genuine and straightforward**, undertaken without pretence or duplicity. We say what we believe, and show that we believe what we say.*¹²⁶

*In our teaching and organisational structures, we show a preference for simplicity of **method**. Our way of educating, like Marcellin’s, is personal, rooted in real life, and practical. Likewise, simplicity of **expression**, avoiding any ostentation, guides our way of responding to the possibilities and the demands of our contemporary educational settings.*¹²⁷

*Our way of relating to young people is to be a **brother or sister** to them*¹²⁸

*We are convinced of the educative value of quality relationships between ourselves and the young, and of the importance of being ourselves in their presence and their feeling at their ease with us.*¹²⁹

Great teachers can always make their subject matter simple, of course. It is a sign of mastery of an academic

for Marcellin’s beatification.

¹²⁴ See, for example, his article ‘Simplicity’, in the edited collection his works. *Reflections on Our Origins, an anthology of selected articles, published and unpublished, written by Brother Alexandre Balko FMS*. Henri Vigneau FMS (ed.), 2001. Many of these articles appeared over some decades in the French Marist journal *Voyages et Missions*.

¹²⁵ Letters of Marcellin Champagnat, Vol. 1, edited by Br Paul Sester. Marist Brothers, Rome, 1991. Letter 1.

¹²⁶ *In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat, A Vision for Marist Education Today*, Marist Brothers, Rome 1998. #103

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* #105

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* #109

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* #171

discipline to be able to do so. A stand-out example is a memorable meeting in 2005 of Pope Benedict XVI with young children who were first communicants. This highly educated theologian, the university professor and inhabitant of a rather rarefied academic world, was able to explain to children with simplicity and impact what it meant to receive Holy Communion.¹³⁰ Many of us would have had experience of such effective teaching. I recall two of my own secondary teachers – Brother Barry Lamb who could make modern history zing (even in the period after lunch), and Denis Callaghan who made Economics a snack, using just the daily newspaper as his textbook. Both educators also brought a contagious enthusiasm and a love of their subjects. And a tangible enjoyment of the company of those they were teaching, relating easily and openly with them. They were bon enfants!

Water from the Rock speaks similarly of Marists' 'simplicity of behaviour':

*We strive to be persons of integrity – truthful, open-hearted and transparent in our relationships.*¹³¹

Another element of simplicity for the Marist has often been the promotion of simplicity in lifestyle. This, in turn, has been linked to a commitment to equity and justice – the 'live-simply-so-that-all-can-simply live' argument. Pope Francis, in both *Laudato Sí* and *Fratelli Tutti*, has emphasised this attitude of shared responsibility for our global community. *Water from the Rock* does the same in its introduction to simplicity:

*This same spirit encourages us to develop a simple style of life. This implies that we avoid consumerism, with its accumulation of disposable goods and wasteful use of resources. We choose to be responsible for creation, a precious gift of God to humanity. This attitude encourages us to join with others in actions necessary to preserve our environment, to enhance the harmony between humanity and nature, and to collaborate with the Creator in bringing creation to its fullness.*¹³²

Yet there are differences both of meaning and motivation in the range of the above understandings of simplicity. The concepts of integrity and transparency of character, those of effectiveness in teaching method and directness in personal relationships, and those of equitable and responsible use of resources, are not all the same thing. While there are some obvious links and overlaps, we need to be alert to potential confusion as to what we mean precisely when we talk of Marist simplicity and, more importantly, what is driving it.

The essence of Marist simplicity is spiritual. This should be the litmus test we apply to any description of it.

We are talking about a *spiritual* simplicity, or a 'spirituality of simplicity', as *Water from the Rock* describes it, a simplicity of heart before God and others. While this will surely come to express itself in, for example, a cultural simplicity in institutional and communal settings, or a pedagogical and relational simplicity in teaching and ministry, or a broadly attitudinal simplicity of lifestyle – as it did for Marcellin and the founding generation – its kernel is in a relationship with God, a Beatitudes-type relationship. Such a way of relating with God is mirrored, indeed expressed, in our relating with others.

The way to such a relationship with God is sourced in human experience of love, trust, belief and self-acceptance. *Water from the Rock* goes straight to this:

¹³⁰ www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/october/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051015_meeting-children.html

¹³¹ *Water from the Rock*, #33.

¹³² *Ibid.* #38

At the heart of Marist spirituality coming from Marcellin and the first Brothers is humility ...

This attitude grew from the experience of Marcellin and the first Brothers. Marcellin's formative environment was that of a loving family in a small rural village. From his mother he learned to trust in the providence of God; from his aunt he learned filial abandonment into the arms of this God. From his father he learned sincerity and honesty. Through the joys and struggles of life he learned to be humble and confident. Aware of his limitations he experienced them as a grace when he was able to dispose himself with confidence to the will of God. The first generation of Brothers were young men from environments similar to that of Marcellin. All these providential circumstances developed a spirituality that was uncomplicated and down to earth.

This spirituality of simplicity shapes the whole life of the disciples of Marcellin. 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.¹³³

For Marcellin, simplicity and humility were inextricably bound up with one another; they were two sides of the one coin for him.¹³⁴ References to this are found with great frequency through the writings of Brother François, for example:

The spirit of the Little Brothers of Mary, their particular and distinctive character, is a spirit of humility and simplicity ... Humility and simplicity must always be the principal privileged and characteristic virtues of each one of us.¹³⁵

... the spirit of the Brothers of Mary, their distinctive character, must be a spirit of humility and simplicity ... after the example of the Blessed Virgin ... Entry to heaven is barred against all who do not possess the humility and simplicity of a small child ...¹³⁶

The primary spiritual attitude of humility – of recognising God as God and allowing God to be God in one's life, with both the self-belief and the vulnerability that such a mindset needs if it is to be a healthy and liberating thing – was for Marcellin best nurtured through a spiritual simplicity. He understood this and lived it as an uncluttered, transparent, trusting, discerning and direct personal relationship with God. This kind of simplicity has become a signature element of the spiritual inheritance we have from Marcellin and, importantly, one of the most effectiveness means that Marists have in their ministry of evangelisation with young people:

Young people are attracted to this simple spirituality. The images of God we offer them, and the language, experiences and symbolism we use, are accessible and touch the heart. The more our evangelisation and catechesis are rooted in our distinctive Marist spirituality, the more effective they become.¹³⁷

¹³³ *Ibid.* ##33a, 34, 36

¹³⁴ Marcellin's Spiritual Testament expresses the hope that 'simplicity and humility be always' the markers of the Marists. The writings of Brothers Jean-Baptiste and François are replete with the twinning of these spiritual attitudes. It was clearly something that was central to the spirituality they learnt from Marcellin.

¹³⁵ *Instructions of Br. François*, Vol 1, pp. 147-150.

¹³⁶ *Circular on the Spirit of Faith*. (The last sentence was put in italics in the original text, indicating the strength of François' conviction on this point.)

¹³⁷ *Water from the Rock*, #35.

While it is admittedly conjectural and a stretch of historiographical legitimacy to suggest it, it is easily believable that Marcellin would have been a fan of the liturgical and catechetical reforms of the post-Conciliar period. A vernacular liturgy (a genuinely vernacular one, in contrast to the confected ‘sacralised’ language of the 2011 English translation of the Roman Missal), and approaches to catechesis and youth ministry that meet young people in the existential realities of their lives, these would have been intuitively attractive to him. He would have rejected any criticism that these were somehow a banalisation or dumbing-down of the ineffability of the Divine. Confidence for such a view of Marcellin is sourced in his conscious advocating of simplicity. He opted to use the word, and he understood it conceptually.

Simplicity as a concept was, however, grated against the prevailing prejudices of the French church at the time (much of it still aligned with the pretentious mores of the *ancien régime*), and perhaps French culture more generally where fashion, appearance, and *savoir-vivre* esteemed. Champions of simplicity were scarce because of its allusions to ignorance, coarseness and rusticity. Simplicity was hardly in vogue in the private salons or the public cafés of Paris.

Such an attitude was evident even among some leading members of the Society of Mary, including Father Colin himself. Father Mayet, for example, was critical of his fellow Marist priests, ‘the majority of whom were incapable of preaching in front of an educated congregation because they were illiterate and made [grammatical] mistakes in French.’ Perhaps he was exaggerating to make the point that the effectiveness of the Society of Mary was going to be impeded if its priests were seen to lack sufficient sophistication. Similarly, Jean-Claude Colin is on record for being dismissive of *simplicité*, associating it with being poorly educated, something that he did not want for the Society and was more than a little embarrassed about in his own life story because its self-described peasant origins.¹³⁸

Marcellin was somewhat marginalised in the Society – at least by some of the younger generation of Marist priests – for his country ways. Indeed, Marcellin described himself as a *campagnard* (a man from the country), and he seemed to like to do so.¹³⁹

But for most people, simplicity was for simpletons.

Again from Colin via Mayet’s writings, we have this explanation for Marcellin’s lack of success in Paris when he was attempting to get legal recognition for the Brothers:

A Marist [priest]¹⁴⁰ said that what had hampered Father Champagnat in Paris was his great simplicity – and that after having seen him it was said, ‘That is truly a courageous man!’ But everything about him is speaks of the country and he lacks the elegant formalities and he lacks the elegant formalities of Paris’.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ *Memoires* of Fr Mayet. Doc.136, p.374. In another telling note of Mayet (Doc. 128), Colin admits his embarrassment at receiving dinner invitations from the Jesuits, and also the Capuchins and Missionaries of Lyon, because he didn’t have good enough manners, being from the country. He said he could not reciprocate and invite them to the Marist house. The contrast between Colin and Champagnat is interesting here, for Marcellin – even though he explicitly worked on enhancing politeness and etiquette among his Brothers, seeking to polish their rough, rustic ways – was never uncomfortable with his or their humble origins. Indeed, he delighted in them.

¹³⁹ Marist historian, Brother André Lanfey, has written on this subject, citing comments made about Fr Champagnat by Frs Maîtreperre and Mayet. See his article : *Champagnat Pretre « Campagnard » Fondateur d’Ecoles de Campagne*.

¹⁴⁰ Probably Jean-Baptiste-Justin Chanut SM, the young priest who accompanied Marcellin to Paris for a couple of months in 1838, and who had been with Marcellin at The Hermitage. He was then to have rather unusual life story: later in 1838 he was appointed to manage the Marian shrine at Verdélais in Bordeaux (which had been entrusted to the Society of Mary but to which Marcellin refused to send any Brothers to be sacristans); five years later he was dismissed from the Marists, became a diocesan priest of Lyon and was appointed to Saint Louis in Rome; after appointments back in Lyon, he applied to re-join the Society of Mary, did another novitiate, and was then appointed superior of two successive communities, including a time when he lived with Father Mayet who recorded his memories of the early days of the Society. Later he left the Marists again. He seemed to be a rather opinionated man.

¹⁴¹ Interview of Jean-Claude Colin with Bishop Frayssinous. *Mémoire Mayet*, 1, 26.

It was a sentiment still echoing half a century later when the cause of Marcellin's beatification had been introduced:

His confreres criticised him a lot from the moment he started his work. There was an attempt to have him suspended under the pretext that he disgraced the priestly state by living a life so wretched and poor – he even made a stonemason of himself while he built the Hermitage.¹⁴²

It was apparently a criticism extended to the Brothers, as Balko relates:

The behaviours of the Brothers, undisguisedly those of the common people, easily led them to be treated as peasants; it was not fully understood by certain ecclesiastics. Fr Rouchon, parish priest of Valbenoite, and his group of Brothers, headed home from a visit to Lavalla [to investigate a possible merger] shaking their heads. Fr Mazelier himself hesitated for a long time before deciding to unite the Brothers of Saint-Paul-Trois-Chateaux with those of the Hermitage. Those who came to Fr Champagnat lived the simple, poor, hard-working, pious life of country people.¹⁴³

Simplicity did, nonetheless, have some noteworthy advocates in French spiritual discourse, among them two popular authors with whom Marcellin aligned himself closely and deliberately. The first has been mentioned frequently on these pages: Francis de Sales; the second was Vincent de Paul. Both men saw that simplicity was the pathway to gospel living.

Let us turn first to Francis de Sales. In a conference he gave to the Sisters of the Visitation, whom he had co-founded and whose way of life was well-known to Marcellin, de Sales took up the topic of simplicity, a theme he says that 'he had often addressed'.¹⁴⁴ He takes his audience immediately to the tenth chapter of Luke's Gospel – to the episode of Martha and Mary (Lk.10:38-42). We know it well: Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, leaving her sister Martha to attend to all the serving of their guests. 'It is Mary who has chosen the better part', counsels Jesus. Francis de Sales frames this encounter in terms of desire, and simplicity of desire, or, to put it another way, the essence of desire. De Sales is never fearful about the power of human desire; indeed, he urges people to embrace it, because, he argues, all human desire is essentially a desire to find the love that is God.¹⁴⁵ The quest is holy.¹⁴⁶

Our heart is simple when we have no other aim in all that we do or desire ... That is 'Mary's part'

¹⁴² Testimony of Fr Matthieu Bedoin to the diocesan enquiry into the cause of the beatification of Marcellin Champagnat, Session 38 (22 Oct. 1890). Matthieu Bedoin was the nephew of Etienne Bedoin (d.1864), who became the long-serving curé of the parish of Lavalla soon after Marcellin moved to the Hermitage. The older Bedoin was a contemporary of Marcellin. He testifies that he stayed periodically with his uncle, as a boy met Marcellin, and heard many stories about him from his uncle.

¹⁴³ Balko, *op.cit.*, p.122

¹⁴⁴ *Conférences de St François de Sales*, Vol.1, No.9

¹⁴⁵ This is one of the main themes of his *Treatise on the Love of God*, a book that we know that Marcellin not only had on his bookshelf but one which he recommended to his Brothers as a primer of the spiritual life. 'Desire' has over 300 mentions in this book.

¹⁴⁶ In contemporary spiritual discourse, this is an idea that has been developed extensively by Ronald Rolheiser OMI. See, especially, his book *Holy Longing*.

which 'alone is necessary.' And that is simplicity . . . as it looks straight at God, without tolerating any mixture of self-interest

Simplicity removes from our hearts all the worry and anxiety which many have suffered uselessly as they look for a variety of exercises and means to be able to love God, as they say . . . They are tormented in their search to know the art of loving God. They are not aware that there is no other way of loving God, except that of loving Him. They think that there is a special art to obtain this love. Nevertheless, it is to be found only in simplicity.

That is the only way we can find and acquire the love of God. but we are to go about it in simplicity, without angst or anxiety.¹⁴⁷

The virtue of simplicity, de Sales points out, is the opposite of what he calls the 'vice of guile'.

From this vice flow all kinds of subtlety, cunning and duplicity. Guile is an accumulation of deceit, cheating and treachery. It is by means of guile that we find ways to deceive our neighbour and all those with whom we have dealings. In this way we lead them to the goal of our designs. We try to make them understand that we only know what we are telling them. All this is entirely opposed to simplicity, which requires that our interior matches our exterior.

De Sales thus joins the dots between simplicity and love: 'Simplicity is nothing else but a pure and simple act of charity which has only one end in view – the love of God.'¹⁴⁸

The evangelist Luke, in this chapter of the Gospel, presents things in the same way as Francis de Sales: the episode of Martha and Mary cannot be read separately from the passage that immediately precedes it, the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). The *listening* of Mary at Jesus' feet is juxtaposed to the *acting lovingly to one's neighbour* of the Samaritan in the story, which is contrasted with the duplicity or hypocrisy of the Levite and the priest. Love of God is love of neighbour; love of neighbour is love of God. Simple. But there's more: we also need to go back to the first part of the same chapter, which sets a conceptual framework for both the Martha/Mary story and the Good Samaritan parable. In the first 22 verses of the chapter we find one of the recurring themes of Jesus' message, that of simplicity of heart:

At the same hour [i.e. after the sending out of the Seventy and their return, having cast out demons and announced the immanence of God's reign] Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.' (Cf. Lk.1-22)

The constitutive elements of this tenth chapter of Luke encapsulate well the characteristic simplicity to which we Marists are called.

Second, let us look at St Vincent de Paul. This saint was promoted, from the first years in Lavalla, as a model of the kind of spirituality that Marcellin wanted to nurture in his Brothers.¹⁴⁹ Reference to him appears with

¹⁴⁷ *Conférences de St François de Sales*, Vol.1, No.9

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ In the *Life of Marcellin Champagnat* (Part 1, Ch.10, pp.306-07), Brother Jean-Baptiste tells us that during the building of the

increasing frequency in both official and informal primary sources in later decades.¹⁵⁰ ‘Monsieur Vincent’, as he was widely known, drew consciously from the spirituality of Francis de Sales.¹⁵¹ He saw himself, especially in his later years, as a disciple of de Sales. Vincent and the Congregation of Mission¹⁵² that he founded to undertake inland missions in France were, with St John Francis Regis, models for the nascent Society of Mary.¹⁵³

Vincent was famous for his charitable work and his disarmingly respectful attitude to the poor. But, for the man himself, it was simplicity that was the most important thing. He often called it ‘his gospel’.

*The heart must not think one thing while the mouth says another.*¹⁵⁴

*The missionary must avoid all duplicity, dissimulation, cunning, and double meaning.*¹⁵⁵

*God gives me such a great esteem for simplicity that I call it my gospel. I have a particular devotion and consolation in saying things as they are.*¹⁵⁶

We can imagine how comfortably Marcellin would have sat with such sentiments. He was never one to dissimulate, not his relating with others, nor in his spiritual life. He would have appreciated the directness of the injunction in perhaps his favourite book of the Bible – the First Letter of John: *He who says he loves God but hates his brother is liar* (1 Jn. 4:20). He strove consciously to be a simple man. He did not shrink from using the term *simplicité*, however much it may not have been attractive to many others.

extensions to the house in Lavalla, there was reading at meals. He mentions the lives of several saints which were read; St Vincent de Paul is the second of the three mentioned, the other two being the great inland missionary, St Francis Regis, and foreign missionary, Francis Xavier. He further tells us that the reading was frequently interrupted by Marcellin himself who spoke with some passion about the saint who was being featured.

¹⁵⁰ For example, as an appendix to the *Rules of Government* drawn up by the General Chapter of 1854, there is a list of books recommended for the Brothers to read. Among them are: *Esprit de St Vincent de Paul (Vols 1 et 2)*, by André-Joseph Ansart CM. (Interestingly two others are: *Esprit de St François de Sales (Vols 1-4)* by Louis Baudry PSS, *Esprit de Ste Thérèse [of Avila]* by M. Emery PSS – further evidence of the influence of both the Carmelite and Salesian sources of the Marist spirituality of Marcellin Champagnat.) Another book in wide circulation among the Brothers was *La Vie de St Vincent de Paul* by Pierre Collet CM. Each of the books by Ansart and Collet was regarded as a spiritual classic and each had a new French edition published in the mid-1820s. Excerpts from both books appear numerous times in the notebooks of Brother François and Brother Jean-Baptiste. In *Avis, Leçons, Sentences* there is a dozen references to Vincent, and in the *Manuel de Directeurs* (a handbook for superiors/principals), there is a long section on Vincent. The explicit influence of Vincent de Paul on Marist spirituality probably grew even more in the years after Marcellin’s death, promoted by both Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste, arguably because of the obvious resonances of Vincent in the life of Marcellin.

¹⁵¹ There are over 150 references to St Francis de Sales in the extant writings of Vincent. See *Vincent de Paul, Conférences, Correspondence, Documents* (14 Vols). Pierre Coste CM (ed.), 1920-26.

¹⁵² Various known popularly in different countries as the Vincentians or the Lazarists.

¹⁵³ There are numerous references to Vincent de Paul in documents associated with Jean-Claude Colin. See especially an article by Marist scholar Jean Coste SM. ‘Saint Vincent de Paul and Father Colin’ in *Acta Societatis Mariae* (Vol. VI, n.28, August 1960). Note also this comment of Colin in the *Memoires* of Mayet, Doc.110: « *Je vous recommande aussi beaucoup, Messieurs, l’esprit de St. Vincent de Paul. Je ne trouve rien qui me semble mieux représenter l’esprit que la Société doit avoir, que l’esprit de saint Vincent de Paul* ». (‘I also highly recommend to you, gentlemen, the spirit of St Vincent de Paul. It seems to me that nothing captures the spirit that the Society [of Mary] should have better than the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul.’)

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 9:81; 9:605; 12:172

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 2:340; 9:81

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 9:60

Yet, while we can be fairly sure that he would have had no difficulty eschewing the coiffured hairstyles or flamboyant fashions of Paris, we should not think that being simple came easily to Marcellin, at least not spiritually. As for each us, his was the journey of a lifetime. We have observed previously that the self-confessed major struggle of his life was with pride, taking himself out of the centre. Marcellin was like all of us: the innate simplicity with which we are born – the evangelical simplicity of the child – is something that has to be born again in us. And again. And again.

We know that there is a plethora of factors that can lead to us to feel the need to become masked or mistrusting, to doubt that others will accept us for who we are, to believe that we somehow need to prove ourselves or to be something that we are not, to lust for power or privilege. It may be that we have been emotionally hurt along the way, that we have faced rejection, been denied love or been betrayed in it, or been made unfairly to fear consequences or question our goodness. The resulting artifice, our intricately constructed system of self-defence and survival, needs to dissolve if we are to progress spiritually. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are those who live out an integrity of desire.

It is always about dying to self. The vulnerability to which this exposes us is something that can be forbidding. It certainly was for Mary, as we can see from how Luke constructs the Annunciation passage. Yet, finally she trusted. It was a source of dark doubt also for Marcellin, but he learned more and more to trust, from his 'dark night' experience of 1826. His increasing recourse to Psalm 127 was emblematic of this, as was his simple but prayerful jotting of 'You know' in his personal journal. He calls us to do the same:

Like Marcellin, our journey with God is also one of simplicity. We approach God with transparency, honesty, openness and trust. We consciously seek uncomplicated ways to help us in this journey.¹⁵⁷

The Gospel reading for the feast-day of Saint Marcellin on 6th June is fixed (Mt. 18:1-7;10), because the day enjoys the rank of a solemnity in Marist communities, and one is not supposed to fiddle with the pre-determined prayers and readings of liturgical solemnities. It is the same reading that was used at his beatification in 1955 and his canonisation in 1999. Why was it chosen? I long assumed that the choice must have been related to the educational aims of the Marists: the passage seems to be about having children come to Jesus. Maybe so. But that overlooks the little detail in verse 2 that, in fact it is Jesus who brings the child to the disciples, not the other way around. This gives us another lens to this passage, a lens of simplicity:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.' ...

To be able to welcome Jesus, that is surely the moment of arrival in anyone's spiritual journey. Again, as it was for Mary. But it is never really an arrival; it is always the journey, a now-but-not-yet, a continual renewing and rebirth. The fourth and final part of T.S. Eliot's magisterial work 'The Four Quartets' is called 'Little Gidding'. Written at a dark time for the poet and the world (1942), it explores the purgation that Eliot sensed was needed to reach salvation. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross would have concurred. So would have

¹⁵⁷ *Water from the Rock*, #41.

Marcellin. In the end, Eliot names this purgation as 'simplicity', and its price as 'not less than everything'.

Marcellin, Teresa, John, and anyone who has wrestled and matured spiritually would have also affirmed Eliot's leaving his reader, ultimately, with hope. To come home finally to ourselves and to know ourselves in a new way, to know as fully as we are known (cf. 1 Cor 13:12), to become like him because we shall see him as he really is (1 John 3:2).

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree*

*Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always--
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well.
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.¹⁵⁸*

As profound as this poetry from Eliot unquestionably is, with its typically arresting array of figurative devices, literary constructions and thematic allusions – not least the linking of simplicity to Mother Julian of Norwich and to her Easter imagery at the time of the Black Death – let us conclude our exploration of simplicity in Marist spirituality with a Scriptural image. For Marists especially, the motif *par excellence* for simplicity is arguably that of Mary and Elizabeth in the first chapter of Luke.

The little town of Ein Karem, now a leafy suburb in south-west Jerusalem, is traditionally linked to this passage of Scripture. When we visit with Marist pilgrimage groups, people are often taken by how the intensity of the Mary-Elizabeth encounter is compellingly captured in the statue in the courtyard of the Franciscan church there. The women's eyes are wholly caught on one another: no mask-wearing, no hidden agenda, no dissimulation. Their presence to one another absorbs them both in a way that their hearts meet and speak.

The Lucan scene of the meeting of these two pregnant women depicts a literal jumping with stirrings of new life. 'From the moment your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy' (Lk1:44). It is an encounter of joy and of hope, fecund in promise. We should not overlook this context. In our reading of

¹⁵⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding' from 'Four Quartets', in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*.

this passage we sometimes rush to the wonderful words of the Magnificat, skipping over how and where it happens: in a relationship, in an unfiltered and embracing encounter. A simple relationship, a relationship of simple hearts.

At the bottom of the hill in Ein Karem is a small mosque, now disused, and a little spring that was once known for the purity and sweetness of its water. The mosque is called 'Mary's Spring', as was the church that was there before it. And before that there was a Greek temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of fertility. 'Ein' in Hebrew means 'spring', and 'kerem' means vineyard'; 'ein kerem' is the 'spring of the vineyard'. This is a place that celebrates fertility. Mary is at once simple before Elizabeth, simple before God – 'my whole being rejoices in God my saviour' (Lk. 1:47), and simple before herself – 'the lowliness of his servant' (Lk. 1:48). It is this tri-faceted simplicity that allows her to meet Elizabeth and for God's reign to take root, bud and flower in in them, between them, and around them. To be the spring of the vineyard. Simple.