

Before Marist Spirituality: The Spirit of the Institute

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Part 1: The definition of this spirit by Marcellin and his immediate successors, 1824 - 1852.

At the time of the Institute's birth the word "spirituality" was rarely used and it was only in the second half of the 20th Century that the Institute adopted it to redefine its identity. From the start and for a very lengthy period, the expression "spirit of the Institute" was more or less equivalent. The Marist M, accompanied by three violets symbolising humility, simplicity and modesty became, quite late on, the graphic expression of this spirit.

The most complete study of this spirit of the Institute was carried out by Brother Basilio Rueda¹ on 25th December 1975, just at the time the word "spirituality" was coming into use. In his Introduction he offered a definition, "When we speak of the spirit of the Institute we think of humility, simplicity and modesty. We also think of devotion to Mary and finally of fraternal charity lived in a fairly particular way: family-spirit." However, he showed some prudence. "This Circular does not claim, however, to be a real study of our spirit. For this, it would be necessary to bring in an historical element, which is not within my competence, but which would be indispensable."

It is my plan, therefore, to carry out the historical study that Brother Basilio wanted. This is not very easy as the official documents of the Institute rarely use the expression "spirit of the Institute". For example, neither the *Life of Father Champagnat* (1856)² nor the Common Rules (1852) have a chapter on the subject³. The reason for this is simple, as Brother Louis-Marie recognised in his Circular of 16th July 1861: "This Marist spirit of Father Champagnat. {...] is everywhere in our Rule, in our Constitutions. [...] It is the soul and life of our establishments [...] it is our environment, it is the atmosphere in which we live." However, this reduction of the spirit of the Institute to a global environment clearly does not correspond to reality since the manuscripts of Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste carry teachings going back to Marcellin which defined a spirit of the Institute founded on humility as exemplified by Mary.

¹ [Translator's Note] Superior General September 1967 - October 1985. He was the first non-European General of the Institute.

² [Translator's Note] Reference to or translation from the *Life* will be to the standard 1989 Bicentennial English translation.

³ The Indices of topics in *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*, in the Circulars prior to 1916, or in Marcellin's *Letters* have no entry for this expression.

My aim will therefore be, as a first step, to clarify as far as possible the birth and contents of the concept of spirit of the Institute before a General Chapter in 1852 - 1854 established an official “definitive” doctrine based on the Common Rules and then enriched by the *Life* and the later works of Brother Jean-Baptiste. I believe that I am able to show that Marcellin very quickly developed the main elements of what we today call Marist spirituality. However, the editors of the 1852 Rule would give to the Institute’s spirit a more ascetical and institutional than spiritual face to the point that, from then on, being a Brother who observed the Rule and having the spirit of the Institute would be one and the same thing.

Nevertheless, it will be my task as a second step to show that, up to the relativisation of the Rule⁴ and the emergence of the concept of Marist spirituality in the 1970s, Marcellin’s early teaching had been kept in mind and taught by the Superiors General.

The spirit of the Institute in the early years

It was under the name of Mary that Marcellin brought together his first Brothers and it is obvious that, since the time of La Valla, the theme of humility was important, since it was an essential point in the formation of every candidate for the devout life. The reading of *Christian Perfection* by Rodriguez, Scupoli’s *Spiritual Combat* or Franchi’s *Self-Contempt*⁵ are not in themselves signs that, at the beginning, the community was making humility the basis of its spirit, nor that this virtue was clearly tied to the example of Mary. In the phrases in the La Valla oratory it is her Immaculate Conception that is considered. The fifteen principal teachings of Marcellin prior to 1822 which were kept in the memory of the Brothers turn on the following poles: piety, withdrawal from the world, the love of Jesus and Mary and zeal for teaching the catechism. Humility is only referred to in passing.

On the other hand, when Brother Avit drew up the list of the Founder’s principal instructions up to 1832, the senior Brothers gave him eight, of which the sixth was “On Humility”, about which he gave a very succinct overview: “It is in order to inspire love of this virtue in the hearts of all the Brothers that the good Father imposed on them the name of Little Brothers of Mary”. This is very little to go on, but, all the same, the Brothers held onto the fact that, according to Marcellin, there existed a strong connection between humility and the Institute’s name. We find this again in several texts on the spirit of the Institute.

⁴ [Translator’s Note] At the 1967 - 1968 General Chapter new Constitutions and a book of rules known as the Directory were passed, thus doing away with the old Rule.

⁵ [Translator’s Note] Alphonsus Rodriguez, Spanish Jesuit, 1526 - 1616, Lorenzo Scupoli, Italian Theatine, 1530 - 1610, and Giuseppe Ignazio Franchi, Italian Oratorian, 1712 - 1778, were popular spiritual authors in nineteenth century France. Franchi’s book is better known in English as *Humility or the Love of Self-Contempt*.

The contribution of Brother François' "Retreat Notes"

Brother François' notebooks constitute a more precise source, especially Notebook 302 in which, from 1819, he wrote down his "thoughts" during times of retreat or on the occasion of his talks. For the year 1824, he left us this type of summary of Marist spirit:

"Our vocation is holy and sublime: it is that of Jesus Christ himself and his apostles. To match up to that we must faithfully employ all means to completely fulfil our duties.

1st means: Great union and charity between each other: that is strength

2nd. **Great humility, modesty and simplicity in everything: that's the seal**⁶

3rd. Great reserve, discretion and restraint in relations with our neighbour

4th. Frequenting the sacraments with the necessary dispositions

5th. Great devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin (Father Gardette, Superior of the Major Seminary.)"⁷

This is undoubtedly a summary of a series of teachings on the Brothers' vocation: first of all on the aim of the Institute, based on zeal for imitating Jesus and the apostles, the first catechists. Then the qualities necessary to be fruitful, one of which is humility, previously formulated in its triple aspect. However, this seems to link in with zeal, rather than with devotion to Mary.

In the *Life* (Part 1, Chapter 12 Page 150) Brother Jean-Baptiste confirms this series of talks given during the construction of L'Hermitage: "During that summer, he thoroughly instructed them on the religious vocation, on the end of the Institute and on zeal for the christian education of children." He gave it to them again⁸ in "a small writing exercise" which summarised his teaching and of which the *Life* gives "the substance" (Pages 150 - 152): sacramental life and prayer; fraternal charity then a dozen articles with regard to conduct towards children.

The first part of the *Treatise on Education* compiled later by Brother Jean-Baptiste⁹ entitled "The Means of Doing Good with the Children" is to be considered as the prolonging¹⁰ of this series of lessons. For example, Chapter 2, dealing with the excellence of the catechetical aims of the Brothers affirms that "there is nothing more sublime and more excellent [...] Jesus Christ himself did this; it is the first thing he confided to his apostles." He then elaborated on the qualities of

⁶ This will be taken up again in Article 1 of the chapter on humility in the Common Rules.

⁷ This type of reference is very frequent with Brother François and often indicates the source of the words or refers back to a similar source. There is a slight possibility that Father Gardette himself gave this teaching.

⁸ Or had them copy it down.

⁹ In order to prepare the editing of the *Schools' Guide*.

¹⁰ Brother Jean-Baptiste clearly based himself on Marcellin's teachings, but he added numerous citations, which made the perception of the original text difficult.

zeal, which had to be prudent, enlightened, kindly, gentle, mortified... In Chapter 15 he stated that “zeal must be humble” to be agreeable to God and people, but also “We must have humility to merit the protection of Mary”. It is even indispensable for “Religious of the Society of Mary.”

From these various factors I find that, according to Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste, it was in 1824 that Marcellin defined, in a systematic way, a spirit founded on zeal, fraternal charity and a humility seen as a virtue both necessary for the apostolate and fundamental to a society affiliated to Mary.

In the same Notebook 302 Brother François left us a list of six thoughts on humility, dated 1827. The first five are fairly banal and taken from an ascetical tradition, but the sixth is of a whole different tone.

“1. Humility is the root, the basis, the nourisher and nurse of all the virtues. [...] (Rodriguez, Part 2, Treatise no 2)

2. Humility gives birth to and preserves the virtues [...]

3. Some of the good works we do are accounted as nothing if they are not accompanied by humility.

4. Pride is the beginning of all sin. (Eccl 10)

5. My God, I can only be humble in the measure that you grant me humility. I ask it of you.

6. Learn from me to be gentle and humble of heart. Yes, Divine Jesus! I want to apply myself seriously to this for the rest of my life. You have called me to **an Institute of which the identifying character is humility and which carries the name of Mary, your dear Mother** so pure and so humble. Oh, humility! The virtue of Jesus and Mary! May you both always be my delight!...”

In October 1826, after the huge crisis of Marcellin’s illness and the conflict with Father Courveille, the Brothers, one of whom was Brother François himself, made vows for the first time. In 1827, recalling his commitment, he defined the “identifying character” of the Institute as humble because it was of Mary, referring to a lesson - undoubtedly from 1826 - which this time defined the Little Brothers of Mary as a Religious Congregation. It seems that manuscripts of Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste had retained a copy of this vitally important lesson on the spirit of the Institute.

The series of lessons preserved by Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste

In a previous essay entitled “The Missing Link in Marist Spirituality” I showed that there existed in the writings of the first Superiors numerous lessons coming from Marcellin but remaining unknown until they inspired the official literature drawn from the Common Rules (1852) and up to the death of Brother Jean-Baptiste (1872). When the lessons or very similar series of lessons were discovered in the collection of Instructions of Brother François (Nos 307 - 309) and of Brother Jean-Baptiste (Writings 3 and 4) it became practically certain that they were taken from Marcellin’s lessons held, recovered and reused after his death by the Superiors.

In my view, the most faithful text to the original lesson on the spirit of the Institute is that preserved by Brother François in manuscript 307: “Character and Spirit of the Society of the Little Brothers of Mary”. Brother Jean-Baptiste’s two versions are more complete, but seem to me to be more reworked¹¹. In any case, the different versions have very similar texts and were constructed according to the same plan: 1. Each Religious Order has its own spirit. 2. The name “Little Brothers of Mary” signifies the particular spirit of our Institute. 3. Mary has given us the example of a hidden life. 4. The humble attitudes and practices of the Little Brothers of Mary.

Here is the opening of Brother François’ version:

“1. It is necessary to distinguish the spirit general to the religious state and the particular spirit of each order, says St Francis de Sales. [...] Each Religious Order, then, has its own spirit, which is like its own character and distinctive brand. Not all Religious reach perfection by the same means. “ [...]

“[...] The spirit of the Little Brothers of Mary, their particular and distinctive character, is a spirit of humility and simplicity. Our life must therefore be said to be humble, hidden and unknown to the world. Humility and simplicity must always be our principal virtues, given first place and characteristic of each of us. It is through these virtues that we will be able to attain perfection in our lives and procure the glory of God. It is the mould which must give us the form and the mirror in which we see the spirit of our Order and our way of conduct.”

“We never forget our name Little Brothers of Mary¹². Mary is our Mother, our Superior, our model. We are called to honour her, to imitate the humble, simple, pure life of the Blessed Virgin and to bring these virtues to life in our conduct; the humility of Mary in her thoughts, words, actions, her occupations and sorrows, her honours and her privileges.”

¹¹ Perhaps they are amalgamating several previous lessons.

¹² The usual name was “Brothers of Mary”. The word “Little” was added in 1824 in the Prospectus.

Brother François then turned to the lesson “Mary, Model of Humility” (no 308).¹³, which , at one and the same time a succinct telling of the life of the Virgin and a meditation on its significance, particularly in the following passages:

“2. Mary had low opinions of herself; she only ever saw her nothingness and she stood before God in humility and a profound self-emptying.”

“10. Mary practised such humility in her speech and actions; she covered herself in such a way with the veil of humility that she was always unknown in the world, despised by the world and regarded by everyone as an uneducated woman, as a person of little merit, of no use in the world, but hiding from every view her virtues, her holiness, the greatness of her son, and all the favours she had received from God. It was in this way that Mary esteemed, loved, pursued and practised humility. Her life must be the model for ours.”

Mary, conscious of her nothingness before God and choosing a life unknown and hidden: those are themes dear to the Bérullian school of spirituality.¹⁴ It was the case, therefore, for Marcellin that Marist humility was not a simple ascetical virtue but a joining in a divine mystery, a hidden wisdom and participation in salvation.

There came then a long list of items concerning humility, simplicity and, incidentally, modesty. It is certain that part of the list is a later construction. In any case, we find this list in both Brother Jean-Baptiste and Brother François. In the table below, we give preference to the first ones, which seem to us the earliest, summing up the characteristics of humility such as were conceived by Marcellin.

Character, spirit (No 307) Brother François Spirit of the Institute (Writings no 3 & 4) Brother Jean-Baptiste
1. Humility and simplicity: virtues dear to the Little Brothers of Mary. They must shine in their personality.
2. To have a particular preference for the hidden life.
3. To consider humility as the principal virtue. Work to acquire it.
4. To do good without fuss.
5. To apply oneself to the human sciences and secular instruction only to please God.

¹³ Brother Jean-Baptiste expanded upon this exemplary life of Mary in the lesson itself.

¹⁴ Often and undeservedly called the “French School of Spirituality”. Brother Basilio refers to it in his 1975 Circular. [Translator’s Note] Bérullian: after Cardinal de Bérulle (1575 - 1629).

6.To carry oneself among the Brothers and seculars with humility and simplicity.
7.To have a particular preference for public penances, <i>coulpes</i> ¹⁵ ...
8.To become like little children (a Gospel citation perhaps serving as a conclusion in the earliest version. This item is found only with Brother François.

It is primarily an interior attitude (a dear virtue...); a life-style (unknown and hidden; doing good without fuss). However, this general view of humility and simplicity must be incarnated in the limited context of the apostolate and the community: the school, relations between Brothers and with society, without forgetting the traditional monastic practices.

Later items, less coherent and of a different tone

The following items, in a wholly relative order, rest on the theme of the battle against the evil spirit based on pride and condemned in very vivid terms. They began by joining up modesty, humility and simplicity. They are probably late elements. Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste give almost-identical texts, of which we give the main ideas. Their numbering shows the variations.

Brother François	Brother Jean-Baptiste
8. & 10. The Brothers cannot save their souls without humility, simplicity and modesty.	9. <i>The same</i>
9. Happiness and success depend on their humility.	10. <i>The same</i>
11. Humility and simplicity are indispensable virtues.	11. <i>The same</i>
12., 13. & 14. Proud spirits are not made for the Institute.	12. <i>The same</i>
15. Each one must be persuaded that he is the last.	13. <i>The same</i>
16. Look on pride as the greatest enemy.	14. <i>The same</i>

This lesson, then, functions as a summary of the ideal handed on by the Founder and undoubtedly filled out by his immediate successors. It would be used in the editing of official

¹⁵ [Translator's Note] The *coulpe* was a compulsory community exercise in the Institute up to the mid-1960s. Brothers confessed external faults against the Rule and community regulations and accused other members of the community of similar faults. Small penances were assigned by the Director to be carried out in the presence of the community.

texts of the Congregation, notably in the Common Rules, which would, however, as we will see, be far from respecting their unity.

The Rule of 1852 - a fragmentation of the teaching on the spirit of the Institute

The Common Rules did not retain the concept of the spirit of the Institute, but they exploited the original teaching in the chapter “On Devotion to Mary” (Part 1 Chapter 6), particularly in Article 8 which offered, on the spirit of Mary, a definition close to that of the origins, but on another level: her humility is less that of a creature towards her creator than that of the love of Christ incarnate.

“Her virtues which they will strive most to imitate are: her humility, her purity, her tender love for Jesus Christ. Following her example, they will have a particular preference for the humble, hidden, life, for the most ordinary and menial work. Like her, they will cherish the lovable virtue and will take all the means necessary to hold onto it. Like her, they will flee from any shadow of sin and, emptying their hearts of all affection for creatures, they will love only Jesus Christ and they will employ all their life and strength in making him loved.”

As for humility, almost all the Articles of Chapter 5 of Part 2 of the Common Rules on this topic are inspired by lessons on the spirit of the Institute. Article 1 points to this relationship.

Common Rules Ch 5 “On Humility	Characteristics and spirit of the Society of the Little Brothers of Mary	Spirit of the Institute
Humility, simplicity and modesty must be the identifying characteristic of this Institute; the Brothers will have a particular preference for these virtues, and they will ensure that all their actions and everything pertaining to them bear these marks.	1.that humility and simplicity must be virtues dear to the Little Brothers of Mary and shine out in their person, in their words, in their actions and in everything that pertains to them. 2.that they must have a particular preference for the hidden life...	That humility and simplicity must be virtues dear to the Little Brothers of Mary and shine out in their person, in their words, in their actions and in everything that pertains to them. 2. That the Brothers must have a particular preference for the hidden life...

In this chapter, humility is disconnected from the example of Mary. The expression “a virtue dear to...” was no doubt too familiar not to be retained. The integration of modesty with humility and simplicity is so poor that it benefits from a separate chapter. (Part 2 Chapter 9). It is, moreover, conceived of as the art of “arranging man’s external appearance with propriety” for the edification of one’s neighbour. To summarise, it is the way Religious relate to each other and to lay people. Fundamentally, it is attached more to zeal than to humility properly so-called and to Mary.

The Life of Father Champagnat: an unconvincing summary of two traditions on humility.

In the second part of the *Life*, Chapter 7 treats of Marcellin’s devotion to Mary and Chapter 12 his humility. Brother Jean-Baptiste therefore confirmed the separation of the two topics, devotion to Mary figuring in the major axes of the spirituality, along with the spirit of faith (Chapter 2), trust in God (Chapter 3), the spirit of prayer (Chapters 3 - 4), and love of Jesus Christ (Chapter 6). Humility is simply part of the virtues, after obedience, poverty, detachment from parents and mortification. Thus even the order of the chapters leaves aside the concept of the spirit of the Institute in favour of an ascetical conception of humility and a devotional, rather than spiritual, conception of relating to Mary.

Nevertheless, the contents of the chapters go some way to correcting this rupture. Thus, in the chapter on devotion to Mary, Brother Jean-Baptiste reminds us of the need to imitate Mary: “her humility, her modesty, her purity and her love of Jesus Christ.” to the point that “all his actions and his entire person are a reminder of Mary, and reflect her spirit and her virtues.” (Part 2 Chapter 7 page 360). However, the clearest element of the chapter is reserved for the zeal in making Mary loved through practices in her honour. It is no longer the spirit of the Institute, but a fairly short devotion: Mary guarantees the salvation of those devoted to her.

In the chapter on humility, Brother Jean-Baptiste again takes up the passage contained in the lesson on “Spirit of the Institute” on the meaning of the expression “Little Brothers of Mary”, which is the “stamp”, the “mould”, the “mirror” of the Marist spirit. However, he strongly emphasises its ascetical aspect: the need to know oneself, to meditate on the evils produced by pride, to hold onto obedience and charity, to maintain modesty always and everywhere. (Part 2 Chapter 12 Pages 421 - 424). His bringing together for humility the ascetical tradition and the spirit of the Institute is disappointing.

Such a development is no surprise: a Rule and the biography of a Founder considered its archetype could scarcely put the idea of the spirit of the Institute to one side. However, the *Manual of Piety* retained something of it.

The *Manual of Piety* (1855): a belated witness to the spirit of the Institute

This catechism for the use of novices, published in 1855, often reflects old Marist spirituality behind a banal appearance. This is the case in Chapter 3 of the Second Part which tells us that the devotion of the Brothers for Mary must be “more special and more perfect” and consist “of four main practices, of which the second is taking on the spirit of Mary”. “It is a spirit of humility, of simplicity, of modesty; it is a great love for the hidden life, a great distancing from the world and an extreme horror of its vanities and pleasures.” ... Humility is treated further on, in Chapter 9 “On Family Spirit”, the first section of which gives rise to the lessons: “The religious spirit” and “Characteristic and spirit of the Little Brothers of Mary” from Brother François’ Notebook No 307, with which we have already dealt with at length:

“Q. What is the spirit of the Institute of the Little Brothers of Mary?

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

Q. Where does this spirit come from?

A. From the Blessed Virgin, because we have chosen her especially as our Mother and [since] we carry her name, it is right that we take on her spirit and that, in order to go to God, we follow the path she followed.”

A second section of the chapter then treats of “What the spirit of humility demands of the Brothers” set out in six points, the first few of which are fundamental: to do good quietly; to live unknown and forgotten by the world; to teach with humility and modesty.

Conclusion

The concept of the spirit of the Institute arrived at an early stage, probably in 1824 when it appeared linked to three key events: the Prospectus, in which, for the first time, the name “Little Brothers of Mary” was used; the construction of L’Hermitage; the lessons resulting in a “short essay”. In 1826 organisation as a Religious Congregation imposed the need for a definitive spirit to distinguish the Institute from other Orders. However, this spirit, which linked together Mary, humility and zeal was counterbalanced by an ascetical tradition which considered humility as a virtue in itself, without being explicitly tied to Mary. The two traditions were joined together in an ambiguous way in the famous three-fold formula: humility, simplicity and modesty, which could be read with plain spiritual glasses, to say nothing of mystical, but also in a flatly ascetical or devotional way.

The team of Superiors preparing for the editing of the Common Rules of the Institute made a choice more ascetical than Marcellin’s biography had ratified. Without being negated, the concept of the spirit of the Institute lost its precise sense to become a sensitivity present

everywhere, in texts and in attitudes. Furthermore, it was on the margins of a Marist identity founded on the Rule. In such conditions it became difficult to think of the spirit of the Institute as equivalent to the concept of “spirituality”.

However, in his talk on the spirit of the Institute, Marcellin had set out for the early Brothers the bases for a real spirituality: not only “a way of being, a family-atmosphere, an environment among people which creates a spiritual relationship”, as Brother Basilio said, but also a formalising of our spirit within a specific body of doctrine which could be explained and taught. However, the acceptance of such a doctrine had been problematic for several reasons: the difficulty for many Brothers of an in-depth understanding, then the death of a Founder who left hardly any written teaching, and, for a stronger reason, a Rule and finally, the lengthy delay between this death and the editing of the Rule (1840 - 1852) in a body in full demographic explosion which went from around 300 to nearly 2,000 Brothers.

For the editors of the Rule, concern for fidelity to the spirit of the Founder was intact, but it was an urgent matter to give clear ascetical principles and a firm institutional framework to a very young body which had become numerous. The 1852 Rule, then, formulated a spirit for the Institute, adapted for a delicate time in its existence, focused on the charism (education) and corporate spirit (humility...) more than a polished spirituality. However, we will see that the concept of the “spirit of the Institute” founded on the three-fold Mary - humility-zeal was not forgotten.
