

# The Unfinished Biography of Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet

## Three biographical articles but no real biography

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Translated by Brother Colin Chalmers

Everyone familiar with the Marist story knows that Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet, one of Marcellin's first disciples, is the author of his biography published in 1856<sup>1</sup>. Many Marists also know that this Brother, born in the Haute-Loire, arrived in La Valla in 1822 with a group of young men from the same area, that he occupied posts of Headmaster before becoming one of Marcellin's helpers in the government of the Institute. Elected Assistant to Brother François in 1839 along with Brother Louis-Marie, he was, after the time of the Founder, a member of this trio of Superiors who were so united that they were named "The Three-in-One". It is also generally known that Brother Jean-Baptiste, beyond editing the *Life*, was the editor behind the early Marist literature, notably the Rules and Constitutions, but he was also the author of *Biographies de Quelques Frères* and *Avis, Leçons Sentences*<sup>2</sup> ... about ten works all told, but little consulted today. It is also known that this Brother had poor health because Marcellin and Brother Stanislas went to visit him in Bourg-Argental in 1823 and almost perished in the snow on the return-journey. Worn out by asthma, he died on 5th February 1872, at almost 65 years of age.

### The Testimony of Brother Louis-Marie

Brother Louis-Marie, his Superior and former companion, devoted a moving eulogy to him in his Circular of 8th April 1872, two months after his death, under the title, "Brother Jean-Baptiste or the Fervent Vocation". It was not, properly-speaking, a biography, since the author was interested only in his work as Superior, spiritual director and legislator of the Institute from 1832. He built up a myth around the person, making him the faithful transmitter of Marcellin's thought, and the Institute's legislator; not only the perfect disciple, but the second Founder. This is why he asks the Brothers to gather together what materials they possess on him, especially his letters, so that he himself can draw up a biography. Brother Louis-Marie would clearly not have the time to devote to this task, nor would he want to confide it to anyone else.

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<sup>1</sup> [Translator's Note] *Life of Father Marcellin Joseph Benedict Champagnat*, hereafter noted as *Life*.

<sup>2</sup> [Translator's Note] Both of these works have been translated several times into English, but with various titles. In general they continue to be known in the English-speaking Marist world under their French titles.

In order to keep this article to a reasonable size, it is in the second article, concerning the incomplete biography, that I will comment in detail on this eulogy.

### **The missing plan to publish the letters**

As a result, his request for documents generated an enormous body of resources: hundreds of summaries and collections of instructions, meditations destined for the Brothers, letters of direction given or lent by the Brothers, an essay on education ... everything was recopied and put in order by the Secretariat of the Institute in the form of large volumes of manuscripts. It is not certain if this body was complete at the time of Brother Louis-Marie's death in 1879. In any case, a large team of competent biographers with a great deal of time available would have been necessary to master such a complex and large dossier. And there we have one of the causes for the absence of a real biography of Brother Jean-Baptiste. In 1890, Brother Avit (*Annals of the Institute 1872 no 36*) regretted that the biography of Brother François "and those of his first two Assistants" had not yet been published.

In the absence of a biography, a plan to publish Brother Jean-Baptiste's letters, devised in 1872 by Brother Louis-Marie, had made good progress since there exists a carefully drawn-up Collection of 575 Letters of Direction of Reverend Brother Jean-Baptiste. Furnished with an index, it was ready for publication. However, at the beginning of the manuscript there is a veto temporarily suspending publication signed by Brother Théophane, who became Superior General in 1883<sup>3</sup>:

"These letters are not true models of the genre, nevertheless, on the advice of an eminent priest, it would be appropriate not to have them printed without some editing of the occasional inexact or crude expression. The reading of these letters would not be appropriate for all the Brothers, nor would it be useful for them, at least until they are revised and several are eliminated because they basically look similar."

The "eminent priest" who advised that the letters be edited was probably Father Nicolet, the Postulator of Marcellin's Cause, for which the diocesan process had begun in 1888. His advice was followed as there now exists another collection of letters, arranged chronologically, but slightly reduced in number, which dates undoubtedly from the years 1890 - 1900.

### **An effect of the *Quemadmodum* Decree?**

Brother Théophane's judgement on Brother Jean-Baptiste's letters, "inexact or too crude", certainly postdates the Decree *Quemadmodum* of 17th December 1890 which forbade Superiors of lay Congregations (Brothers and Sisters) from questioning their subjects in the internal forum<sup>4</sup>, notably on "the holy virtue"<sup>5</sup>. The letters of Brother Jean-Baptiste showed, in effect, that the

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<sup>3</sup> The text is undated, but this cautious step could have come only from the Superior General.

<sup>4</sup> [Translator's Note] ie. on the level of the individual's conscience, as opposed to external acts.

<sup>5</sup> [Translator's Note] ie. chastity.

Brothers, in particular the young ones, were extensively informing him of their “temptations” and that he, although not a priest, had no doubts as to his aptitude as a director of conscience in giving them advice.

After the Decree it became difficult to capitalise on the letters of Superiors that the Marist Fathers had been complaining about during the years 1850 - 1860 as competing with confessors<sup>6</sup>. The Circular of 6th June 1891 announced to the Brothers that this Decree “was related to the private manifestation of conscience, to Communion and to Confession” and it would be read to them at the time of the retreats. Meanwhile, the Circular minimised its scope: “We have little to change in our Rules and customs”. However, it was the end of a spiritual framework of regular correspondence to the Brothers from the Assistants. The posthumous prestige of Brother Jean-Baptiste, resting largely on his talents as a spiritual director, had certainly been extinguished.

I put forward, therefore, the hypothesis that the plan for a biography of Brother Jean-Baptiste had died at the same time as Brother Louis-Marie, and, I presume, the Decree *Quemadmodum*, made the publication of his letters inopportune. However, this aspect was perhaps only secondary: remembering Brother Jean-Baptiste suffered from real competition in the Institute’s memory as it lost Brother Louis-Marie in 1879 and Brother François in 1881 - the loss of three models of discipleship of Marcellin.

Who was the best? By creating the myth of “The Three-in-One”, that is to say, the perfect unity of outlook of the first three Superiors, the Institute had sought to get around the problem. However, it was not as simple as that.

### **Who was the true spiritual son of Marcellin?**

Brother Louis-Marie’s entire biographical article in 1872 rested on the assumption that Brother Jean-Baptiste was the perfect disciple, the infallible interpreter of the Founder’s thought. However, that had very little effect in the case of Brother François, in retirement at L’Hermitage and dying only in 1881. While awaiting death he edified the whole house and beyond with his discrete sanctity. In the eyes of the senior and younger Brothers, it was he who was the perfect disciple. Brother Louis-Marie, who had so brilliantly directed the Institute’s progress, also had his admirers.

It was natural that, with the death of these three candidates for the status of perfect disciple, the rivalry functioned on a symbolic level: their places of burial and their tombs. L’Hermitage had the tombs of Marcellin and Brother François, but St Genis, the new Mother House, was a little short on prestigious tombs. Also, in its meeting on 30th March 1882, the General Council rejected a proposal and took the following decision in principle:

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<sup>6</sup> The General Council spent several sessions on this topic in April - May 1890. In particular, on 22nd April: “It was decided to acknowledge reception of this Decree and assure His Eminence of our perfect submission.”

“Some Brothers had proposed to have a tomb erected for the Reverend Brother Louis-Marie, the late Superior General, by means of subscriptions, but the Council disapproved of this plan. The General Chapter voted for a vault for receiving the mortal remains of the Institute’s Superiors General; the Regime<sup>7</sup> is disposed to carry out this decision as soon as is convenient.”

At that time this concerned only Brother Louis-Marie, who had died in December 1879 and was buried in St Genis, since Brother François, the guardian of Marcellin’s tomb, was definitively linked to L’Hermitage and there would never be any question of transferring his remains to St Genis-Laval. The death of Reverend Brother Nestor in 1883 did not hasten the project. It was only in the meeting of 7th April 1892 that the Council decided on the construction of the vault for the Superiors General under the central cross in the cemetery at St Genis-Laval. However, in the meeting of 12th October 1892, it decided:

“The remains of Reverend Brothers Louis-Marie and Nestor will be exhumed and transferred to the vault. It will be the same for the remains of Reverend Brother Jean-Baptiste, Assistant. However, in relation to the latter, the Minute of this translation will note that it is a unique exception and the vault must exclusively be for Superiors General.”

So, twenty years after his death, Brother Jean-Baptiste enjoyed the exclusive privilege of being buried with the Superiors General. For him, this was recognition of a status apart in the line of succession from the Founder and it certainly satisfied many Brothers who had lived under his authority. It was also creating at St Genis-Laval the site of a memorial for the Institute complementary to that at L’Hermitage. St Genis could henceforth pride itself in possessing two highly charismatic disciples: the prestigious Superior and the legislator.

## **The choice of Brother François as the best disciple**

The Process of Beatification for Marcellin had been going on since 1888 and it would culminate in 1896 with the introduction of his Cause in Rome. It was a question of waiting while the procedure slowly followed its course. Also, the Superiors, no doubt spurred on by Father Nicolet, the Postulator, considered opening an office for a second Cause. There were only two possible candidates: Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste, between whom they hesitated. Admitting Brother Jean-Baptiste into the Superiors’ vault in 1892 was perhaps a sign of that hesitation.

Still, it was after 1896 that the choice was made: it would be Brother François. Father Ponty, the chaplain to the novitiate at Lacabane, from whom the Superiors requested a biography, lets us understand, in his Preface addressed to Reverend Brother Théophile on 2nd February 1899, that they envisaged the introduction of his Cause after the Decree of Heroicity for Marcellin:

“The specifically-named biography of your first predecessor, the Reverend Brother François, immediate successor of the Venerable Marcellin Champagnat, Founder of the Institute, is finished.

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<sup>7</sup> [Translator’s Note] Up until the late 1960s this was the name by which the Superior General and his Council was generally known

As I wrote it on your insistent pleas and with the documents you procured for me, the first edition comes to you by right.”

It took more than two years to complete this work. As an aside, I note that, if one chapter is devoted to the Circulars, nothing is said about Brother François’ letters of direction, however numerous they may be<sup>8</sup>, as if this biography had also suffered from the effects of the *Quemadmodum* Decree on the direction of conscience. The events of 1903 - 1905 pushed the opening of the diocesan process back to 1910<sup>9</sup>.

As for Brother Louis-Marie, he would benefit in 1907 from a biography “by a Brother of this Institute”, possibly Brother Gerald, an Assistant. However, there was no intention of making this the first act of a Cause of Beatification: that of Brother François would be enough. This work might have given a major place to Brother Jean-Baptiste. However, it is less a biography than an anthology of Circulars and talks by Brother Louis-Marie. Even when it brings up the Circular on “the fervent vocation”, which is, in fact, the biographical notice on Brother Jean-Baptiste, the author contents himself with a very bland summary.

There was no lack of reasons for choosing Brother François over Brother Jean-Baptiste for a Cause of Beatification. The first had been the successor by title, regularly elected and governing the Institute from 1840 to 1860. It is true that he had to resign, but when he died in 1881, his stature as Marcellin’s spiritual son as much as keeper of the Champagnat “reliquary” was confirmed while that of Brother Jean-Baptiste, at its highest in 1872, had not been confirmed by a biography or even the publication of his letters. As for his books, he was probably more respected than read. It is true that his admission to the Superiors’ vault in 1892 gave him a status apart, but as for being a saint, he was more admirable than imitable. In fact, constrained by illness, but also by temperament to a solitary life, he had not been, in contrast to a Brother François, very monastic, a good example of the common life. And then, his numerous works could complicate a process of beatification. Had the Superiors weighed up all the reasons? In any case, it boiled down to an analysis of the comparison between Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste.

After 1907, although he was the first of the “Three-in-One” to die, Brother Jean-Baptiste was the only one not to have a biography. This is, at the very least, a paradox for the man who was Marcellin’s biographer insofar as it was not unimportant for the reader of the biography of a Founder to know that of the biographer. However, the Institute was not really tempted by a critical reading, considering the *Life* in a fairly ambivalent manner: not completely sacred writing, but the most faithful expression of the truth of the Founder.

## **Brother Amphiloque Deydier and the centenary of the Institute**

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<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that Father Ponty wanted to write a chapter on the letters of Brother François since, on p 260, he alludes to his personal letters “which we will have to deal with later”.

<sup>9</sup> [Translator’s Note] In 1903 the French Government banned Religious Orders and schools run by Religious. This led to a massive dispersal of French Brothers around the world.

The Institute's centenary would move things on a bit, with Brother Stratonique working to re-evaluate the memory, and so, the literature of the Institute. It was in this context that Brother Amphiloque Deydier (1842 - 1929), former Provincial of Syria and now retired in Grugliasco, prepared around 1915 - 1917<sup>10</sup> a "Biographical Essay on Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet", an incomplete manuscript of more than 300 pages. A pious and elderly man, he used the fairly old-fashioned genre of hagiography. However this biographical essay was not without merit as it was the first to systematically deal with the letters of Brother Jean-Baptiste. It had also gathered statements from the last Brothers to know Brother Jean-Baptiste. On his childhood, it gives us details not found elsewhere. The work would remain unknown, but Brother Jean-Émile would use it for the third biographical notice we are going to talk about. In an accompanying article I analyse this essay in greater detail.

### **The lengthy biographical notice written by Brother Jean-Émile in 1952**

This is the most complete of the works on Brother Jean-Baptiste. It is found in *Our Superiors*, a work published by the Institute in 1952 which brought together the biographies of Superiors General from Brother Louis-Marie (1860) to Brother Diogène (1942). There is no notice for Brother François, but by introducing Brother Jean-Baptiste into the list of Superiors General, the General Administration showed once more its concern to honour an ancestor of an authority which was more charismatic than institutional. Its notice, of which the author was very probably Brother Jean-Émile<sup>11</sup>, an Assistant General, is a solid summary of someone who never ran the Institute, but who enjoyed an exceptional status in its history.

The decision to publish came from the General Chapter of 1946 at which the General purposes Commission stated:

"16. Biographies of Superiors. We ask that the following be published: a) a biography of all the early Superiors. b) a booklet on the history of the Institute since its origin."

After the General Chapter's ratification of this proposal, the history of the Institute, written by Brother Jean-Émile appeared in 1947. At its meeting of 7th November 1952 the General Council approved "the printing of "Biographies of the Superiors General (in conformity with the decisions of the General Chapter)"<sup>12</sup>. The Preface nimbly justified the absence of a notice on Brother François: Marcellin was not included "since his life was written by the hand of a master" and "it is the same for Venerable Brother François, his immediate successor". A notice on Brother Louis-Marie had not been dropped, even although his biography appeared in 1907. The Institute's

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<sup>10</sup> He said that he started his work towards the end of 1917, which is quite vague. He would have had to begin many years before that, perhaps around 1908 - 1910.

<sup>11</sup> To my knowledge no document gives the name of the author. However, it is typical of Brother Jean-Émile's style, although he certainly received help from collaborators, in particular the General Archivist.

<sup>12</sup> It seems that the General Council had hesitated about including Brother Jean-Baptiste. Thus, on the title page giving the list of biographies, Brother Jean-Baptiste is named at the end. However, the volume begins with his notice.

remembrance-culture conceived, it seemed, a sort of founding duo of Marcellin-François and an organiser/legislator duo of Jean Baptiste-Louis Marie.

## **A biographical article which is too skimpy but intelligently exploited the sources**

Brother Jean-Émile did not do much supplementary research on Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet, but he particularly capitalised in an intelligent way on previous works and his books. He found particular inspiration in the Circular of 8th April 1872 and Brother Amphiloque's manuscript, notably for describing Brother Jean-Baptiste's childhood. The literary genre was still hagiography, with the classic division of life-virtues. However, none of the facets of the individual's life and work were forgotten. It is a solid work, even if many points, mainly of chronology, should have been picked up or completed. I am challenging only one point, but an important one: Brother Jean-Émile's interpretation of Brother Jean-Baptiste's spirituality, which appears to me to be astonishingly superficial.

In effect, Brother Jean-Émile considered this spirituality to be "simple and solid", resting on the adage, "Our salvation is our only task!" However, far from being simple, this affirmation interprets a major problem for Brother Jean-Baptiste, torn as he is between the limitless confidence in God which he invites the Brothers to adopt and great anxiety for his own salvation. Brother Louis-Marie had seen that very clearly in 1872. On the other hand, reading around 150 of Brother Jean-Baptiste's letters gives evidence, in my eyes, of a spirituality of the Cross, or rather a christology based on the Cross and the Eucharist in which Mary finds an entirely secondary place. We say that Brother Jean-Baptiste had a very sincere devotion to Mary, St Joseph, the Guardian Angels and the Souls in Purgatory, but his spirituality was centred on Christ, not the Pantocrator, but the Servant for the salvation of the world, crucified and consumed. With Brother Jean-Baptiste we can even speak of a mysticism of the Cross: for him, there was no real conversion without the mediation of Christ's Passion. This spirituality of the Cross is tied to Religious Profession since the Brother "takes up his cross" on that day. There is an impression that the whole of Brother Jean-Baptiste's spiritual teaching was aimed at getting his directees to take up spiritual combat when they were young (in sum, the purgative way), then the mystery of the Cross. However, we must, of course, go further in our analysis.

## **An examination of the major characteristics of Brother Jean-Baptiste's life-story**

After an introduction on Brother Jean-Baptiste's providential role, very much inspired by Brother Louis-Marie, the story of his childhood comes from Brother Amphiloque. As for the story of his entry into the novitiate, that is taken from the *Life*. On Brother Jean-Baptiste's personality and qualities as a formator, the core comes from his two predecessors. They were more far-seeing than

Brother Jean-Émile on spirituality. On the other hand, he had tried to set out the individual's CV from 1822 to 1872. The chronology is approximate and incomplete and the interpretations sometimes open to discussion, yet it is the only one of the three notices that establishes a chronological framework and tries, often enough by sheer good luck, to describe and explain Brother Jean-Baptiste's actions.

The biography does not show itself to be very reliable on his early years since it tries to show that the Marcellin-Jean-Baptiste relationship had been there from the very beginning. It tells us, for example, that, right from the novitiate, Marcellin "attached himself...in a particular manner in order to form his chosen novice, while on his side, the fervent novice, happy to be in the school of a saint, applied himself in order to profit from the smallest lessons". He confirms that "the studious novice devoted himself, with an ardour that ravished our Venerable Founder, to the reading and study of spiritual authors<sup>13</sup>". However, it is highly unlikely that this enthusiasm showed itself so early on. Brother Jean-Émile is more credible when he cites Chapter 20 of *Avis, Leçons, Sentences* in which Brother Jean-Baptiste recounts Marcellin's lesson on what a saint is, just before the Feast of All Saints, 1822.

On Brother Jean-Baptiste at Bourg-Argental, the biography mixes together two distinct events: the departure of Brother Jean-Marie Granjon for the Trappist monastery at Aiguebelle in the Spring of 1822 and Brother Jean-Baptiste's illness in February 1823. On Brother Jean-Baptiste's time at St Sauveur-en-Rue (1823 - 1826) only the episode of the suppression of the dance, which was taken from the *Annals of the Institute* was retained.

Brother Jean-Baptiste became Director at Neuville-sur-Saône in 1826. "He had not yet reached nineteen years of age. However, the Father Founder found him more sensible and more mature than the majority of men at thirty years old." said Brother Jean-Émile, who again wanted to show that the privileged relationship with Marcellin had begun very early. He put forward the highly improbable hypothesis that, from Neuville, Brother Jean-Baptiste frequently went to L'Hermitage in order to verify details for the *Life*, written much later:

"His stories had an intensity which only an eyewitness could bring to them. Some of them allow us to say that he played a part in them and without this we might not have all the information, such as the scenes of the business of the woollen stockings and several others."

Then, after ten years at Neuville<sup>14</sup>, "We discover Brother Jean-Baptiste around 1836 at Charlieu, where he had replaced Brother Louis." The author cites for us a letter in which he described the situation of the community. We know that Brother Jean-Baptiste remained at Charlieu for only a year and then, based at L'Hermitage, he had the position of Visitor. However, Brother Jean-Émile says nothing about this. He immediately speaks of Brother Jean-Baptiste, the Director of the school in St Pol-sur-Ternoise in the north of France which Marcellin had founded in order to obtain legal authorisation. He situates the foundation in 1839, but the community had arrived at the end of

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<sup>13</sup> It is true that Marcellin said that he studied "furiously", but there is little possibility that it was during this period.

<sup>14</sup> Interspersed with a number of short stays in other places.



1838 and he does not mention that Brother Jean-Baptiste's stay there had been quite long. He does mention his election as Assistant in 1839: "He was 32 years old". He soon moves on to Brother Jean-Baptiste's role in the amalgamation with the Brothers of St Paul-Trois-Châteaux without clearly linking this amalgamation with his stay in the small commune of Bouillargues (Gard) in 1842 - 1843 where he spent several months getting his health back on track while working on the amalgamations with the Brothers of St Paul-Trois-Châteaux and the Brothers of Viviers.

Brother Jean-Émile knew the dossier of the amalgamation with the Brothers of St Paul-Trois-Châteaux particularly well and he offers a remarkable analysis:

"Brother Jean-Baptiste had to have a delicate touch to manage the reform under the eyes of Father Mazelier, who remained as chaplain to the house, without offending in any way this worthy former Superior."

He did not conceal the harshness of Brother Jean Baptiste's strategy:

"At St Paul, he imposed by his authority and in the smallest details, the Rule and customs of L'Hermitage. His manner was a gentle stubbornness which never gave way on principles, a paternal goodness which, within a few months, rallied all hearts to him, then a superiority which he imposed on Father Mazelier himself and eventually time proved him right."

Brother Jean-Émile confirmed that there were two major problems: the low level of resources, due to badly thought-out foundations, which he had to close, and the mediocrity of several subjects<sup>15</sup>, whom he had to send away. This harsh early strategy of much tactical accommodation bore fruit:

"In 1842, when Brother Jean-Baptiste took charge there were 40 Religious, 6 novices or postulants and 13 establishments. In 1860, when he was replaced by Brother Chrysogone, he left 80 establishments and the Province had almost doubled its workforce."

Brother Jean-Émile thought that, with the Brothers of Viviers, the same strategy had, from 1844, produced the same effects but he took note in this case of the tactic of small steps undertaken by the Assistant.

"He rushed nothing, but was content at the 1844 Retreat to give our habit to his new children and send them back newly-clothed, each to his old position. They went back, delighted to see that nothing very serious would apparently be asked of them. He then progressively obtained the changes that he judged necessary and that each one, won over by the previous simple processes, hastened to agree to. There were only two Brothers who refused to accede to this and they returned to the world."

This statement was a bit too optimistic. There had been tenacious opposition and the clergy of the Diocese of Viviers were not really in favour of Brother Jean-Baptiste's rigorous approach.

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<sup>15</sup> [Translator's Note] Up until the late 1960s this was the customary way in which Superiors referred to the Brothers.

However, it has to be agreed that the result was excellent: the number of houses went from ten to forty “with a proportional increase in the workforce”. With good reason Brother Jean-Émile attributed this result “to the open, yet at the same time firm, spirit of Brother Jean-Baptiste.” It was from this that his prestige rose among the Brothers of the two Provinces of the Midi.

## The legislator and author

Brother Louis-Marie had already presented Brother Jean-Baptiste as the legislator of the Institute and Brother Jean-Émile took up this claim, clearly showing, however, that fidelity to Marcellin presumed adaptation.

“At the death of Father Champagnat, the edition of the Rules published in 1837 in eleven small chapters, was only in total a small part of what he had hoped to complete, as time would add to experience and practice. [...] Of the 211 articles of the old Rule, a good number had already become impractical. Developments in the Institute forced a renunciation of minute regulations which only suited the times when all the establishments were grouped around L’Hermitage, the single centre to which the Brothers returned each year.”

This was a eulogy to adaptation to new times, which were not really, however, the order of the day in 1952. Brother Jean-Émile went on to list Brother Jean-Baptiste’s books:

*The Principles of Perfection* (in fact the *Manual of Piety*) “for the instruction of novices”.

*The Directory of Solid Piety* “a collection of prayers” and meditations.

He claimed, with some exaggeration, that Brother Jean-Baptiste had worked for fifteen years on the *Life*: from 1840 to 1855 and that he had been “the eyewitness of all that he recounts [...] He was a true witness who reproduced exactly everything that he had seen and that had happened, without pandering to anyone, neither our Founder nor his circle.” This was the old claim of the Superiors during the beatification process in the 1890s<sup>16</sup> to which Brother Jean-Émile added a more pertinent argument: before its publication in 1856 the Institute possessed “only scattered traditions which, with time, became weaker. [...] The appearance of the *Life*, so long sought after, made our Venerable Father live again, with noticeable effect.”

Brother Jean-Émile attached little importance to *Biographies de Quelques Frères* which offered “beautiful examples” of some fifteen deceased Brothers. However, it was with *Avis, Leçons, Sentences* that he displayed the qualities of an intelligently critical reader. Notably he put forward the hypothesis which I believe to be justified: that Brother Jean-Baptiste put into this work “the numerous materials accumulated on his table or in his memory” that he had not been able to give a place to in the *Life*. Also, this book “which resembles no other” and which had no plan, is the

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<sup>16</sup> Brother Jean-Émile used a specious argument: “a comparison with the process of beatification which completely confirms his story”. However, Marcellin’s canonical biography was taken from the *Life* by Brother Jean-Baptiste.

echo of Marcellin's teaching in the form of family conversations. And then, "Brother Jean-Baptiste himself was the author of much doctrinal enrichment which the flow of a conversation or a gentle lesson did not carry. Finally, two or three (chapters) were clearly entirely by Brother Jean-Baptiste."

Brother Jean-Émile also praised *Le Bon Supérieur*, a work much appreciated by many religious communities, including a Polish Congregation which, in 1926, asked to publish it. However, he himself gave no personal appreciation of a work into which Brother Jean-Baptiste had poured all his experience as a Superior. He said practically nothing about Brother Jean-Baptiste's last two works: his meditations on the Passion and the Eucharist, clearly forgotten.

### **Manuscripts left by Brother Jean-Baptiste**

- *A Treatise on Education* which he considered to be "a work which could serve as spiritual reading" on education and zeal. It is in two parts: the first includes a number of lessons coming presumably from Marcellin; the second, more strung-together, strongly influenced by various educationalists.
- The *Meditations* on the great truths and Four Last Things. Also, a second series of particular examens on the principal duties of a good Religious. However, they are both only sketches: around a hundred meditations and as many examens.
- "numerous talks, notes, drafts on all sorts of religious subjects" These are in fact what we would now call the Manuscripts Writings 3 and 4, gatherings of papers left by Brother Jean-Baptiste at his death.

Contrary to Brothers Louis-Marie and Amphiloque, Brother Jean-Émile does not take much advantage of Brother Jean-Baptiste's letters. On the other hand, he incorrectly attributes to Brother Jean-Baptiste "a little treatise on devotion to the Blessed Virgin" and "a treatise on religious etiquette" which were works of Brother François. In any case, there is a considerable amount of written work: about ten volumes, several works "at different stages of completion" [...] "of which the single detailed summary of chapters covers 34 large-format pages<sup>17</sup>. In concluding this detailed review, Brother Jean-Émile reminds us that, without Brother Jean-Baptiste "all that would be left to us of [Marcellin] would be a vague memory and uncertain traditions". A belated biography "would only have been a pale reflection of what he had bequeathed to us": "a lifeless portrait, hastily painted on the day of his death, a face ravaged by illness, the light of his eyes extinguished"<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [Translator's Note] Brother André wonders if this document is still in the General Archives in Rome as he has never seen it.

<sup>18</sup> An obvious allusion to the Ravery portrait of Marcellin.

## Why was a biography of Brother Jean-Baptiste envisaged?

I have quickly run through the fairly complicated story of how Brother Jean-Baptiste was remembered - between fulsome praise and oblivion. The various biographical works that I quoted revealed something of the uncommon person that he was: seriously ill, self-taught, a highly charismatic Superior, legislator, spiritual director, talented biographer, a very lively letter-writer, mystical author etc...and probably very spiritual. However, we are still far off from a true biography.

A passage from the *Annals of the Institute* by Brother Avit (1867 nos 44 - 45) gives us a good idea of what he thought of biographies:

“When we were in the house, we<sup>19</sup> spent almost all the recreations chatting with Reverend Brother Jean-Baptiste. One day, he said to us, “Hurry up and die, my lad, so that I can write your biography”. “It would not be very flattering,” we replied, “and I’m in no hurry.” “You only put what’s good into biographies,” he added. “In that case”, I answered him, “mine would be very short and it would not be worth your while working on it. For the rest, I do not fault your way of working, but I don’t think that biographies would be any less interesting or less profitable if the faults of their subjects were related. That would prove the efforts they had to make, the severe sacrifices they had to impose on themselves for their sanctification as much as the help they received from on high.” The conversation ended there, but our ideas have not changed since.”

Brother Jean-Baptiste was, therefore, quite consciously, more hagiographer than biographer, which does not mean that he took great liberties with the real story: the *Life* shows this clearly. However, Brother Avit’s opinion is an implicit criticism of this literary genre and it is certainly in line with that of many Brothers of his generation. From this arose a certain amount of suspicion towards the *Life* that was seen during the process of beatification, with the Superiors strongly asserting the authenticity of this version, which was used as the basis for the canonical biography. This is why an appeal was made to the senior Brothers to carefully back up the underlying premise of the *Life*. This is where Brother Sylvestre’s story comes from. Even in 1952 Brother Jean-Émile still felt the need to praise the *Life*. It was as if the Institute had not managed to get over the old and insoluble question of historical objectivity, which was very important in the nineteenth century. Clearly resolved today, it was, in any case, one of the brakes on the editing of a biography of Brother Jean-Baptiste, which risked a reopening in one way or another of the question of the authenticity of the *Life*<sup>20</sup>.

## Brother Paul Sester’s 1990 biographical note

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<sup>19</sup> That is, Brother Avit.

<sup>20</sup> This might be one of the reasons for the lack of completion of Brother Amphiloque’s article..

In *Marist Notebooks* nos 1 and 2 of June 1990 and June 1991, Brother Paul Sester has left us, under the title of “Frère Jean-Baptiste Furet, biographer of M. Champagnat”, a Paper finally freed from the hagiographical genre and the question of the absolute authenticity of his testimony on Marcellin. In the article which accompanied the new edition of the *Life* in 1989, Brother Paul intended only to draw up a portrait of Marcellin’s biographer since, “with any biography,” he told me, “50% refers to the author and only the other 50% to the person about whom he is speaking”. He was therefore going to consecrate the 1990 article to a psycho-historical analysis of Brother Jean-Baptiste’s personality by largely taking advantage of his letters. In 1991 he presented a critical analysis of the *Life* and of the *Treatise on Education*, one of his principal works.

However limited it may have been in its objectives, this work established a qualitative leap in the way of thinking about the *Life*, not as a Message dropped down from heaven, but as Brother Jean-Baptiste’s telling, with its legitimacy and its limitations. Brother Paul pointed the way to a biography of Brother Jean-Baptiste as one of the great interpreters of the Marist tradition, but no more than that. However, given the multiple facets of the individual and the mass of documents he left us, the editing of an academic-level biography would be a fearsome task and perhaps of little value in a Marist environment oriented to different projects.