

Who Would Be Father Champagnat's Legitimate Successor?

The Founder's difficult choice during his last illness (1839 - 1840)

Brother André Lanfrey
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Translated by Brother Colin Chalmers

By means of the Decree *Omnium Gentium* promulgated on 29th April 1836 Pope Gregory XVI gave his approbation to the Marist priests as the Society of Mary, but not to the other branches, although they were considered to be morally affiliated with it. This ambiguous situation would prove to be one of the main sources of the problem of succession, which I am going to discuss at length. Canonically, the Society of Mary was constituted on 24th September 1836 when Father Colin was elected Superior by the Marist Fathers, one of whom was Father Champagnat, who then went on to take their religious vows. In L'Hermitage, at the beginning of the month of October, the Brothers took public vows for the first time, at the end of the retreat preached by Fathers Colin and Convert. However, their new formula of engagement, "to the Superior of the Society of Brothers of Mary", was ambiguous: was the Superior Father Champagnat or Father Colin? Marcellin's resignation as head of the branch of Brothers one year later on 18th September 1837 scarcely altered a fundamental fact: canonically speaking, the Brothers' branch depended on the Archbishop of Lyons and its own Founder; moreover, its history and spirit were reasonably different from that of the priests.

Marcellin's illness and death took place in the context of tension between him and Colin concerning the nature of the Society of Mary and, particularly, the status of the Brothers' branch. The Spiritual Testament of 18th May 1840 and Marcellin's death temporarily resolved these fundamental questions by clearly establishing Jean-Claude Colin as his legitimate successor and the Superior of the whole Society of Mary. However, this unity would be more formal than deep and would find its resolution in amiable separation in the years 1852 - 1863. This, then, is the story of two conceptions of the Society of Mary, of institutional rivalry and of a crisis of succession that I mentioned, with Marcellin's illness and death exposing them and setting up the urgency of temporary solutions.

1. Difficult relations between Jean-Claude Colin and Marcellin during 1836 - 1840

Thanks to the collection of sources entitled "Colin sup"¹, we can follow the main steps for the establishment of a Society of Mary where, in addition to the basic questions raised above, the material and administrative problems played a not-negligible part.

¹ The subtitle of Volume 1 published by Father Gaston Lessard SM in Rome in 2007 is: "Documents for the study of the Generalate of J.C. Colin (1836 - 1842)"

A little before the recognition of the Society of Mary, on 13th October 1835, Marcellin and the Fathers of Valbenoîte established a society presided over by Father Rouchon, the Parish Priest and owner. His contribution in furniture and buildings amounted to 6,000 francs. Father Séon, Marist priest, brought 10,000 francs in cash and furniture; Pierre Colin, Jean-Claude's elder brother, had only his "hard work" as his entire capital. Marcellin brought to the society L'Hermitage and La Grange Payre or a capital of 15,000 francs in goods and buildings. However, he retained the personal administration of this during his lifetime. In a letter of 6th November 1836 concerning good management, Jean-Claude Colin asked Marcellin to let him have a copy of the Act mentioned above. Thus, up to 1835, all the goods of the branch of the Little Brothers of Mary were Marcellin's personal property. The fact that he had become a Religious in 1836 did not prevent him from continuing to administer these goods. It was only the prospect of his approaching death which necessitated in 1840 the setting-up of a new society consisting of Marcellin and six Brothers.

It was not only about the administration of goods that Father Colin, in a letter of 11th August 1837, soundly criticised Marcellin's manner of governing.

"I feel the need to advise you to suspend every type of project for three months, to occupy yourself solely with forming your Brothers well, to put your Mother-House and private establishments on a sound footing, and to organising your affairs so well that, if you were to die in three months, everything would be in order. [...] Your health and your soul are more important."

In the eyes of the new Superior of the Society of Mary, Marcellin behaved too much like a businessman, lacked rigour in his management and neglected the formation of his disciples. A certain concern for the health of his confrère can also be detected. These criticisms would certainly contribute to Marcellin's resignation as Superior of the Brothers on 18th September, at the end of the Marist Fathers' retreat. On 29th September, Jean-Claude Colin more clearly spelt out his concerns to Marcellin over the state of his health:

"Pray very much that the good God will furnish me with the means to give you a helper as soon as possible.² Every day, I ask him for this grace. I feel that you need someone."

A letter of 27th October 1837 would have a completely different tone: Colin insisted that Marcellin send him, for the "children of select families", well-brought-up Brothers of proven virtue to serve in the College³ of the Fathers in Belley. "The Fathers' houses must be looked after well and in order to do this we must have fewer establishments, if necessary." He added: "I am thinking about a significant reform of the government and conduct of the Brothers. [...] Your ideas appear to me to be too fixated on certain points and I have my doubts that in this you are doing God's will." One of these points was the lack of ecclesiastical acknowledgement: "Don't treat business in an off-hand manner; equally, avoid any sort of joking, something which I regard as being completely opposed to the religious spirit."

² This priest would be Father Chanut, present in L'Hermitage during 1837 - 1838. However, this was because this fairly disorganised priest was no longer wanted at La Favorite boarding-school.

³ [Translator's Note] In France a "college" is the most academically advanced type of secondary school.

The year 1838 passed without any major upheaval since Marcellin was occupied in Paris for more than six months with the issue of legal authorisation. It was at this time that the role of Brother François as an administrator was confirmed.⁴ In contrast, the year was marked by conflict, with a threatening letter on 22nd February which reproached Marcellin for not having sent a Brother to Verdélais in the Diocese of Bordeaux to help Father Chanut. This was an occasion for Colin to be specific in his thinking on the Brothers' branch at the heart of the Society of Mary.

“A Brother at the service of priests of the Society does twenty times more good, in my opinion, than if he were working in a commune, where, thank God, the means of instruction of young people are not lacking today. However, you have never really understood this arrangement and aim of the Society.”⁵

There was, therefore, a fundamental difference between the two earliest Marists and Founders. For Colin, the Brothers' branch was not in the original plan for the Society and the teaching Brothers were Marcellin's personal creation, which had no apostolic utility in itself. Like many ecclesiastics of his time, he attached scarcely any importance to the education of the common people. As for Marcellin, if he clearly acknowledged that the Brothers were only a later branch of the Society, he could not conceive of that Society without Brothers vowed to popular education. According to Colin's views, therefore, he was an obstacle to any reorganisation of the Society of Mary.

He was a big obstacle! Even if the economic power he represented was a secondary consideration, it could not be neglected. In particular, the Brothers' branch was growing rapidly and Marcellin enjoyed the prestige of a Founder with his Brothers. Considered to be the Superior of the diocesan Congregation of Brothers, he was strongly supported by the Archdiocese. More and more, and contrary to Colin's ideas, education of the common people was being considered as a priority and Marcellin was being seen as a precursor in this area. Finally, the Society of Mary had only begun to set up its centre in the Archdiocese of Lyon, when Marcellin had always been there. He was under only one handicap, but it was a serious one: he had not succeeded in obtaining legal authorisation for his Institute. It was the exhausting work of obtaining it that led to his illness and premature death in 1840. This absence of official status was going to force Marcellin to make Father Colin his successor. However, in 1839, we were not there yet.

The construction of the story of Marcellin's illness and death

The Circular of 6th June 1840 in which Brother François informed the communities of the Founder's death ended with these words: “Details surrounding the illness and death of our good Father Superior will be sent from the Mother-House to each establishment. His portrait will be drawn from life and will be sent to you as quickly as possible.”

⁴ Father Colin greeted him by name in his letter of 27th October 1837.

⁵ He also invited him to undertake a three-day retreat to humble himself for not having done God's will.

The portrait is that of the painter Ravery and a lithographed copy was sent to the Brothers later. As for the promised notice, it was certainly never sent. Indeed, on 20th November 1840, in a Circular to the Brothers of Polynesia specifically announcing the death of “our Father and Superior”, Brother François and his Assistants content themselves with these words: “He fell asleep in His bosom (God’s) on Saturday, 6th June, the Vigil of Pentecost, at 4.30 in the morning after three quarters of an hour of calm agony. His last illness had exhausted him and taken such a toll that he was like a living skeleton. His death, like his life, was full of edification. We have no doubt that it was precious in the eyes of the Lord.”

This is apparently the first written description of Marcellin’s illness and death. If a fuller description had existed it would have been attached to the Spiritual Testament and the Circular of 6th June 1840 announcing his death. However, a little later, in the Circular of 8th September 1840 inviting the Brothers to the retreat, Brother François announces its theme: “We will find him (the Founder) again in the monuments to his zeal and his devotedness to us, in the remembering of his holy lessons, in the mutual telling of his virtues and holy examples.” During the October retreat the Superiors had therefore recounted the illness and death of the Founder in quite a detailed way for the Brothers in school who were certainly keen for details. They would hardly have been able to speak without a minimum of notes, notably to report on Marcellin’s exhortations and some of their listeners would certainly have taken notes for themselves. Paradoxically, it would be the story of Marcellin’s illness and death which would be the first appearance of the project to assemble the most complete documentation possible on his life. Those few lines to the Brothers in Polynesia on Marcellin’s death echoed what had been said during the October retreat as the point of departure for his biography.

When he enlarged on the story of Marcellin’s death during the years 1850 - 1856, Brother Jean-Baptiste (who was in the Province of the North in 1839 - 1840) had to use various written sources, putting them into some order as an aid to precise timings and an almost-clinical description of the illness and its progress, something which carried the stamp of Brother François, the privileged witness. He eventually succeeded in drawing up a portrait, at once moving and glorious, of a Marcellin who, through his fervour, his clarity, his far-sightedness, his encouragement, his personal or formal encounters with the Brothers (the Sacrament of the Sick, the Testament) died as a man inspired, as a saint, and as a Founder. As for Brother Avit’s much later *Annals of the Institute*, much was copied from the biography, but it sometimes seems to have other sources as inspiration. Some of these differences will be commented on from time to time. Brother Sylvestre’s *Mémoires* simply copy Brother Jean-Baptiste’s story and add a few personal memories.

Marcellin’s illness and the process of election of Brother François

According to the *Life of Champagnat*, Marcellin’s health-problems seriously arose in 1839. The author of Chapter 20 tells us:

“On leaving Paris, Marcellin went to Saint-Pol-en-Artois, to arrange with the authorities for the opening of a new school in that town. [...] His wearisome visits in Paris and the frustrations of every kind that he endured, ended up ruining his constitution and exhausting his little remaining strength. The result was that, on his return, it was quite evident that the end was fast approaching.”⁶

There follows a section praising Father Colin, who “was the first to notice the seriousness of Marcellin’s condition and become concerned about it” and he saw “that a Brother should be elected as his successor before the Founder’s death.” However, these statements are a later construction. As is said in Chapter 20, Marcellin had suffered from poor health since his illness in 1825 and this had developed into chronic gastritis, with vomiting, preventing him from eating normally.⁷ As these problems did not seem to seriously affect his activities, there was little concern about them, from Father Colin no more than the others, his severe letter of 1830 demonstrating that he was not seeking to deal with a sick man.

In fact, the principal reason for the election of a successor was the death of Cardinal Fesch, Archbishop of Lyon, in Rome on 13th May 1839. Since 1824, Archbishop de Pins had been responsible for the administration of the diocese, with the purely honorific title of Titular Archbishop of Amasie. He had hoped for some time to be Archbishop of Lyons, but his hopes would be quickly dashed: since he was a Legitimist, the Orleanist⁸ government did not want him and it nominated Cardinal d’Isoard on 13th June. Clearly, between the nomination and the taking possession of the diocese by the new archbishop, several months passed, during which Archbishop de Pins and his Council expedited the business-in-hand. However, at the beginning of 1840, it was clear that the old diocesan administration would be finishing. Father Colin knew that the departure of Archbishop de Pins and his Vicar General, Father Cholleton, would deprive the Society of Mary of powerful protectors. The new Archbishop could be less favourable and, in any case, would need time to inform himself about the Society. Colin would reveal his grand strategy by taking advantage of the brief time left to the de Pins administration to clarify his relations with Marcellin and make sure of the future.

All at once, Archbishop de Pins, very much affected by the insult to him, protested against his sidelining by withdrawing to La Grande Chartreuse from mid-July until the end of August 1839. It was undoubtedly in September that Father Colin “took it upon himself to approach the Archbishop, to inform him of Marcellin’s state of health and request the necessary powers to have a Brother elected to succeed him.” (*Life* Page 241). Brother Avit says nothing about this interview and there is no trace of it in any archdiocesan document, but there is no room for doubts that such a meeting took place as Father Colin could only act with the agreement of the legitimate authority. However, Archbishop de Pins did not grant him the authority to arrange an

⁶ [Translator’s Note] Pages 239 - 240. All quotations and page numbers are taken from the standard English translation of the *Life*.

⁷ These problems are dealt with at slightly greater length at the beginning of Chapter 21.

⁸ [Translator’s Note] The Legitimists and Orleanists were two right-wing movements favouring the restoration of the monarchy, but disagreeing about the line of succession.

election of a Superior of the Brothers, contrary to what the *Life* states, but simply to nominate a General Board for the Brothers⁹, a function which Brothers François and Louis-Marie were already carrying out in fact. It was, therefore, just a question of an internal adjustment requiring only oral authorisation.

Father Colin would therefore preside at the nomination-election as the delegate of the Archdiocese and as Superior of the Society of Mary. However, the de Pins - Colin interview, certainly some time during September, had left little time before the Brothers' retreat at the beginning of October. The story in the *Life*, moreover, gives the impression of a rushed election, with Father Colin inviting himself to the retreat and obtaining Marcellin's agreement a few days before the election on 12th October. Brother Avit, more concerned with Marcellin, claims that he had invited him to the retreat. In any case, by this date, it was certainly known at L'Hermitage that Cardinal d'Isoard, who had been appointed to the See of Lyon, had died on 7th October. However, this event, which gave six more months to the de Pins administration, did not delay the election.¹⁰ In fact, it was Marcellin's premature death and the future separation of the Fathers and Brothers from 1845 which would retrospectively give this election the feeling of a succession.

Two traditions about the run-up to the 1839 election

Chapter 20 of the *Life* has Colin as the initiator and organiser of the election in 1839, with Marcellin taking a back-seat.

“In fact, Father Colin's wisdom, good judgement and experience, had long since convinced him of the insurmountable difficulties that would be encountered in attempting to combine the Brothers and the priests, under the same Rules, the same government and the same Superior. [...] he believed it imperative for the good of all, that each branch have its Rules, its government and its Superior. [...] Father Champagnat however had laboured all his life with a single Society in mind. He saw this union as a guarantee of the preservation of religious spirit amongst the Brothers. Father Colin's idea, therefore, was not particularly congenial to him” (Pages 240 - 241) The other side of this coin is that Brother Avit was determined to show that the election “of a successor” was largely the work of Marcellin.

“The good Father felt that his strength was going. He saw that his death was not far off. In order not to threaten the future of his dear Congregation, he wanted to provide for its government before his death. He made arrangements with Father Colin for him to be present at the annual retreat. Although he was suffering, the pious Founder gave the talks while Father Chavas preached the sermons.”

The scathing Brother Avit even took care to minimise the role of Father Colin with an amusing anecdote: “Reverend Father Colin gave a talk and recommended to the Brothers that they carefully guard against any bad habit, in particular that of taking snuff. While making his latest

⁹ This would be after a sondage among the Brothers.

¹⁰ Archbishop de Bonald would be appointed only on 8th December 1839 and would take up his post only on 2nd July 1840, after Marcellin's death.

recommendation, the good Father took snuff five or six times.” He says nothing about how the Brothers were informed of the election¹¹, even if he gives us details of the conditions in which it was undertaken.

Without going too far in praise of Father Colin, I would essentially merit him with the organising of the 1839 elections. Certainly, Marcellin’s shaky health justified this initiative: in the case of the Founder’s incapacity or death, a team would be in place to govern the Brothers on a day-to-day basis. Even if Marcellin remained Superior of the Brothers, the presence of a Director General and Assistants would enable Father Colin to avoid a face-to-face meeting with him, a man he thought of as not particularly capable, not sufficiently docile, and not quite in line with the true spirit of the Society of Mary.

In any case, the *Life* presents a veritable anachronism by showing us a Colin supporting the separation of the two branches of the Society and a Marcellin very much attached to its unity. In 1839, it was exactly the reverse. Colin did not succeed in separating the two branches until after 1842 and it was only in May 1840 that Marcellin, in his Spiritual Testament, resigned himself to confiding the Brothers’ branch to Colin.

However, the election of Brother François in October 1839, far from allowing a reinforcing of Colin’s authority over the Brothers’ branch, seemed to contribute to the opposite result, as indicated in the letter of 29th February 1840 in which Father Colin stated his renouncing of his plan to unite the Brothers of L’Hermitage with the Fathers: henceforth the Fathers would no longer be asking the Marist Brothers for auxiliary personnel but would form their own coadjutors and give them their own habit. Perhaps a certain pique was on display at the end of his letter: “during your lifetime it was hardly possible for me to become involved with the teaching Brothers; consequently, you can continue to govern them according to God’s spirit as in the past”. Basically, Father Colin reluctantly accepted the complete autonomy of the Brothers under Marcellin’s authority. The sense of unity was not broken, but relations between the two Founders of the Marist branches became very cold.

From the election of Brother François to the announcement of the illness (October 1839 - March 1840)

Chapter 21 of the *Life* shows us that, after 12th October 1839, little changed at first in the government [of the Institute]. In November Marcellin preached a retreat at the boarding-school in La Côte Saint André and then travelled to Autun to organise the creation of a novitiate at Vauban, which he would personally open on 5th - 8th December 1839. He got back very tired, and then, in the Circular of 10th January 1840 (*Letters* Vol.1 no 313) Brother François asked for a novena for improvement in the “still very precarious health” of the Founder. Without leaving L’Hermitage, he remained very active, keeping himself busy, notably with the legal authorisation. However, there is no doubt that an event at the end of the month of February

¹¹ It was in fact by a sondage, ratified by Father Colin, which Brother Avit emphasises in the *Annals*.

alerted his followers: paying a visit to the workers cutting the rock and trying for a time to work like them, he collapsed.

The first phase of the illness

On Ash Wednesday, 4th March, Marcellin suffered severe pains in his kidneys and permanent swelling of his legs. However, he was not yet confined to bed and he lived as far as possible with the community. Nevertheless, it was during this month consecrated to St Joseph, the patron saint of a happy death, that Marcellin became aware of his approaching death, a death that he had up until then discounted. He quickly set up a property-holding committee comprised of himself and six Brothers, without any Marist Fathers.¹² The deed was registered on 22nd March at the lawyer’s office in St Chamond. On 1st April, Father Colin showed his annoyance that the deed had been filed in St Chamond, and not with the Marists’ lawyer in Lyon: “It would have been a display of trust if you had filed it with M. Berloty.”

The *Life* tells us that it was a short time after these arrangements that Father Maîtrepierre, the right-hand man of Father Colin, came to visit Marcellin, certainly to sort out various problems of government and to find out how things were with him. Marcellin took the opportunity to make a general confession. In a letter of 5th April, Father Maîtrepierre told Father Lagniet:

“I spent a week at L’Hermitage in the middle of March; the good Father Champagnat was not well at all; he was slightly better when I left. Again, I was very much edified there. We have just learned that he is worse than ever, but we do not know exactly how things are going. Nevertheless, he is far too bad to go on much longer, so let us pray a great deal for this venerable Father.”

At the beginning of April, then, it is known at the Marist Fathers that Marcellin’s days are numbered, as he himself knew and spoke about. On Holy Thursday, 13th April, he went on horseback to La Grange Payre, where there was a pre-novitiate, to say his farewells to the boarders. He addressed an exhortation to them that the *Life* and Brother Avit transcribed extensively in the same terms, apart from the ending. After an invitation to profit from the education received and to flee from sin, the text recommending recourse to Mary is clearly longer with Brother Jean-Baptiste:

<i>Life</i> Chapter 21 Page 248	Avit, 1840 no 651
This grace will be yours (of not sinning) and you will save your soul, if you are very devoted to the Blessed Virgin...	This grace will be yours (of not sinning) and you will save your soul, if you are very devoted to the Blessed Virgin.
saying a prayer such as the Memorare every day, to place yourself under her protection.	

¹² There had been an understanding that the administrations of the two branches would be separate.

Yes, children, if you have great confidence in Mary, I promise that she will bring you to heaven.	
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It is probable that this talk to the children was sent very soon afterwards by one or more of the Brothers who had heard it and that Brother Jean-Baptiste had later used this source, perhaps with a slight re-arrangement or by bringing together the different versions.

Could a Brother be Marcellin's successor?

At the beginning of April Father Colin knew that Marcellin's; death was imminent and he did not consider Brother François, a simple layman, to be a Superior in the canonical sense. However, it was too late to intervene as Cardinal de Bonald had been nominated in December 1839 but took up his functions only in July. Faced with the prospect of Marcellin's approaching death, Father Colin prudently attempted a reconciliation in a letter of 24th April in which he sets out the problem of a new Superior and invites Marcellin "to place the branch of teaching Brothers in the hands of His Grace the Archbishop [...] who undoubtedly would nominate a Marist Father to look after it and this competition for supreme authority would turn out for the good of all". He also asked Marcellin to share this proposal with Brothers François and Louis-Marie.

It seems to me that this proposal has to be seen as a diplomatic way of getting an obstinate Marcellin to understand that the problem of succession was not resolved by the election of Brother François and that he had to designate a credible successor in the time that remained to him. However, Marcellin did not react to the suggestion - a sign that he still considered Brother François as his successor.

However, he was declining rapidly. He still managed to open the month of Mary on 30th April, but no longer said Mass after 3rd May. According to a passage in the *Life* (Chapter 22, Page 266), he has hoped to die on Ascension Day, 8th May, or during the Octave of the feast¹³. This is why, persuaded of his imminent death, he organised the ceremony for his reception of the Last Sacraments in the presence of the whole community of L'Hermitage on 11th May. As the majority of residents of the House had not seen him for some time, "his weak state, his suffering and his sickly appearance moved the Brothers to tears." (*Life* Page 251). At the end of the ceremony he gave a long spiritual testament, as reported in the *Life*: "how good it is to die in the Society of Mary!", he said in conclusion (Page 252). However, he did not designate any successor, thus considering that the role would be taken on by Brother François. The unexpected happened: the gathering was overwhelmed by an emotion and desolation that the presence of the Superiors and chaplains could not keep in check.

As with the farewell to the children of La Grange Payre, Brothers Avit and Jean-Baptiste give Marcellin's oral spiritual testament in the presence of the whole community in the same terms. It

¹³ [Translator's Note] In the pre-Vatican II Church, major feasts were celebrated over a week (the octave).

opens with Marcellin’s invitation to remember the last ends¹⁴ to avoid sin. He then encourages the Brothers to charity and then obedience. Brother Avit does not write any more, but the *Life* adds the final paragraph below which is not relatively marginal like the one from La Grange Payre but speaks of vocation in the Society of Mary and is also very similar to the ending of the Spiritual Testament which would be read on 18th May.

<i>Life. Oral Testament of 11th May, Pages 251 - 252</i>	<i>Life. Spiritual Testament, 18th May Page 260</i>
<p>Ah! My children, how good it is to die in the Society of Mary! I find it to-day, I can assure you, my greatest consolation. So, be faithful to your vocation and, for that purpose, observe the Rule. Obedience to the Rule will ensure your perseverance, will give you a love for the duties of the religious life and make them easy. Love your vocation; preserve it; it is the means God wishes to use in order to save you; you will be saved, in fact, if you have the happiness of dying in the Society of Mary. I have assisted at the death of many Brothers. Not one have I found who, on his deathbed, repented of having become a Religious, regretted having persevered in his vocation; or was sorry to be facing death in the habit of a Brother of Mary."¹⁵</p>	<p>Dear Brothers, love your vocation, be faithful and steadfast to the end, with manly courage. Remain true to the spirit of poverty and detachment, and let the daily observance of your holy Rule preserve you from ever violating the sacred vow by which you are bound to the fairest of all the virtues, and the frailest. There are difficulties in leading the life of a good religious, but grace sweetens all their bitterness. Jesus and Mary will come to your aid, and besides, life is soon over and eternity never ends. Oh, what consolation we have, when about to appear before God, to remember that we have lived in the favour of Mary, and in her own Society.</p>

I do not believe that Brother Jean-Baptiste had added at a later date a conclusion to a speech judged insufficiently Marist. This passage shows that the Spiritual Testament of 18th May was strongly inspired by themes of the earlier one, which is not at all surprising. The most important thing is that, in positioning himself as a Founder who in no way denied his belonging to the Society of Mary, but did not designate a successor, Marcellin opted for a branch of Brothers governed by Brother François, but under the more theoretical than real supervision of Father Colin.

How many people thought as he did? The story of Marcellin’s illness notes the numerous concerns of visitors and Brothers about the survival of the Institute after him. “What’s going to happen to us and who will take over the running of the Society when you leave us?” asked a Brother who had come to visit him. Brother Stanislas thought the same “as did all those who

¹⁴ [Translator’s Note] In traditional catechetics the four last ends were death, judgement, heaven and hell.

¹⁵ It is extremely astonishing that Brother Avit did not cite this passage at all, at least in summary, as it appears to be the most important of the Founder’s sermons. However, the close resemblance with the ending of the (written) Spiritual Testament raises the question of the authenticity of the passage.

came to see him.” Marcellin strove to say that God had no need of people, that Providence would provide and that “the Brother you have chosen to succeed me will do better than me.” However, the upset of 11th May showed the dominance of the idea that Marcellin’s death might well mean that of the Society of Brothers as well (*Life* Chapter 21 Page 249). Apparently little account was taken of the oversight of Father Colin or the authority of Brother François.

In the *Annals*, Brother Avit, who described the atmosphere in the Institute after Marcellin’s Spiritual Testament and death, showed that these fears lasted, and he went further in his analysis: “While he was very well thought-of by everyone, the Reverend Brother François had neither Father Champagnat’s character, initiative, energy nor spirit. He neither possessed the hearts nor dominated the wills. His coldness was not much liked. [...] He was seen as overly-cautious. As for his Assistants, up to now they had no practical experience of government. [...] The (Marist) Fathers, the local ecclesiastics and our benefactors say the same.”

Designating a legitimate heir

Let us return to 11th May when Marcellin took account of the great distress of his disciples. Very ill and very much surprised by such an occurrence, Marcellin was not able to react immediately. In a letter of 13th May to Father Cholloteon, Father Colin, no doubt kept informed by the chaplains at L’Hermitage, simply said, “Father Champagnat is on the point of death. It is a very great loss that we are experiencing.” However, the story in the *Life* notes that Marcellin improved at the end of a novena to Saint Philomena, which had started on 11th May:¹⁶ “the swelling in the hands and feet abated; the pain in the back, which had caused such suffering since Ash Wednesday, disappeared” (*Life* Chapter 21 Page 253). It was probably this improvement and a period of several days for reflection that allowed Marcellin to have a spiritual testament drawn up, in which, while re-stating his recommendations made to the Brothers on 11th May, he clearly designated Father Colin as his heir.

Brother Avit tells us that the whole process of thinking about, drawing up, and reading the Testament took place in a single day, 18th May. That appears to be too rapid, but the prospect of Marcellin’s imminent death obliged him to hasten. It seems to me, nevertheless, more realistic to see the entire operation as taking place over two or three days insofar as Marcellin had to arbitrate on a disagreement between Brother François, who had reservations as to whether such a document was opportune, and Brother Louis-Marie, who, being favourable to it, would be responsible for drawing it up. Such an option suggests that Father Colin’s proposal to designate a successor (at that time the Archbishop¹⁷) had been discussed by the three men, as his letter had invited them to do, and that the position of the Founder and Brother François had then won out

¹⁶ However, at the beginning of Chapter 22 this improvement takes place before 18th May. In fact, there seems to have been two successive novenas: one at the start of the month to Mary and the other after 11th May. In my opinion, the surest date of the remission is around 20th May.

¹⁷ [Translator’s Note] The Institute was regarded as a diocesan Congregation and the ultimate Superior was therefore the Archbishop, who would have automatically taken over the government in the event of no successor being nominated.

over that of Brother Louis-Marie. The event of 11th May allowed Brother Louis-Marie's position to be dropped at a late stage.¹⁸

The reading of this Testament by Brother Louis-Marie was a strong sign sent to Father Colin who knew he was favourable to his being the successor. It took place on 18th May after Evening Prayer in Marcellin's room in the presence of the community, but without the novices and postulants. The text largely re-states the formulaic themes of 11th May in unambiguously and unreservedly designating Father Colin as the spiritual successor. "The Superior of the Fathers, being equally that of the Brothers' branch, must be the centre of union of both [...] His spirit is my spirit and his will is my will." Between 11th and 18th May, then, Marcellin was persuaded, in his suffering, more towards Father Colin's view of the Society. Far from being obsessed with a straightforward unity, as the author of the *Life* says in Chapter 20 Pages 240 - 241, his sole resolve was to preserve the Brothers' branch from a crisis of succession. While he was absent on 18th May, Father Colin was the one most concerned with this Testament, a copy of which he would quickly receive confirming the allegiance of Marcellin and the Brothers' branch.

The improvement experienced around the 18th May settled in and, for a few days, Marcellin was able to get up and visit the House. This period of remission lasted until Father Colin went to L'Hermitage on 24th May "to see Father Champagnat, who, happily, is no longer ill"¹⁹. Father Mazelier arrived the following day. Certainly, on 25th May Marcellin "had a lengthy conversation with Father Colin", the conversation sealing their reconciliation and the allegiance of the Brothers' branch, which had become official on 18th May. On the same day, probably, the conversation with Father Mazelier confirmed previous agreements between the two Founders.²⁰ It seems that the definitive version of the Spiritual Testament was quite late in being worked-out, perhaps even after 25th May. Indeed the version of the Testament kept in the Marist Fathers' Archives is somewhat different from that sent to the Brothers on 6th June 1840. In the 6th June version, following the Testament's preamble, the paragraph seeking pardon from those Marcellin had offended and declaring that he died "with sentiments of grateful and respectful submission to the Superior General of the Society of Mary" is not found in that place in the Marist Fathers' version, but is placed as a sort of codicil, following the main text. Seemingly, on 18th May Brother Louis-Marie read out a first version of the Testament, a copy of which was signed by Marcellin and sent to Father Colin. However, after the Colin-Champagnat meeting on 25th May, two paragraphs were added to the foot of the first document that the definitive version would bring together in a single paragraph at the beginning. Marcellin's signature attached to the codicil is clearly less assured than that on the first version. The scenario of the birth of the Spiritual Testament sent to the Brothers on 6th June would then be the following: firstly, the oral Testament of 11th May was written up and filled out by Brother Louis-Marie on 18th May and

¹⁸ It was probably also the opinion of the chaplains of L'Hermitage, whose importance the story in the *Life* certainly underestimated. Brother Louis-Marie's position was certainly known to Father Colin.

¹⁹ Letter from Father Maitrepierre to Father Lagniet, 24th May 1840.

²⁰ Father Mazelier received into the Diocese of Valence Brothers of L'Hermitage who were liable for military service.

completed on 25th May, then definitively settled and printed, no doubt at the end of May, in view of Marcellin's imminent death. The placing of the two paragraphs of the codicil in the body of the text very much downplayed their sense, which could have brought about a backlash in the Brothers' branch since Marcellin had recognised in them questionable conduct towards Father Colin.

Towards the end of May the illness returned in a new form: Marcellin could no longer eat: "A devouring fire seemed to consume him" (*Life* Page 264) and he was vomiting clots of blood. Everyone knew that he could die at any moment and the priests from the surrounding areas came to visit him: on 1st June Father du Treuil, the Parish Priest of St Pierre in St Chamond and on 2nd June several ecclesiastics from the neighbourhood, among whom was Father Janvier, a former Marist aspirant. He died on the morning of 6th June. The two senior Brothers who had been watching over him did not seem to have alerted the Superiors before his death.

Jean-Claude Colin would not be present at Marcellin's funeral but the Society of Mary was amply represented by Fathers Matricon and Besson (both of them chaplains at L'Hermitage), but also Pierre Colin, the elder brother of the Superior and resident at Valbenoîte, Father Maîtrepierre, Jean-Claude Colin's right-hand man, Fathers Bertholon, Chavas and Soton.²¹ Writing on 18th July to Bishop Pompallier, Father Colin set out a brief eulogy which was partially inspired by Brother François' Circular of 6th June 1840 announcing Marcellin's death to the Brothers. In contrast to Brother François, he was wary of granting him the title of Founder. He made no further mention of his role in the origins. Along with promising to send copies of the Spiritual Testament, he informed Pompallier, who was linked more to Marcellin and L'Hermitage than to him and Belley, that there no longer existed the somewhat dual-nature of the Society of Mary.

"I have the sorrow of informing you that death took Father Champagnat from us on Saturday 6th June at 4:30am at the moment when, every morning for several years, he intoned the Salve Regina. His illness had been long and painful, his patience great, and his death precious in the eyes of the Lord, we dare to hope.²² However, I again recommend him to your prayers; he had worked hard over the course of his punishing career. I will send you copies of his Spiritual Testament. As Father Champagnat had been in charge of your power of attorney, you will have to choose someone else."

In a letter addressed to the missionaries on 21st November Father Colin is somewhat warmer: "I will tell you in three words, the pains caused us by the deaths of two excellent confrères, the venerated Father Champagnat, Founder and Superior of the Brothers of Mary, and the very pious Father Debeny, Superior of the Seminary at Meximieux [...] the former edified us greatly and will edify you with his Spiritual Testament, which we will have sent on to you."

In the eyes of Father Colin the Spiritual Testament lifted a sizable obstacle from the unification of the Society of Mary and he thought he would be able to integrate the teaching Brothers' branch with the Society. However, he would quickly have to forget this plan in the face of the

²¹ Circulars of the Little Brothers of Mary Vol 1.

²² This last phrase, added to the sentiments expressed by Brother François, expressed something of a reservation.

Brothers' hesitations and the refusal of Rome to envisage a single Superior for such different branches.

Behind the crisis of succession, a crisis of growth

At Marcellin's death, the Congregation comprised around 280 Brothers. The Guizot Law of 1833, with its support for education of the common people, had opened up the educational market and recruitment had become massive. Brother Avit (*Annals 1839* nos 517 - 518) gives us numbers for the workforce in October 1839: 110 perpetually professed (of whom 92 were present at the election), in principle the oldest, but 148 "unprofessed"²³, younger men, and 13 postulants. The "senior men" were therefore in a minority and the transmission of the original spirit was becoming more difficult.

Marcellin's illness had certainly disturbed somewhat the work of the multifunction house. Even if the tale was one of praise for the Brothers who, on this occasion, displayed their devotion and veneration, it was true that Brothers François, Louis-Marie and Stanislas were very much occupied with Marcellin, rather than with their usual roles. Brothers had to watch over the Founder during the night. The story rarely mentions the chaplains at L'Hermitage, but their work was also complicated. It is certain that many of the Brothers were exhausted by an agony which went on and on: on 5th June (*Life* Page 269) the physician recognised that, for ten days, he had been declaring that the sick man would die within twenty-four hours. It is undoubtedly why Marcellin, on the evening of 5th June, "was still strong enough to prevail upon them {the Brothers of the community} to go and rest." (Page 270). And he was being watched over by only two senior Brothers when he died around 4:30 in the morning.

It must not be thought that the veneration for Marcellin had prevented a certain amount of wavering. The atmosphere in the house recalled that at the beginning of 1826 when Marcellin's illness had led to real discouragement and a loosening-up. The Brothers in charge and even the chaplains, all very busy and not enjoying the same prestige as Marcellin, must have had trouble with the subjects in formation and even the most senior Brothers. We have a couple of indications of this: firstly, the real manifestation of uncontrollable disarray at the Last Sacraments ceremony on 11th May; then on 20th May, Marcellin, who was able to leave his room, noticed a certain amount of relaxation of supervision of the Brothers: a novice organised a sort of niche in a wall as somewhere to hide. Marcellin admonished whoever was responsible for works. On another occasion he observed some Brothers "working sluggishly in the field" (Page 254) and warned the Director of the Novitiate that "laziness is one of the worst vices", particularly for Religious.

Marcellin's death would not put an end to this atmosphere, since it was due in part to a crisis of growth which the poorly-experienced Superiors could get under control only gradually. That is why Father Colin, who considered that the novices were too young and too fleetingly formed to

²³ In fact, temporary professed and novices.

make the three vows, in particular that of chastity, imposed on the temporary professed from 1840 the making of only the Vow of Obedience at the end of the novitiate. In 1841 he reproached the Superiors of the Brothers with sending temporary professed away too easily. However, the notes in one of Brother François' notebooks let us see that abuses were sufficiently serious to necessitate severe measures.

Conclusion

The story of Marcellin's illness and death had been the occasion of a fundamental debate on the nature of the Society of Mary which the canonical recognition of a society of Mary reduced to the Fathers complicated rather than clarified. In becoming a Marist Father in 1836 and by agreeing in 1837 to be no longer Superior of the Brothers, except by delegation, Marcellin, however, did not give up - and his Brothers no more so - a history and type of apostolate which he profoundly considered legitimate and in the spirit of the origins. There was, therefore, a tension between the two concepts of the Society of Mary: two traditions and two Founders since there were already two branches of the Society already firmly established. It was, however, a situation contradicting the old idea of unity: "Cor Unum et Anima Una"²⁴. Taking advantage of Marcellin's illness and pressed by a complicated situation concerning the Archbishop's successor, Father Colin went for an attempt at reunification.

The nomination of Brother François as Director General after a sondage of the professed Brothers prepared for the future, but, at the same time, increased the confusion. Firstly, under what title did Father Colin intervene and preside at this nomination-election? As the delegate of the Archdiocese or as Superior of the Society of Mary? In fact, in both these cases his legitimacy was questionable.²⁵ In particular, how did these two Founders interpret this nomination-election? Marcellin saw in Brother François a successor destined to replace him after his death while Father Colin was thinking of a Superior of the Brothers who would be a priest, even if he delegated the administration to a Brother. The nomination of Brother François in October 1839 was therefore thought of as a holding-solution insofar as the Brothers and Marcellin himself did not foresee that the question of succession would concretely be raised so quickly. However, Marcellin's illness would very quickly impose the most realistic solution: the unification of the Society under a single Founder-Superior, Father Colin.

However, the process leading to autonomy for the Brothers' branch, slowed down by Father Colin from 1836 then interrupted by Marcellin's death in 1840, would be back on track for achieving independence with the legal recognition in 1851 and the Roman decree of recognition in 1863. Completely provisional though it may have been, the solution of unity under a single Superior would have allowed an Institute in a crisis of succession and growth to get through a very delicate stage. Fundamentally, Father Colin's solution would have proved better in the

²⁴ In the Spiritual Testament Marcellin emphasised this several times: "One Heart and One Spirit"

²⁵ Logically, it was to Marcellin as canonical Superior of the Brothers that belonged the right to obtain the authorisation of the Archdiocese and preside at the nomination of a Director General.

short-term and Marcellin’s more utopian one would be ratified by a long-term evolution. It was in this context of the taking of independence from the Fathers by the Brothers that the story was written of the Brothers’ branch being bound by the illness and death of their Founder. In summary, the whole of Chapters 21 and 22 which tell of this event give proof of a great deal of manipulation to sufficiently erase the difficulties of a fairly harsh conflict of succession in such a way that the protagonists in the affair could emerge from it without shame.

In his telling, Brother Avit appeared to inherit a Brothers’ tradition which was more confrontational and less favourable to Father Colin. Perhaps he knew of and exploited sources somewhat different from those of Brother Jean-Baptiste. There is a highly significant difference from the *Life* in the recounting of the Founder’s death on 6th June.

<i>Life</i> Chapter 22²⁶ Page 270	<i>Annals of the Institute 1840. No 671</i>
<p>His death took place on Saturday, June 6th, the vigil of Pentecost. He had declared several times during his sickness: "I would like to die on a Saturday, but I don't deserve that favour, while I do hope for it from Mary's kindness." Not only was he given that grace, but also another: he died at the time, which for thirty years he had devoted to meditation and to union with God. It was during the prayer which followed the Salve Regina that the Mother of Mercy led him from exile to the fatherland, and showed him Jesus, the fruit of her virginal womb.</p>	<p>Finally, the hour marked out by Divine Providence began to strike. The Sovereign Judge went to him to address these words from the Gospel: "Good and wise servant, you have been faithful in everything; enter into the jot of your Lord." He went to join the 49 Brothers who had gone ahead to Mary’s feet. There, he did not forget those whom he had left in this place of exile. So, we do not allow ourselves to be beaten down by sorrow, however legitimate, at no longer seeing him here below.</p>

While the text of the *Life*, with its very marian tone, emphasises the person of Marcellin, Brother Avit situates the Founder in the spiritual line of the great servants of God and of the dead of the Institute. Like them he is henceforth an intercessor. The influence of Brother François’ Circulars is felt here, particularly in the final sentence which invites us not to be beaten down. Indeed, it reflects the spirit the Superiors wanted to inculcate in the Brothers immediately after the Founder’s death (*Life* Chapter 23 Page 272). It was a way of affirming that they did not consider the Spiritual Testament as a fundamental rupture and that they expected the Brothers’ branch would retain a great deal of autonomy. Also, Father Colin would know that he had to exercise prudent oversight, something he had hardly done during the years 1836 - 1839.

²⁶ [Translator’s Note] In his Paper, Brother André gives Chapter 21 as the source of the quotation. It comes, in fact, from Chapter 22.

To summarise: since 1826²⁷ Marcellin had exercised the roles of Superior and Director without distinguishing them, the one, more charismatic, the other, more administrative. With the Spiritual Testament, the two functions would be separated, Father Colin representing the inheritance of the Marist charism while Brother François rather represented the administrative continuity and the spirit of L'Hermitage.

²⁷ Brother Jean Marie Granjon, elected Director in 1819, had left the Institute and was not replaced.