



The homily the Pope never got to preach

A secreted pearl of Marist history: what was its hidden message?

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Marists who had the good fortune to be in Rome twenty-five years ago for the canonisation of Saint Marcellin would recall a memorable week. Extraordinarily so. Many thousands had converged on the Eternal City, from all parts of the Marist world. Over several days, they took part in concerts, receptions, youth gatherings and celebratory liturgies; they were festooned with commemorative scarves and other memorabilia; they sang specially commissioned songs; they met together and partied. On a slightly showery Sunday morning, 18th April, the pilgrims filled the piazza of St Peter's to capacity to hear Pope John Paul II proclaim the sainthood of Marcellin Champagnat. A huge image of a new painting of the Founder was draped from the scaffolding that hid the façade of the basilica which was being renovated at the time. The celebrations continued well after the Mass, as the Marists took over Rome. It was a grand event.

But, unknown to all but the organisers, one of the planned activities did not go ahead.

It had been hoped that on the morning after the canonisation, there would be special papal audience for the Marist pilgrims, perhaps in the Paul VI Audience Hall where their various national groups had staged an all-singing, all-dancing concert on the previous Saturday evening. For various reasons, it was not able to be scheduled. There did end up being a Mass for everyone that morning at the basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, but it was not led by the Holy Father.

As part of the planning for the canned audience, Brother Charles Howard, the former Superior General then retired in Sydney, had been asked confidentially by the Vatican if he would ghost-

write an address for the Pope to deliver to the Marist pilgrims. The draft of this address survives. It has never been published, or even known. The twenty-fifth anniversary of its non-delivery seems an appropriate time to bring it to light.

The draft has been hiding in the files of this writer since 1999. At the time, Brother Charles was based at the Provincial House of the Brothers in Sydney. Close to the Feast of St Marcellin on 6 June that same year, each of the Brothers in the community woke to find a typed note slipped under his bedroom door (a lifelong practice of Brother Charles!). It gave them some background to the draft papal address that he had prepared, and suggested that it may be useful to include in their community morning prayer:

Dear Brothers

Towards the end of last year I was asked to prepare some notes to facilitate the work of those preparing the Address of the Holy Father to the pilgrims on the day after the Canonisation of Saint Marcellin.

These notes consisted of:

1. Some brief biographical notes.
2. A few on some of the more important aspects of Marcellin's spirituality.
3. A limited number of references mostly drawn from:
 - recent writings of Pope John Paul II
 - extracts from the Constitutions of the Marist Brothers
 - some writings of Br Benito

At the end of each section I included two or three paragraphs of suggestions for the Address, drawing from the references mentioned in No. 3 and my own ideas! All in all, the work came to about 15 pages.

What follows are the paragraphs that I thought might be useful for the speech writers.

Well, *"tis a pity if it be wa..a..sted!*

So you might like to use it for prayers on Thursday as I will have left for Canberra.

Charles



The Brothers dutifully did as their former General had proposed, but a small community of eight Brothers was a considerably more modest assembly than the ten thousand or so Marists who might have otherwise heard Charles' words from the Pope. A quarter of a century later, perhaps it is timely for those words to be received by a wider Marist audience.

Here is the address that Brother Charles penned for Pope John Paul II:

Today, dear friends, we celebrate a new Saint, St Marcellin Champagnat, a man who is for us a shining example of faith. At the heart of his spirituality was his faith in God's love and in God's continuing presence and action in his life. This was at the root of his remarkable zeal, compassion, energy, and enthusiasm. It was this which sustained him in very difficult circumstances. It was this which enabled him to continue to say 'yes' to God just as Mary had.

Each of us, my dear friends, has a special place in God's heart. He writes in the life of each of us a project of love and grace, inviting us, through the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, to play our part in bringing about the reign of God.

Each one of us has a precious vocation as a disciple of Christ. As a member of the wider Marist family, I encourage you to support one another in your personal vocation, pray for one another that you be sensitive and faithful to the calls of the Holy Spirit in your lives. And pray in a special way for vocations to the Marist congregations, to religious life, and the priesthood.

A great love of Mary was one of the most important features of the life of Marcellin Champagnat. He saw a special mark of God's love and providence in the gift of Mary in His life. His confidence in her prayers and her protection shine clearly throughout His life. Mary is model and mother for us all and we ask her to help us to be faithful to our Christian vocation, to bring Jesus to birth in the hearts of others. She is a model for us in opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit's movement in our lives, to God's love, and to courage and passion as disciples of Jesus. Jesus was the whole focus of Mary's life; he is to be the focus of ours.

We are all called to continue the mission of Jesus, to bring life to others, and I know that many of you do this in the noble calling of teaching. Many of you have done this generously and wholeheartedly over many years sometimes in very difficult circumstances. I congratulate you and I thank you.

I encourage you all to be passionate in your work, be passionate in spreading the Good News by your zeal, by the witness of your lives, by giving yourselves generously in the service of others, especially the young, and, amongst the young, have a special care for the marginalised and those most in need. Be Marcellins for the young people in need, for those in search of values, for a meaning to their lives. Be Marcellins



for young people in need of someone to listen to them, to encourage them, to love them. For those of you who are involved in education, never forget those words of Saint Marcellin: "To bring up a child properly, you must love him."

Marcellin encouraged his Brothers to love one another and to love their students. His insistence on the importance of creating a spirit of family in the communities and in the schools is a wonderful legacy. To have students, teachers, staff, and parents feel at home with one another, with the knowledge of being accepted and valued whatever their role or social standing is a beautiful gift and a precious contribution to the development of people. Any educational institution with a strong spirit of family will have an evangelising impact on all that come into contact with it.

I commend you for all that you do to develop this family spirit, this sense of community, something which is vitally necessary in today's world. Moreover, a truly Christian community will always be ready to extend its boundaries to embrace others in need, and to work for reconciliation where that is needed. I strongly encourage you in this – may you be messengers of love, of justice and of peace to the wider human family. May your institutions never become bastions of the privileged.

We know that Marcellin Champagnat was a man with a special concern for the needy and the underprivileged. He was a man rich in compassion and sensitivity towards those on the margins of society. He encouraged his Brothers to take every possible care of the poorest, the most ignorant, and the dullest children.

I urge you to follow this example of Saint Marcellin, to be men and women of solidarity. The world desperately needs a sense of brotherhood which includes a spirit of sharing where people consider it an honour to be able to devote their care and attention to the needs of their brothers and sisters in difficulty. My dear friends, we are in the second year of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and the Holy Spirit is at work in the world. One way in which we see this is in the selfless service of those who work alongside the outcasts and the suffering, those who work for a better world and a more just society.

I noted with joy that, in difficult social and political situations, your Brothers are encouraged to remain with the people as far as possible and I am aware that in recent years eleven of your Brothers have met with violent deaths for the witness of their faith, their Christian courage, and their fidelity to the people. You also have other Brothers living in very difficult circumstances. I reach out to these men and thank them for the witness of their lives, an encouragement for us all to be generous in our living of our faith and our commitment to solidarity as your General Chapter recommended. "This is the hour for us to accept, decisively and unequivocally, the evangelical call for solidarity". This call to solidarity is a most important one for our time and I urge you all to be generous and audacious as you follow this call which is clearly a call of the Spirit.

My dear friends, it is easy to look at today's world and see many negative factors that can lead to pessimism. But I believe that God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity and if we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit then we can be transformed into bold and courageous witnesses to Christ and his message. It was the Spirit who guided the apostles, it was the Spirit who led Marcellin Champagnat to be such a courageous and bold leader. The same Spirit will grant us boldness in spreading the Good News, and in bringing the love of Jesus to others through our concern, compassion, availability, and interest in their problems and needs. Encourage and strengthen one another and the Spirit will fill your hearts with love, passion and boldness. In different ways, each of us has the capacity to be bold and courageous witnesses and leaders.

Be audacious as a group also. Be a shining example of lay people and religious working together boldly in the great and arduous adventure of the evangelisation of young people and their families. With your strong family spirit you can be models of the new vision of the Church with its collaboration and partnership between all members. And together, sharing the charism of Marcellin Champagnat, you can work at providing young people with a renewed Marial spirituality. Be bold, my friends, be Marcellins for today.

Now, I would like to say a final word to the Brothers. I have noted with great joy that a good number of you have indicated your willingness to serve in difficult situations, including countries where some of your confreres have been killed in recent years. All of you, dear Brothers, are being called to heroism at this critical period in the history of your Institute. You have all been called to allow yourselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, to be converted, and to re-found your Institute in creative fidelity to the spirit of your Founder, Saint Marcellin Champagnat. Today we give thanks to God for the life of this great man and the inspiration that he is to us all. Let it also be a day of thanksgiving for our own life and our own calls, a time for renewal of our commitment.

In particular, I pray that you will be courageous in undertaking this refoundation which is so important for all those that you are serving now and that you will serve in the future. It is also very important for the whole Church.

To all you members of the wider Marist community, who walk with the Brothers in collaborative partnership, pray with and for them asking Mary's special help. Encourage the Brothers to be audacious in their solidarity and in their refoundation, just as you did at your last General Chapter.

For yourselves, I pray that you will be encouraged by the witness of our Saint to see with greater clarity the dignity of your own vocation in life, your call to be joyful witnesses of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, men and women, young and old, called to be messengers of hope in a world which hungers for a spiritual vision of life.

Marcellin Champagnat is a man who had a great love of the Church and he would rejoice to see the union that we strive for today with priests, religious and lay people, all understanding, respecting, encouraging and supporting one another in different calls of vocations, all with the common call of carrying on the mission of Jesus. Wonderful!

And now, finally, let us ask Mary, our good mother, to continue to inspire us and pray for us on our journey of faith, hope and love.



To appreciate the themes and emphases in the text that Brother Charles drafted for the Pope, including what may be seen as its sub-text or hidden message, it is helpful to situate it in the Marist context in which it was written. The year 1999 was 44 years after the beatification of the Founder, and 34 years after the end of Vatican II. Both events had been highly significant for the Marist movement, the former because it proved to be a catalyst for new scholarship and research concerning Marcellin, and the latter for the way that it led to a wider embrace of women and men who were coming to regard themselves as Marists and who were sharing responsibility for carrying on Marcellin's project as part of their own baptismal vocation. During the 1990s, these two developments had intersected more than ever before. There were blessings in that, but also dangers. Brother Charles seems to have been alert to both.

At the time of the beatification in 1955, the ways that Marcellin was known and understood were becoming a little remote and tired. Increasingly, they seemed to belong to another time. Despite several biographies appearing since that of Brother Jean-Baptiste a century before, these contained very little by way of substantive new research or fresh insights. It was more a re-packaging of old narratives. Apart from early work such as that of Brother Pierre Zind in France, but largely unknown elsewhere, all that could be found on Marist bookshelves were dusty and outdated texts. The first volume of *Origines Maristes* – the fruit of the ground-breaking research of Jean Coste SM and Gaston Lessard SM – was still five years away. Masters and doctoral theses that started to appear in the 1960s and 1970s on Marcellin Champagnat, on Marist spirituality and Marist education, and on the founding Marist story, were hardly yet conceived. The foundational “canon” in use across the Marist Institute had not really been augmented since the 1860s, and some books had never been translated from the French. It is not surprising that within a decade or so, they largely fell out of use. They spoke to a forgotten context.



Things changed markedly during the two decades after the mid-1970s. New research, new books, both academic and popular, led to a plethora of courses, programmes and resources becoming available. Vatican II called religious families to rediscover and reinterpret their founders. Interest in Marcellin was re-kindled. What emerged was a man who sat easily in the post-conciliar church. New paintings and sculptures appeared all over the Marist world. Songs were written. Marcellin was re-patriated to the late twentieth century. His spiritual wisdom was re-distilled. Marists warmed to this fresh image of the Founder: a more human, inspiring and attractive figure than the one they had previously known. Marcellin's letters, in particular, revealed a man of compassion, passion, spiritual mastery, and humour.

The bicentenary of his birth in 1989 was celebrated as the "Champagnat Year" and signalled a decade of heightened attention on Marcellin. In introducing the year, as Superior General, Brother Charles Howard invited people to encounter "a man of the earth, a man of God, a man of great love, a man of good sense."¹ A revised and critically edited version of *The Life* was published, with a personal copy provided for each Brother and Marist institution. In the General House, a new ceramic sculpture of the life of Marcellin was installed, a work that captured the zeal of Marcellin, his reaching out to youth, his enthusiasm and family spirit. A new mural was also unveiled. Plays, musicals, songs, art, sculptures, booklets and resources with Marcellin Champagnat as their subject were produced all over the world. Marcellin's spirituality and his approach to ministry and community appealed to modern-day Marists.

The inspiration and energy that derived from all of this were welcome and fulsome, but the latent risks were arguably less apparent. The use of the Founder as a primary point of reference for Marists seemed almost ubiquitous. The English-language version of new Marist education document finished in 1997 was called *In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat*, where the Founder was described as the "life-giving root" of Marist education. Marist educators were called to be Marcellin's "disciples". What of the centrality of Jesus Christ?

Every ecclesial group fortunate enough to have had an inspirational and attractive founder needs to be careful that it does not develop anything like a personality cult around such a person, or that it does not romanticise his or her memory in such a way that the founder becomes the main subject of its narrative. To do so can potentially usurp the essence of a founder's personal charism with a dynamic that is not primarily concerned with Christian discipleship or *missio Dei*. When a founder's story or an institutional identity is embraced uncritically or non-evangelically, the unwittingly created danger can be a triumph of style over substance, or of identity over purpose. In Marcellin's being such a compellingly inspiring figure, both in his person and his action, this was clearly a lurking risk for Marists.

At this time, during the 1990s, there was another significant development in the Marist world: a conscious and pro-active "widening of the tent". Momentum for it had been building for more than a decade – named at the 1985 General Chapter, which in turn led to the founding of the Champagnat Movement of the Marist Family a couple of years later, and then the welcoming of lay people to the next Chapter in 1993, the first time this had ever happened. Increasingly, lay people were seen not simply as mission partners or collaborators with the Brothers, but as "Marists" in their own right. Brother Charles included them in his last Circular, which had as its theme Marist spirituality.² Large numbers of men and women who were not professed members of the Institute

¹ *Circulars of the Superiors General*, Vol XXIX, No. 4, p.157.

² *Circulars of the Superiors General*, Vol. XXIX, No.9.

were being encouraged to name and claim themselves as *Marists*. Indeed, in Marist life and mission in many parts of the world, it was the case that a just a few Brothers were supporting a numerically much larger group of these new Marists, rather than the reverse.

This expanded understanding of who was a Marist, and the effective induction of many thousands of new people into Marist life and mission, was happening, however, at a time when the person and, unfortunately, sometimes the cult, of the Founder was at its height. There was also an increased emphasis on Marist *identity*, in some places at the expense of Marist *purpose*. The release of *In the Footsteps of Marcellin* Champagnat, for example, listed five characteristics of the distinctive Marist style of doing evangelisation which, in some regions, came to be misunderstood as the foundation of what being Marist was all about. Again, style over substance. In hindsight, it is reasonable to ask: What was the self-concept of the Marist world into which these new Marists were being inducted? To what degree was it focussed principally on Marcellin Champagnat and/or Marist cultural style, rather than explicitly on Jesus Christ and Christian discipleship? The two are not at all mutually exclusive, of course, but it is a question of orientation and balance.

We move forward to 1999, the year that Brother Charles’ “papal address” is written. The hype around the canonisation was immense. People’s imagination had been captured. Events were organised all over the Marist world, culminating in the week of the ceremony itself. People came from everywhere. From Australia, for example, over fifty Marist schools sent student and staff representatives to Rome. Brothers went into a ballot to be chosen. Former students and other Marist women and men joined them. The lively delegation from Australia occupied most of the economy section of a Qantas 747. Arriving in Rome, they joined the largest group of Marists ever assembled in one place, or ever likely to be – tens of thousands. They were all wearing their “Champagnat scarves” and often enough chanting the new saint’s name as they went about Rome. Among the pilgrims were approximately one thousand Brothers, then a full fifth of Institute, who, in one of the lead-in



events, gathered one memorable evening at the General House. It was to this large group of Marists that Brother Charles imagined Pope John Paul II would be speaking. What did he want the Holy Father to say?

Surprisingly but it would seem deliberately, through the seventeen paragraphs of the address, there is relatively little focus on Saint Marcellin himself. When he is mentioned, it is almost always in the context of what he can teach contemporary Marists about faith and discipleship, about living in God's love and presence, about forming community, and about being emboldened for mission. Right from the outset, Brother Charles situates Marcellin in his experience of God's love and his response to this. In the first paragraph he also introduces Mary, not devotionally but as a model of discipleship. As soon as the second paragraph, it is we – the listeners, the present-day Marists – who become the focus. Charles first assures us that each of us “has a special place in God's heart”.

The address is quite Christocentric in its theology and focussed primarily on the life and work of the Marists of today: “Jesus was the whole focus of Mary's life; he is to be the focus of ours.” This experience of Jesus could lead nowhere else other than to a response in love: “We are all called to continue the mission of Jesus, to bring life to others, and I know that many of you do this in the noble calling of teaching.”

Charles then goes on to use characteristic Marist language to describe the distinctive Marist way of sharing in Jesus' mission, with words such as “passion” and “zeal”, “loving the students”, “family” and “home”. Most of the second half of the address is concerned with emphases for which Charles Howard was well known, and which he hoped would be characteristic of Marist life and mission everywhere: that Marists be “messengers of love, of justice and of peace”; “men and women of solidarity”; “audacious”, “bold” and “courageous”. The last point is especially poignant in the context of the Marists who had been martyrs in the previous decade, the memory of whose deaths would have been still quite raw. He includes a message that would be typical of Marcellin – without actually naming him – by wholeheartedly encouraging his listeners, with optimism and assurances of the worth of their lives and work as Marists.

Up until this point, just six paragraphs from the end of the address, it is implicit that the Pope is speaking to a wide embrace of Marists – women and men, religious, clergy and lay. By doing this Charles is clearly affirming the widening of the Marist tent and, by having the Pope say the words, he is wanting the Church also to affirm it. But then he becomes quite explicit: “Be a shining example of lay people and religious working boldly together in the great and arduous adventure of the evangelisation of young people and their families ... be models of a new vision of the church.” It is only after all of this that he devotes a paragraph specifically to the Brothers, calling them to renewal, and to “re-foundation” which was a theme at the time.

He then returns to his wider Marist audience, and he ends where he started – with Jesus: “be joyful witnesses of the paschal mystery of Jesus, men and women, young and old, called to be messengers of hope”; “Marcellin Champagnat ... would rejoice to see the union that we strive for today with priests, religious and lay people ... all with the common call of carrying on the mission of Jesus. Wonderful!”

Brother Charles Howard, in this address on the occasion of the canonisation, can be seen to be celebrating one major development in the Marist world while he is subtly correcting another. The affirmation obviously is for the new and inclusive understanding of membership of the Marist community and how this could be a prophetic paradigm for other spiritual families within the Church. The quieter admonishment is to bring this family of people to what, or who, should be at



the centre of everything for them: Jesus Christ. And, by implication, not Marcellin Champagnat. He was urging them not so much to love and celebrate Marcellin, but to love and celebrate what Marcellin loved and celebrated. The difference was essential.

An interesting post-script to the canonisation and to Brother Charles Howard's draft address, is the statue that was installed in a niche of St Peter's Basilica the following year and blessed by Pope John Paul, a gift of the government of Costa Rica. There is much that can be said of this stunning sculpture of Saint Marcellin by Jiménez Deredia, but for the purposes of this article one small aspect of its story may be pertinent. When the design – an unusually modern one for that ornate Renaissance-style Baroque building – was submitted to the Vatican authorities, approval was given, perhaps grudgingly. But one small change was insisted: there was nothing to signify that Marcellin was priest, so a cross should be put on him somewhere. Deredia put one in his hand. This decision drew criticism from some Marist quarters, as an unwarranted interference with artistic licence. But perhaps it was not such a bad idea. It reminds us that Marcellin was shaped by a deeper identity and purpose.