

Before Marist Spirituality: The Spirit of the Institute

Part 2: Superiors General and the Spirit of the Institute (1860 - c.1960)

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In Part 1 I tried to show that the concept of Spirit of the Institute, deriving from Marcellin, from the years 1824 - 1826, and transmitted by Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste was very close to what we refer to today as a spirituality and was not just a common sentiment expressed by the formula humility-simplicity-modesty. From the years 1852 - 1856, the Institute's legislation and the Founder's biography constituted the bases for a body of doctrine, but, it seems to me, particularly in the form of an accumulation of ascetical, disciplinary and devotional data. In summary, from 1852 the Rule was supposed to contain the whole spirit of the Institute: it was through the scrupulous observance of the Rule that the Brother proved he possessed this spirit; the Vow of Stability was the public recognition of this fidelity. We will see, however, that this predominance of the Rule did not prevent Superiors General - nor, no doubt, many old Brothers - referring to a conception of the spirit of the Institute prior to the 1852 Rule in a way very close to what we would call today a spirituality.

The 1852 Chapter's letter to the Brothers

In introducing the 1852 Common Rules, the capitulants situated themselves as interpreters of the original Marist spirit: "Not all the rules were written by the hand of our pious Founder, but they all come from him [...] They are the faithful expression of his will and they contain his spirit."... This is an extremely important affirmation as, up to Father Colin's resignation as Superior of the Marist Brothers at the opening of the 1852 Chapter, Marcellin's status as Founder had not been definitively established and there was clear avoidance of referring to him as such. Nevertheless, the 1852 Rule suffered a lack of legitimacy from the fact that Marcellin had not written it himself. Moreover, the Chapter of 1852 - 1854, was composed of senior Brothers who had heard, and even written down, the Founder's teaching and there were tensions and disputes over the Founder's spirit. One example was the establishment of the Vow of Stability, which many senior Brothers rejected or had difficulty in accepting. So, even if the Letter of Introduction to the Common Rules claimed that the Rules encapsulated the Founder's spirit, it would take a long time for this conviction to be established.

Moreover, the capitulants themselves recognised different levels of these Rules: some had quite a formal character as they contained commands proper to Religious Life (the vows and discipline). Those of the Second Part treated of the virtues (spirit of faith, obedience...) which “had the principal aim of forming the spirit of the Institute [...] of moulding all the Brothers according to this spirit”.

1. Brother Louis-Marie: Circular on devotion to Mary

The difficulties in accepting the Common Rules contributes to the explanation as to why Brother François, in a hurry to get the Vatican’s recognition of the Institute, had a long stay in Rome¹. With his attempt being blocked in 1860, he had to leave the government of the Institute to his Vicar General, Brother Louis-Marie. In the latter’s Circulars, there would be a close-fought battle in a persistent dispute. Between 1860 and the end of his term of office as General in 1879 he succeeded in legitimising an interpretation of the spirit of the Institute through the Rule, an interpretation which had earlier met with many reservations.

Nor, however, would he neglect the prior tradition, and his Circular on devotion to Mary of 16th July 1861 would be one of the first displays of his willingness to situate himself in continuity with the spirit of the Founder. Taking the Cenacle after Jesus’ Ascension (Acts 1:14) as a model, he wanted to remind the divided Brothers of “the spirit of the Rule and of our pious Founder about the very particular devotion we owe to this good Mother as her Little Brothers and children”. She was “the soul of the whole Congregation as she was the soul and support of everything our pious Founder did ... It is in the intimate communications with her [...] that he conceived the idea of his Congregation, the plan for its government and the particular spirit with which he wanted it to be filled. The holy name of *Little Brothers of Mary* which we are so happy to bear, we owe to the love of Father Champagnat for Mary and the irresistible attraction he had throughout his life for such simple and modest virtues as this humble Virgin had. [...] We can only be the children, the disciples of our Father and Founder on condition that we love Mary, that we honour and serve Mary, that we live the life and spirit of Mary”...

This spirit of Marcellin is found throughout the books of the Institute, but particularly in Chapter 6 of the Common Rules

“Oh! How dear to us and precious to all must this Chapter on Devotion to Mary be! How well it expresses the thoughts and sentiments, the spirit and all the dispositions a Little Brother of Mary must have towards his good Mother.”

¹ [Translator’s Note] See Brother André’s Papers on this topic in the Library section of the English-language Institute website.

Brother Louis-Marie, therefore, ratified the teaching of the Rule on Mary, but in continuing the Circular he again took up the plan of the early teaching on the spirit of the Institute, of which he seems to have had a version distinct from that of Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste.

<p>Character and Spirit of the Society of the Little Brothers of Mary (Brother François, Notebook 308)</p>	<p>Brother Louis-Marie, Devotion to Mary 1861.</p>
<p>We need to distinguish the general spirit of the religious state and the spirit particular to each Order, said St Francis de Sales. The spirit is to tend towards the perfection of charity, the particular spirit is for the tending or aspiring to that end by such and such a means.</p>	<p>The general aim of the whole Religious Body is union with God through charity and the practice of the Evangelical Counsels. (Matthew 19: 17, 21).</p>
<p>Each Religious Order, then, has its own spirit, which is like its own characteristic and its distinctive brand, Not all Religious reach perfection through the same practices.</p>	<p>However, beyond this general aim, which is the same for all Religious, each Congregation has its own spirit, its special way of perfection and holiness appropriate to the particular aim proposed.</p>
<p>Some do it through the observance of rigorous poverty, others through blind obedience, others through silence, abstinence or solitude; others through the spiritual or corporal works of mercy, following the aim of their institution. It is extremely important to us, therefore, to know through which particular virtue we have to acquire the perfection of our state, that is to say, what the characteristic, the special spirit of our Institute is.</p>	<p><i>Brother Luis-Marie names “the Children of St Francis” (spirit of poverty), of St Dominic (spirit of zeal); the Carthusians (abstinence); the Trappists (fasting and mortification); Saint Ignatius wanted “absolute obedience to be the mark of his Order”.</i>²</p>
<p>Let us never forget our name of Little Brothers and Little Brothers of Mary.</p>	<p>We, Little Brothers of Mary, go there, and we must go there, through Mary, through the love of Mary, devotion to Mary, service of Mary, the spirit of Mary.</p>
<p>Mary is our Mother, our Superior, our model. So, we are called to honour and imitate the humble, simple, pure, life of the Blessed</p>	<p>We, my very dear Brothers, to whom Jesus has given the signal grace of giving us Mary as Mother, Patron, Model and First Superior,</p>

² Either because he was distracted or because he used a second version, he placed these two lines lower down: “Other Religious go to Jesus, some through obedience, others through poverty, others through penance, others through exercises of zeal and charity.”

Virgin and to bring her virtues to life in our conduct, the humility of Mary in her thoughts, words, actions, tasks and privileges.	must save ourselves through devotion to Mary.
The spirit of the Little Brothers of Mary, their particular and distinctive characteristic, is a spirit of humility and simplicity. Our life must therefore be humble, hidden, unknown to the world. Humility and simplicity must always be the principal virtues, privileges and characteristics of each one of us. It is through these virtues that we will be able to acquire perfection in our lives and to procure the glory of God.	It is the spirit of Mary, the practice of humility and modesty and Mary's virtues which is our special means of perfection and holiness.
That is the mould which must give us the form and mirror in which we see the spirit of our Order and our course of action.	Devotion to Mary, the spirit of Mary must always and everywhere be the distinctive characteristic of our Congregation and of each of its members, the mark by which they are recognised.

This, then, is quite an ambiguous Circular, one part of which discreetly confirms that the official books of the Institute contain Marcellin's spirit, yet is also inspired by an earlier source. The spiritual scope of this is somewhat weakened by the fact that Marian humility is no longer considered as the correct attitude of the creature towards its creator, of which Mary is the unsurpassable model, but as a completely classical virtue. One moves from a Marian spiritual theology to a Marian devotion, even if it is true that the idea of living Mary's spirit retains something of the earlier tradition.

The spirit of prayer as the spirit of the Institute?

With the same desire to restore the fervour of a body which needs a spiritual and institutional shakeup, Brother Louis-Marie sent to the Brothers, on 2nd February 1863, a lengthy Circular on the spirit of prayer:

“How many of us, my very dear Brothers, need to enter into and renew within ourselves this spirit of prayer of our pious Founder? [...] Let us strive to pray well, to hold onto and strengthen among ourselves the religious spirit, the good spirit.”

In setting out the equivalences: spirit of prayer = Marcellin's spirit = religious spirit = good spirit Brother Louis-Marie took up the theme of the Circular, “the religious spirit” from the notebooks of Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste, a theme which the lesson on the spirit of the Institute had

preceded, saying, among other things, “The religious spirit, the good spirit, is the love and esteem for one’s state, [...] an underpinning zeal and devotedness for one’s employment.” He gives to this spirit a deep theological meaning, “according to the teaching of St Paul, the spirit of prayer is the very spirit of God [...] (Romans 8:26) To have the spirit of prayer is therefore to have the very Spirit of Our Lord, the Spirit of God, the GOOD SPIRIT *par excellence*. In ending his Circular, he announced a follow-up which would seek to set out the deadly consequences of the absence of a spirit of prayer in communities; this would be published on 19th March 1865. This time, it seems to have been inspired by the lesson on “the bad spirit” which, in Brothers François and Jean-Baptiste, followed that of the spirit of the Institute. In this way, he contributed to an ascetical and institutional interpretation of the spirit of the Institute, to which the spirit of prayer and the good spirit were equivalent. The dichotomy good spirit: bad spirit would very often be employed, with more or less full awareness, notably to justify a certain conservatism.

The spirit of humility

On the other hand, the Circular of 16th July 1868 on the spirit of humility is situated very faithfully in the tradition of the spirit of the Institute as it was defined in the early days, notably linking the humility of the Brother with that of Mary, and with the inspiration of the Founder. Nevertheless, it had a utilitarian aim, at a time when Congregations were having to submit to coordinated attacks from antireligious sources and from an imperial government concerned about their development. In a certain number of communes the municipal councils wanted to laicise the public school, even if it were held by the Brothers. The conduct adopted by the Brothers, therefore, had to be prudent and modest in a society less favourable than before and ready to denounce the morals of Religious.

However, Brother Louis-Marie took advantage of this to demand “a general renewal in the spirit of the Institute, in the love and practice of humility, a fundamental virtue which must be the identifying characteristic of our little Society”. What were needed, therefore, were “humble, simple, modest Brothers, fleeing recognition, loving the hidden life, doing good quietly, without show, without vaunting themselves and counting only on the grace and help of God.”³

He then commented on the word “little”, being inspired by the early lesson on the spirit of the Institute: “the life of the Brothers must be a humble life, hidden and unknown to the world [...] humility and simplicity must be the principal virtues and privileges of the Brothers of Mary [...] We must constantly force ourselves to become little and always see ourselves, not only as the

³ Brother Louis-Marie seems to be taking up the list of items describing humility in the early lesson on the spirit of the Institute.

last among Religious, but also last among the faithful of God's Church." He then developed six application of this littleness:

1. Little before God, following Our Lord's example [...] (Hebrews 5:7)
2. Little before our Superiors [...] (Zechariah 2:8)
3. Little before the Authorities, Clergy, and Dignitaries [...]
4. Little before our Confrères [...]
5. Little even before the children [...]
6. Little before ourselves (Luke 18:14)

The majority of these articles refer back to the articles in the Common Rules chapter on humility, but define them more strictly. For example, the article "Little before God" supplements Article 14 by citing the Letter to the Hebrews, recalling that Jesus "was heard because of his reverent submission" (5:7)⁴. As for the theme of littleness before the children, Brother Louis-Marie insisted on it since, at that time, the anticlerical press systematically attempted to provoke scandals: that the Brothers saw them as, "members of Jesus Christ, temples of the Holy Spirit, and heirs to heaven"; and, in seeing them with the eyes of faith, honouring them, treating them well, and devoting ourselves to their instruction and education complaining about neither difficulties nor trouble in treasuring and forming them."

Ultimately, this recalling of this multi-form littleness reuses the teaching of the instruction on the spirit of the Institute, but the model to follow is first and foremost Christ. Even if Mary appears only at the second level, she is presented well within the spirit of the origins.

"What remains for us to do now is to address ourselves to Mary, our good Mother, to Mary, the model accomplished in the most perfect humility [...] To Mary, our first Superior, our Advocate, our great Patron and Protector, to Mary, the ordinary resource of the Institute and all its Members, that she might obtain for us the signal grace, the precious gift of true humility; [...] Mary is only the most elevated of all the pure creatures of heaven because she was the most humble, the smallest of all in her eyes while on earth. In truth, I tell you, if you do not seem to be like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

To end this affirmation of Mary, the model of humility, there is an expression we find in the early instruction: "Mary is the most elevated of creatures only because she considered herself as the smallest." The word "nothingness" is not said, but the idea is there. As a good theologian, Brother Louis-Marie⁵ took care to subordinate Mary to Jesus and to avoid vocabulary which was too controversial, such as "nothingness", but took up the tradition of the spirit of the Institute according to Marcellin in a way which was more felicitous than his previous instructions.

⁴ [Translator's Note] All translations of scriptural quotations are taken from the NRSV Catholic edition.

⁵ He left the major seminary at the end of his studies.

Brother Théophane

After 1880 there were no further problems of interpretation of the spirit of the Institute. The Rule and the teachings of Brothers Jean-Baptiste (died 1872) and Louis-Marie (died 1879) had determined the legitimate interpretation. The teaching role of Brother François (died 1881) had been forgotten. Brother Louis-Marie's successors were not the "old Brothers" who had received the teaching directly from Marcellin. However, certain events conspired to re-examine the origins.

The first was the introduction of the Founder's Cause of Beatification. On this occasion, 10th June 1897, just after the introduction of the Cause in Rome and Marcellin's becoming "Venerable", Brother Théophane published a Circular on Marist spirit which established that Marist spirit = spirit of the Institute and which extended it to other virtues beyond humility, simplicity and modesty. However, a novel idea came to the fore: Marcellin's spirit. Another interesting aspect was "the spirit of the world". This traditional expression became "the modern spirit". It was a sign that the Institute considered itself somewhat "anti-modern". In particular the end of the Circular established a hierarchy of references which set the Rule after faith and the Gospel; this is not quite as banal as might be thought. Marcellin's venerability was therefore the occasion for "renewing ourselves in the Marist spirit":

"It is good, particularly on the occasion of our retreats this year, to ask ourselves where we are in relation to *humility, simplicity, modesty, piety* and *the spirit of poverty*, and to all the virtues of which our Venerable Founder gave us so many and such beautiful examples. More than ever, it is necessary for us to penetrate the need to keep a check on ourselves against the spirit of the world, against what is called the **modern spirit** in order not to expose ourselves to paying tribute, up to a certain point, to vanity, pomp, pride, sensuality, greed, to this century's prejudices. [...] we must never lose sight of the environment in which we have to move; it must be nothing other than the Faith, the Gospel and our Rule."

Brother Stratonique

Contrary to Brother Théophane, who published little in the way of doctrinal Circulars, Brother Stratonique left quite a considerable amount of work, partly due to the fact that his term of office as General lay on either side of the Institute's centenary. In his Circular of 6th June 1908, he announced a novena of years⁶ in preparation for the centenary. For him, "we must aim at leaving our retreats completely renewed in the original spirit of our Institute and in the true spirit of our Venerable Founder, the Marist spirit which he inculcated into his first Brothers and with which

⁶ [Translator's Note] That is, a nine-year period of prayer.

they had, like him, been so clearly penetrated. [...] it is this spirit that must be set against that of the world which gets lost through its spirit of pride, of ostentation, and of duplicity.”

How do we take on this spirit of Marcellin and the first Brothers? By attentive reading of, and meditation on, our ascetical works, which will allow us “to firmly establish dedication in our hearts, this beautiful and noble virtue which our Venerable Founder and our elders practised to such a high degree and of which they left us so many most admirable examples.”

In this way, Brother Stratonique formulated a fairly personal view of Marist spirit by affirming that it was not only Marcellin’s, but also that of the first Brothers. For him, it was not humility that was at the heart of the Marist spirit, but dedication. Even further, by giving it a definition, he recalled the example of Brother Jerome (*Biographie de quelques Frères*⁷). He even considered a book with the possible title of *The Practice of Dedication in the Institute of the Little Brothers of Mary during the First Hundred Years of its Existence*. He tried to restore to Marist literature an esteem which appeared to be shared by few, but he himself offered quite an individual interpretation of it⁸. This position was taken up again in the Centenary Circular of 2nd January 1917, in which he was inspired by the text of Brother Jean-Baptiste’s Introduction to *Avis, Leçons, Sentences*⁹ in 1868.

“ ‘What is the Institute of the Little Brothers of Mary?’ such was the question he asked. Here is how he answered it: ‘It is a congregation born in humility, poverty, and the shadow of the Cross of Jesus. It was founded on 2nd January 1817¹⁰; today it is 52 years old’ (it was in 1868 that he published the book) [...] our Congregation continues to grow and develop in the shadow of the Cross and under the protection of Mary.”

This emphasis on the cross clearly related to the situation of the Institute in 1917¹¹; however, without putting into question the official literature built up since 1852, this definition of the spirit of the Institute recalls the time at La Valla and the early years at L’Hermitage.

⁷ [Translator’s Note] This multi-volume work has been translated into English under a number of different titles. In English-speaking countries it is still generally referred to by its original French title.

⁸ He even referred to Brother François’ Notebooks which were still in manuscript form.

⁹ [Translator’s Note] What is said in Footnote 7 about *Biographies* applies equally to *Avis*...

¹⁰ [Translator’s Note] This part of the quotation from *Avis* is taken from the English translation of Brother Leonard Voegtle *Listen to the Words of Your Father. Opinions, Conferences, Sayings and Instructions*. The remainder of the quotation is translated from Brother Stratonique’s own words.

¹¹ [Translator’s Note] In many non-English-speaking countries Brothers were called up to serve in the military during the Great War of 1914 - 1918. More than 100 Brothers were killed during their military service.

Brother Diogène

Somewhat like Brother Théophane, Brother Diogène was rarely tempted by the topic of the spirit of the Institute, however, his Circular of 24th May 1926 dealt with the spirit of Father Champagnat and he considered that L'Hermitage was where that spirit blew.

“It is as if one is breathing in an atmosphere of sanctity; the noise and bustle of cities does not reach this solitary valley; worldly preoccupations do not cross the threshold of this austere but nevertheless happy dwelling.” [...] “Each time it is given to me to trample this blessed soil [...] my heart bursts forth in an ardent prayer to obtain from God, through the intercession of Mary, the Queen of L'Hermitage, the grace that the spirit of our Venerable Father will more and more penetrate our Religious and that his protection will support us during this quite dangerous and difficult time we are going through.”

He end up by saying that his duty was to follow the Pope's letter *Unigenitus Dei Filius* addressed to Superiors of Religious Orders and other Congregations of men: “never to lose sight of the examples of their Founder and Legislator [...] to glorify their Father by following his Rule and his counsels, and, in being penetrated by his spirit, they will be faithful to the duties of their state as long as they walk in the footsteps of their Founder.”

Faced with a hostile world, Brother Diogène conceived of fidelity to the origins by associating Marcellin's spirit with the sanctuary of L:Hermitage and the Rule.

Brother Marie-Odulphe

Brother Diogène died in 1942 and the General Chapter was unable to meet; first Brother Michaëlis, then Brother Marie-Odulphe, took over as interim head of the Institute. The war in Europe was barely over when the latter published, on 24th May 1945, his Circular entitled " To Restore Everything in the Spirit of the Venerable Founder through Devotion to the Rule". This title, which brought together the spirit of the Founder and the Rule might seem excessively concerned with a return to order¹². Nevertheless, the spirit of the Institute is given a remarkable definition there.

“Father Colin and his friend Father Champagnat undoubtedly wanted to give the very spirit of Mary to the Society of Mary. However, the Most Blessed Virgin marvellously lived a life which

¹² [Translator's Note] Just as Brothers in non-English speaking countries had been called up for military service during the 1914 - 1918 War, the same thing happened during the 1939 - 1945 War. Again, 100 Brothers were killed in this War during their military service. Earlier, the Institute had lost 176 Brothers, killed during the Spanish Civil War of 1936 - 1939. The period mid-1930s to mid-1940s had been a time of *disorder* for the Institute, particularly in the Continent of Europe.

a saying of St Paul expressed with astonishing precision: “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). The two venerable Founders, understanding that the Marist spirit consists of the interior life hidden in God with Christ, applied themselves to tracing out for their spiritual sons an ideal where humility, self-denial, union with God, love for Jesus and zeal for souls were like the basic virtues. They themselves, throughout their entire lives, constantly pursued this ideal of religious perfection, as their history gives witness to, as much as does the pending process of beatification.”

That definition of Marist spirit, bringing together christology and mariology, appears to be very close to that of the instruction on the origins of the spirit of the Institute, even if there is nothing to suggest that Brother Marie-Odulphe was inspired by it. We have there a fine example of a quite remarkable personal interpretation of Marist spirituality.

Brother Léonida

It was on 8th December 1952 that Brother Léonida emphasised the need to return to the early spirit in a Circular entitled “We are Religious: the Little Brothers of Mary”. It was clearly inspired by the early Circular on the spirit of the Institute and it even follows the same plan. It begins by recalling that, “All Religious Families propose [...] to lead their members to the closest possible union with God and [...] the sole difference which exists among them (the Founders) is that, having had a personal and distinct vision of the virtues of the Divine Master, they have indicated to their disciples the particular means of reproducing these in themselves.” He then take up again the old definition of Marist spirit:

“In this way, the Venerable Father Champagant pointed out to his children the path of humility, of simplicity and modesty, proposing for our imitation the Most Blessed Virgin, the most perfect copy of Our Lord and he wished that our communities would, at their best, reproduce the life of the Holy Family at Nazareth.”

Then, like Brother Jean-Baptiste in previous times, he returned to the name Little Brothers of Mary which “breathes this spirit”. Finally, he refers to Mary as model:

“Our Mother in Heaven showed herself to be so humble in everything that we cannot lightly call ourselves her children if we do not battle against pride, presumption, and vanity; if we cannot recognise our ignorance, our fragility, our faults, in order to attribute only to the infinite goodness of God whatever is of value within us.”

Brother Léonida’s vocabulary on Mary’s humility is less precise than that of the Circular on our origins, but it suggests the same fundamental humility of the creature.

Brother Charles-Raphaël

It is with him that a rupture opens up, notably in the Circular of 24th May 1959, “What the 15th General Chapter wanted”, where we find, perhaps for the first time the expression “Marist spirituality”. Just as the Chapter had weakened the very community-based setting to the benefit of more personal religious practices¹³, he explained, “In spirituality [...] each Religious must have his own programme for sanctification, inserting it into the general programme laid out by the Rules.” In his Circular of 8th December 1960 on the Common Rules he gave a quite remarkable definition of the heart of Marist spirituality. A careful reading suggests that he implicitly states that it was Marcellin’s personal story which reveals his spirit, more than the Rule:

“It must be considered as fundamental in our Congregation that everything touches, closely or remotely, on the very spirit of the Congregation [...] How did Blessed Marcellin Champagnat¹⁴ come to found our Institute? First of all, there was an apostolic problem in his area [...] The thought of founding a Religious Institute followed almost immediately [...] It is in these two directions that we need to look for what is essential in the Work of the Blessed Founder.”

He therefore placed the apostolic life in a direct relationship with spirituality, correctly so-called. Clearly, this will be about Mary; it will go, preferentially, towards those who are humble, with concern for “doing good quietly”.

“That is certainly what inspired and guided our Blessed Founder when he meditated on and progressively implemented his Work. That was certainly what he wanted, against all odds, up to the end of his life. That is what he wants today for his children, for all of them. And that is what we must hold onto at any cost.”

However it was the date of 1st May 1965 when, in my opinion, the tradition of the spirit of the Institute was closed down with the Circular on “Fidelity to the Spirit of our Vocation and the Law of Adaptation”, in which Brother Charles-Raphaël stated that, “it is the same fidelity to the Founder which must push us to undertake the necessary adaptations”. However, by this date the concept of the spirit of the Institute and its equivalents (Marcellin’s spirit, Marist spirit...) was on the way to being supplanted by that of Marist spirituality, a concept to which he had anyway contributed to spreading.

¹³ [Translator’s Note] The 1958 General Chapter abolished a number of exercises which were usually carried out in community. It placed more emphasis on the Brother’s personal spiritual life. In this way it was a forerunner of the General Chapter of 1967 - 1968 which, following the Second Vatican Council, revolutionised the entire life of the Institute.

¹⁴ [Translator’s Note] Marcellin had been beatified in 1955, thus changing his title from *Venerable* to *Blessed*.

This change of vocabulary was not accidental: it was a sign of a new way of thinking about Marist identity, notably through a return to the origins, over and above the Rule and tradition. As the quasi-identity between the spirit of the Institute and the Rule, acquired from 1852, ceased to be acknowledged, a new concept became necessary which would express a religious identity with reference to an original inspiration rather than a later rule of life.

This concern for a return to the sources, already very much present by time of the 1967 - 68 General Chapter would be given a theoretical basis by the Circular of 1st July 1971 in which Brother Basilio delivered “A Superior General Thinking Aloud” during the General Conference, in which, claiming a charismatic-type inspiration, put himself in the position of a re-founder, who was attentive to the signs of the times:

“Today, shortly after the closure of the Council¹⁵, [...] we are present at a transformation of Religious Life, not in its essentials, but in its inessentials; not in its Gospel aspects, but in its cultural aspects. We are present at a divesting of its old and at its new ‘formulation’. [...] I will end by saying again, I feel a force being born in me, without my help, so that I will support whatever comes to birth in the Institute and develops in the way of change and renewal inspired by the Holy Spirit. As Yves Congar¹⁶ said, ‘We must help the dawn to be born’”.

Conclusion

If it is clear that for more than a century (1852 - around 1965) the Rule was the major reference-point for Marist identity to the extent of giving the impression that fidelity to the Rule and conformity to the spirit of the Institute were one and the same thing, then definitions of this spirit, either earlier or personal, have always been around, as we have seen from the Circulars, from Brother Louis-Marie up to Brother Charles-Raphaël. Can we go as far as saying that this spirit of the Institute was equivalent to what we today call Marist spirituality? It would seem to me to be more correct to speak of a discourse dominated by the spirit of piety, of asceticism, and of devotion which allowed only brief spiritual openings. In a tradition which was anti-mystical, communitarian and apostolic and preoccupied with creating solid virtues and fleeing non-conformity, spirituality was most often expressed in an indirect way and was therefore largely “hidden and unknown”. However, we have seen that, however modest they were, these givens were far from negligible.

Finally, it was in his 1975 Circular that Brother Basilio carried out a critical, nuanced and fairly complete review of the concept of the spirit of the Institute. I leave to the readers of this present

¹⁵ [Translator’s Note] i.e. The Second Vatican Council.

¹⁶ {Translator’s Note} Yves Congar (1904 - 1995) was a French Dominican theologian who was highly influential during the Second Vatican Council.

two-part complementary historical study the task of assessing how far it can enrich reflection on what was not yet called Marist spirituality.
