

The Unfinished Biography of Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet

Reverend Brother Louis-Marie and the myth of Brother Jean-Baptiste as “Second Founder”

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It was on 8th April 1872, two months after Brother Jean-Baptiste’s death, that Brother Louis-Marie issued the Circular *Brother Jean-Baptiste or the Fervent Vocation*, which was a eulogy and also an invitation to gather his writings and provide testimonies for a biography of the man whom Brother Louis-Marie did not hesitate to think of as the co-founder of the Institute. This work of collecting Brother Jean-Baptiste’s writings was productive since the Marist archives now hold very large files of writings copied after his death¹, in particular a collection of several hundred letters. However, no biography would be drawn up. Only today can we make a beginning on the exploitation of these sources.

I will limit myself here to a critical commentary on the testimony given by Brother Louis-Marie who, at the beginning of the Circular, considered presenting, in four parts, Brother Jean-Baptiste as the model of the fervent vocation. As he could not immediately bring this impressive project to fruition, he contented himself with “giving a first look at the life of our dear departed” as the model of a serious attitude. “For what must follow, I need the help of your notes and memories, as I will tell you further on.”

So, in the 4th part of his Circular, he details at length the work of collection for publication. First of all, “the senior Brothers, the Visitors, the Provincials, the Directors, particularly of Central and Southern France, will each do me a good piece on the Brother Assistant” for the time of the annual retreat, around the month of September. “The letters themselves or a copy of all his letters that you have kept, except for passages too personal for you,” will also be collected, along with “a summary of his advice and teachings, principally those on the Rule, religious spirit, and education.” Testimonies were also sought on “anything edifying that happened, either for the Brothers or for the children, during the visits he paid to the various Houses of Northern, Central or Southern France during the thirty-two years he was Assistant.” Each one will freely give “his impressions and his appreciation” and also, “his personal feelings of esteem, affection and reliance on the dear departed Brother.” In conclusion, the Reverend Brother Louis-Marie revealed his intention:

¹ One of the reasons for copying was that Brother Jean-Baptiste’s writing was very difficult to read.

“Everyone has an interest in nothing being lost, in the present and in the future, of such a beautiful and perfectly fulfilled life. Well-studied and well-rendered, it will provide the model of a true Little Brother of Mary at all levels: because Brother Jean-Baptiste occupied them all, either in person or through study; for all of them, he gave very strong and very wise direction to those who filled the posts.”

Nevertheless, he attached particular importance to the letters:

“It is good for him that it can be said that he left voluminous correspondence, having had to reply, for more than sixteen years, to all the Brothers of the two Provinces of the South.: for twelve years to those of the Province of St Genis-Laval; and, in addition, to many Brothers from those Provinces that he had left, or from others.”

He even wanted to turn them into a book.

“Please God we can bring these letters together in sufficient numbers to add one or more volumes to those we already owe our dear departed! I am convinced that, of all of them, it would be the most useful and most interesting: so many of these letters were responding to a variety of needs in such a way that they took on different forms to reach all hearts; in such a way that he skillfully and fortunately guessed the strength and weakness of each one.”

The Reverend Brother Louis-Marie thought about himself quickly undertaking the editing of a work on Brother Jean-Baptiste, the complete model of a fervent Marist Brother in whatever employment he undertook. This project would be a completion of the *Life of Father Champagnat*² which had already been constructed in a way to offer such a model. Brother Jean-Baptiste himself would have been the perfect disciple.³ Of course, Brother Louis-Marie would not have had the time to complete such a project. However, he did not confide the project to anyone else.⁴

Why such a willingness to collect

Such a request to gather documents was not new. Brother François had made it after Marcellin's death and, more recently, the death of Brother Pascal, an Assistant, had led to the same request in the Circular of 19th July 1867, at the same time announcing that his biography would be written by Brother Jean-Baptiste. Moreover, it figures in *Biographies de quelques Frères* published in

² [Translator's Note] Further references to this text will be noted as *Life*.

³ The Circular of 24th May 1873 is entitled *Following the Circular on Brother Jean-Baptiste or the fervent vocation* but it barely mentions him.

⁴ In the Annals, Brother Avit reproaches him for thinking that he alone “could make the printing presses groan”.

1868. However, what makes the request concerning the life of Brother Jean-Baptiste exceptional are the repeated eulogies given about him. Here is one of the most characteristic:

“It is in this reflected spirit, this solid spiritual sustenance that the Venerable Father Champagnat must have outlived himself by thirty-two years in an Assistant who continued and perfected his Work without ever having given into a false notion or a relaxed principle. [...] It is that the whole Institute must now and always owe to him, on behalf of the Brothers and Children, the whole collection of rules of conduct, of principles of education, of spiritual doctrine which can only, if they are to survive, make them very strong and almost immovable. [...] is he not for us a second Founder?”

And this is why:

“No Biography up to the present time would be more interesting or more useful; you will all take from it, I am sure, the most pressing and devoted competitiveness. We owe it to the glory of God, which will burst forth from his ardent servant; to the honour of Mary, whose most affectionate and faithful child he always was; to ourselves and to the Institute, which must continue to instruct and edify.”

Finally:

“Brother Jean-Baptiste had a very particular mission in the Institute, that of organising and rounding it off [...] in order to carry out this task he received the most exceptional qualities and dispositions [...] No, no, to no-one else was it given, or even allowed, to penetrate, as he was able to, the intimate and early thinking of Father Champagnat; to reassemble with the same knowledge the people and events at the origins of the Institute; to research with the same certainty and determine with the same authority the spirit, the aim, the rules in concert with the Regime and the General Chapter.”

So, Brother Jean-Baptiste would be the inspired interpreter of the spirit of the Founder and also the legislator of his project. However, what did the Brothers think of such assertions, formulated as they were while Brother François was still alive?

A fairly ambivalent portrait of Brother Jean-Baptiste

Willingly or unwillingly, Brother Louis-Marie would give some nuance to this portrait. We note in the passage that he has little interest in Brother Jean-Baptiste as a child, as a young Brother or even as a Director.⁵ He sees him as the companion:

⁵ He nevertheless gives his CV, which includes his life as a Director: eighteen uninterrupted years in schools and thirty-two years in Provincial posts.

“I lived and worked with him for forty years. We got to know each other in Lyon in 1832⁶; we helped the Holy Founder in 1836 - 37 to prepare the first edition of the Rule; and then in 1839, thirty-three years ago, we were working together either in L’Hermitage or St Genis.”

This why he goes into great detail about the circumstances of his death and meditates on the photograph of the deceased, dead in his chair, which appeared to give him another lesson in spirituality:

“Children dear children, what amuses you? Do you have any other photograph to take than that of Jesus Christ? Come on, leave these follies to me and think only of imprinting in your soul the image of the Divine Master.”

Above all, this is the occasion to recall the type of hidden life that Brother Jean-Baptiste had thanks to his illness, but which he interpreted as a contemplative vocation:

“It was in order to meditate on it more perfectly (the teaching of the Founder) that Brother Jean-Baptiste had left behind all the travelling, all the visiting, all the going-out, all the recreations, almost all sleeping; that he was condemned for at least twenty years⁷ to an almost absolute solitude, only having in his room, the obligatory meetings with Brothers and, in the House, with the Superiors and other Brothers Assistant, indispensable meetings that the care of his Province and the General Administration of the Institute demanded.”

This is an ambiguous eulogy for the Superior of an active Congregation for which community is a fundamental element. On Brother Jean-Baptiste’s intellectual activities he has an equally ambivalent judgement:

“However much he consented to give his stomach⁸ the nourishment he considered bad for it, [...] he gave infinitely less consent to any reading that was foreign to religious ideas. ‘Their *Télémaque*,’ he said to me one day, ‘has been considered a masterpiece; I’d like to believe that. However, it is impossible for me to read it. Don’t talk to me of stories, when I have the Gospel and the Church Fathers.’”

Now, *Télémaque* was a highly-esteemed work on education written by Fénelon, Archbishop of Cambrai and a mystical author⁹. Also, these scornful words, understandable for a cloistered monk, appear very strange for the Superior of a teaching Congregation. And had Brother Jean-Baptiste read the Church Fathers? He seems to have devoted himself to ascetical reading, such as

⁶ Pierre-Alexis Labrosse entered the novitiate on 16th October 1831 and took the Habit on 1st January 1832. At the time of their meeting Brother Jean-Baptiste was already Director at Neuville, near Lyon.

⁷ This puts his retirement at around 1850.

⁸ Brother Jean-Baptiste seems to have suffered not only from asthma but also from digestive illnesses.

⁹ His argument with Bossuet about mystical states is still famous.

Rodriguez and Saint Jure¹⁰ who freely cite the Fathers, but no further. Whatever the case, these words enable Brother Louis-Marie to recommend a return to religious studies, “the only thing which really interests us. And, let us add, the only thing which really interests the Institute: because, when the fundamental, the chief, aspects of salvation do not govern a Brother, [...] he will never be really solid, he will succeed only very imperfectly, and soon he will abandon everything.”

He even goes as far as wondering:

“Without a serious and profoundly religious attitude, who knows what would have become of our dear departed, with all his talents and qualities of spirit and body? Probably an unfaithful Religious, somewhat wordly, light and frivolous, to say nothing worse.”

These words could only have appeared ambiguous to Brothers in 1872 as they had become professionals in teaching. They also witness to a fundamental concern of the Superiors about what they see as a trend towards middle-classness.

Brother Jean-Baptiste as an author

In his second part, Brother Louis-Marie continues to present Brother Jean-Baptiste as a contemplative who has just published:

“his admirable Meditations on the Passion, and others (on the Eucharist) which will be given to you later [...] Before delivering them to the printers, we saw the manuscripts from his own hand, which he himself had meditated on in front of the Blessed Sacrament for an hour each day, as much time as his strength allowed him.”

“The most illustrious of our older Brothers”, this model of the mystical life, needs to be imitated.

The mention of books on meditation led to the introduction of a 3rd part on “Our ascetical books” written by Brother Jean-Baptiste and Brother Louis-Marie deploras their lack of success, citing a Brother Director who spoke to him about, “all the trouble he took to see certain Brothers who paid little attention to his writing, who listened to it with an indifferent attitude” And moreover, added the Reverend Brother:

“These books are well-written, full of doctrine, very solid and extremely practical: we could not have better. [...] These are real spiritual treasures offered to the whole Congregation. One day or another, these treasurers of religious lessons, these principles of perfection and salvation, these

¹⁰ [Translator’s Note] Alphonsus Rodriguez SJ (1526 - 1616) and Jean-Baptiste Saint Jure SJ (1588 - 1657) both wrote on the practical aspects of Christian living and were read extensively for centuries after their deaths.

secrets of zeal and sanctity will be taken up by our Brothers, to the greatest glory of God and for the great good of souls!...”

Further on, he recalls:

“It took him thirty full years to gather, here and there, from the best authors, the holy thoughts, the admirable phrases, the solid maxims that he leaves us today. It took him twenty full years to edit them, to bring them together either in the manuscripts already delivered to the printers, or in those which still remain to us.”

He takes the opportunity to list all of Brother Jean-Baptiste’s works:

“The Life of Father Champagnat; The Directory of Solid Piety; The Principles of Perfection; Le Bon Supérieur; the Course of Meditations¹¹; Biographies de quelques Frères; Sentences, Leçons, Avis; then the three Books of Chapters in which he had played such a great part: The Common Rules, The Constitutions and The Schools’ Guide: twelve volumes at least, when they are printed.¹²”

For him, these books are “treasurers of light [...] an abundant source, very substantial nourishment for the serious spirit. [...] reason, intelligence, good sense predominate; the heart only ever comes second [...] he seeks to instruct rather than touch, to convince rather than to persuade.”

Brother Jean-Baptiste himself had held his christological meditations on the Passion and Eucharist in particular esteem, not without some illusion; they are quite forgotten today:

“‘I want’, he said to me, ‘the Brothers to know Our Lord. My Meditations on His mysteries and, in general, on all the truths, are long, I know that. However they are instructive and solid. I am sure that they will be found very useful in the Novitiates for lessons, and in the schools for catechism. They are taken from the best authors and I can assure you that, for the most part, they summarise the most substantial and most practical things that can be said about each truth. I have never run after heated emotions, the ohs!, the ahs!, but have stuck at going to the root of the issues. When the Brothers have made these Meditations over fifty years, as I have, they will have a doctrine, they will know Jesus Christ and love him solidly. Neither the world nor hell will be able to snatch them away from Him.’”

¹¹ This work was still in manuscript.

¹² This list is not without interest as the Reverend Brother distinguishes Brother Jean-Baptiste’s books from those for which he was not the sole author.

He has an excessive amount of optimism for the power and the longevity of his spiritual work. Brother Avit gives a significant summing-up of this (*Annals 1872* no 35):

“Brother Jean-Baptiste’s *Meditations on the Passion* were also printed. 10,000 copies were printed in the hope that, when the work became known, it would be sought out by all the religious communities of men and women and even by members of the clergy; 18 years later, at least half of that number remained in stock.”

Brother Louis-Marie defined Brother Jean-Baptiste as the spiritual Son and inspired interpreter of the Word of the Founder. Is this not, however, quite a controversial interpretation of the origins since Brother François was practically obscured, as if he had inherited only the institutional legitimacy, but Brother Jean-Baptiste the charism? Was Brother Louis-Marie’s sensitivity not running contrary to that of many of the Brothers, as, in 1872, Brother Jean-Baptiste was no longer the prestigious Assistant of 1850 - 1860, while Brother François’s reputation for holiness was already solidly established?

A more nuanced presentation of Brother Jean-Baptiste

After so many eulogies, Brother Louis-Marie became more biographical, returning to points already touched on, notably the letters, which he justly described:

“It really is astonishing that, in the ardour of his zeal and the inexhaustible resources of his talents, he was able to find so much variety for the letters, giving each one its particular stamp of appropriateness and relevance and imprinting on each one a new twist which makes it always agreeable and more acceptable. Delicate allusions, relevant points, texts and passages from Scripture and the Fathers, striking comparisons, skillful questions, ingenious puzzles, reconciling things in unexpected ways, opposition overcome, gentle insinuation, threats and promises, hopes and fears, friendship and authority, strength of thinking, solidity of principles, dogma and morality, truth and piety, pithy sayings and wise words, honour and interest, encouragement and warnings, present and future, good and evil, time and eternity, Heaven and hell: everything, absolutely everything.”

Having read a great number of these letters, I believe that Brother Louis-Marie is not exaggerating: Brother Jean-Baptiste has an epistolary style of exceptional quality. He is capable of saying sometimes extremely basic things in a pleasant way.

Brother Louis-Marie could not stop himself from quoting certain letters and extracts from lectures which appeared to him to be particularly characteristic, informing us about certain episodes in the life of Brother Jean-Baptiste which were not well-known, such as that of his childhood:

“One day he wanted to advise the Brothers of Saint-Paul on the perfect opening up of the heart and took it up in this way: ‘So you see, when I was a child I was really keen on birds’ nests, from which my dear mother and my trousers suffered on more than one occasion (*laughter*). I was not happy until I recognised at least a hundred of them. Also, when I got home, my poor mother used to get angry and scold me: Ah, there he is, my offspring (*laughter*) with his clothes all torn (*laughter*) etc. etc.”

In the same document he tells us, “When I was Visitor, I went, I came, I snooped around so well that after five minutes I knew all the nests in the House.” And indeed during the years 1837 - 1838 Brother Jean-Baptiste, based at L’Hermitage, took up this role, as various documents and pieces of correspondence testify.

Another quote clarifies for us the reasons for his prestige and the affection which the Brothers had for him:

“Do you know why, he used to say in a Retreat-conference, I always begin by citing your good qualities when I write to you and only bring up your faults on the second line? It’s because you have a sufficient number of devils to discourage you and beat you up. To me, my mission is always to bring relief, always relief. I will never bring you a devil to crush or discourage you.”

An examination of the contents of the letters confirm these words. However, Brother François also recalled the limits of Brother Jean-Baptiste’s influence.

“They alone (the Brothers of Midi) had the Brother Assistant at full strength. Later, the zeal was the same, but the health was failing. Particularly during the Retreats, general conferences were impossible for him.”

That means that, after 1860, the Brothers of the Province of St. Genis-Laval rarely had him as a retreat-master and his prestige was affected by that. He certainly continued to get involved, but with more restricted groups, especially during the Regime’s retreats from 1864 or with the Directors. It seems that, in 1872, the majority of Brothers, who had seldom ever seen or heard of him, looked on him as the leading ancestor, if a bit past it, while the senior members of the Institute, who continued to benefit from his teaching, held him in great esteem. Moreover, in this Circular, Brother Louis-Marie left us to guess the influence Brother Jean-Baptiste had on him and he more or less admitted to being his disciple.

The broken mould

In the 5th part of the Circular, a little story raises a new problem: between 1860 and 1863 Brother Jean-Baptiste had once more been ill, to the point where he had to remain in bed “for

about a month". The doctor looking after him was very impressed by his uncommon personality and joked with him that he would place on his tomb the epitaph "A broken mould [...] They don't make them like that any more." This story is the occasion for recalling that "his very special mission" "would be given to no-one else nor would it be possible to penetrate, as he was able to do, the intimate and original thinking of Father Champagnat". So, the Rule and the Constitutions, in which he had played such a large part perfectly conformed to the spirit of the Founder. Brother Louis-Marie had a tendency to put Brother Jean-Baptiste's character at the service of the Rule, which, not having been written by Marcellin, suffered from a certain deficit of legitimacy.

Brother Jean-Baptiste's doubts and anxieties

Contrary to the sceptics who questioned how an Assistant who had not led the common life, could be the perfect interpreter of Marcellin's spirit, Brother Louis-Marie responded that this isolation had been decided by necessity and had been a problem for Brother Jean-Baptiste himself:

"I will not hide from you the fact that I frequently, and would even say, daily, blamed myself for this major point. My infirmities forced me to take up a diet which, however sad and difficult it was for me, was not sound edification for others [...]"

This life on the margins was not easy!

"In truth, what a diet! In the morning, a little chocolate, but no bread, and nothing else during the day, some herb stock, again without bread; and around 4.30 in the afternoon, some sort of dinner or whatever he was served, and he would take scarcely half of it; in his last years a quarter of the ordinary meal of any other Brother."

For all that, Brother Jean-Baptiste was not comforted: "Do the Brothers see him, 'tho? Do they understand him? Will they not invoke him, do they not already invoke him to authorise for themselves a departure from the Rule, on the slightest pretext?" It was objected that "his emaciated looks" and "his dried up body" constituted "a sickness certificate for a sick man that put no-one in any doubt". However, he is not really convinced and he gives his concerns a more personal reason:

"If I had gone along with the real desire I often had, I would have handed in my resignation and condemned myself to the sick-room twenty-five years ago. I carry unto death my regret for not having done so. That would have been more appropriate and of greater value than the alleged good I was otherwise able to do seeing how few men we had to conduct our affairs, and I

regretted seeing that I was mistaken. This is why I am holding on to what you and all the others knew, if you think it useful.”

Did he really regret not having resigned twenty-five years previously, that is, around 1845 - 1847? He is undoubtedly not referring to the first serious health-problems he contracted during a stay at the small school in Bouillargues in 1842 - 1843, but to another episode of illness in 1847, which is mentioned in various documents. It seems that, from this period, his asthma, complicated by stomach-problems, gradually reduced his independence and constrained him to a life in retirement. When he became Assistant for the area of St Genis-Laval in 1860, it was because he could, for some time, no longer take on responsibility for the Provinces of Midi, where the numbers were large. He had good reason not to resign as Brother François had just left his post, officially for reasons of health. The job of Assistant for St Genis-Laval was a part-time one, but at the Chapter of 1867 Brother Félicité was appointed to help him and, if possible, replace him in directing the Province of St Genis. However, Brother Jean-Baptiste clung to his post, as Brother Avit noted (*Annals 1867* nos 41 - 42):

“Our dear Brother did not want this relief and he constantly refused to make use of it and he even enjoined us not to discuss it with him, which put us in a delicate situation with the newly-elected. He (Brother Félicité) was responsible for the General Secretariat, in place of Brother Euthyme.”

Such an attitude contradicts Brother Jean-Baptiste’s statement about his regrets for not having resigned. We find another contradiction when Brother Louis-Marie tells us of Brother Jean-Baptiste’s last moments when “he felt his strength ebbing each day and made no allusion to his approaching end”. He attributed to him the following spiritual testament drawn from one of his last letters: “Man has only one thing to do on earth: that is, save himself; everything else is illusion and madness, never forget that.” However, this lesson aimed at the Brothers corresponded badly with Brother Jean-Baptiste’s more complex attitude, as related by Brother Louis-Marie himself:

“One day, when he was having a conversation with a Brother Assistant on what simple and commonplace abandonment felt like, he translated these same hopes in this way: ‘Oh, my dear Brother, I am going to Paradise. Believe me, I am going to Paradise, and soon.’ Then without waiting for a reply and as if he wanted to ward off any objection: ‘Let me tell you that I am going to Paradise! How can I not get to Paradise after all the good advice I have given the Brothers? So many letters to encourage them! So many lessons, so much catechism! And all my books! Do you not think that the Good God will take those into account for me? He alone knows what they have cost me.’ He talked like this for almost quarter of an hour and his confrère was able to get in only a few words at intervals while he himself appeared completely inflamed by love, full of hope and very happy with his huge amount of work.”

In their assertiveness and stress, these words translate more anxiety than hope. It is as if Brother Jean-Baptiste is a good example of abandonment, of the doctrine of a small number of the elect, typical of the religious sentiment after 1850, but not quite taking it on fully. Elsewhere, Brother Louis-Marie has this to say:

“Although he treated the great truths in a very strong way in his *Meditations*, confidence and love predominated: ‘Does a father,’ he added in the conversation with the same Brother Assistant that we have just mentioned, ‘ill-treat his children when they have done their best to serve him? Go on! Go on! At death they will particularly see the truth of St Augustine’s saying, *‘No one is such a father as God.’* It is true that He is sometimes offended, but that is sorted with a good confession, and then that’s it done with.”

It must be recognised that this attitude of Brother Jean-Baptiste to salvation is barely found in his letters to the Brothers, which reflect a ministry assuring salvation when there is an issue of fidelity to one’s vocation. This is underlined by Brother Louis-Marie:

“Confidence in God was one of his main virtues and the great object of his recommendations. He constantly brought it to those he had to direct, whatever their misery or difficulties. This disposition enabled him to have such great faith in God’s goodness and in the infinite superabundance of the merits of Jesus Christ.”

Brother Jean-Baptiste largely put aside the rigourism which still strongly marked the times, and even Marcellin’s character. However, like the people of his generation, he still retained many of its aspects: mistrust of the secular world and an austere morality very much mixed up with a strong conservatism...

On the 5th February 1872 he died quite suddenly in his armchair, in the presence of the Brothers, but in the absence of the chaplains: “Around three o’clock his breathing slowed down; then it stopped, then started again; then it stopped again.” Returning hurriedly from Paris, the Reverend Brother Louis-Marie found Brother Jean-Baptiste on the following day still sitting in the armchair in which he died. The funeral took place on Thursday, 8th, in the presence of twenty-six priests and a hundred Brothers who came from their work.

The myth of Second Founder

As we have already suggested, in giving Brother Jean-Baptiste the status of completely faithful mediator between Marcellin and the Institute, Brother Louis-Marie’s aim was to legitimise the legislation put in place by the Chapter of 1852 - 54. However, he also thought of himself as Marcellin’s disciple through Brother Jean-Baptiste.

Basically, Brother Louis-Marie offered us neither a biography, even in draft, nor even a hagiography, but the moving testimony of a disciple and companion of the mediator between Marcellin and the Institute who had been, without any shadow of doubt, an unusual character.

Happily, in spite of an effort to build up a myth around Brother Jean-Baptiste - or perhaps because of it - Brother Louis-Marie also knew how to display the complexities and contradictions of someone showing a certain taste for power, an optimism and assurance which were sometimes worrying, but also the anxieties and doubts which bring him astonishingly close to us. His culture, which was very ascetic, was neither as broad nor as deep as he himself believed it to be, but his strongly christological spirituality holds the attention and merits serious examination. As far as Brother Louis-Marie's testimony goes, he introduces us less to a biography of Brother Jean-Baptiste than to the establishment of the myth of a providential instrument through whom Marcellin's teaching was transmitted to the body of the Institute.
