

# The World of Marcellin Champagnat

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## Introduction

A real understanding of Marcellin Champagnat and the origins of the Institute demands some knowledge of life in France and the Church around Marcellin's time. It is not so long ago that a basic knowledge of these areas could be taken for granted in Houses of Formation, particularly in those of a European-based culture. Today, however, in the English-language Marist world, there are novitiates and scholasticates in which English may be the language of teaching but only a second or third language of the students or, indeed, the formators. Knowledge of European history and culture cannot be assumed. Formators have to work with written materials such as Marcellin's biography and correspondence translated into English and help students gain some understanding of the 'culture' behind these works. If both students and formators are from non-European cultures this can be very difficult.

Life in the Church of the first half of the 21st Century is very different from life in the French Church of the 18th and 19th Centuries. Many of the practices in the Church of Marcellin's time were still in existence in the Church prior to the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. While there are still many Brothers alive who remember life in the pre-1960s Church (including the present author), many of the practices of those times need to be explained to those in formation (and, possibly, even to formators) as they had profound effects on Marcellin and the Institute.

In this brief Paper I have tried to provide information which, I hope, gives some basic knowledge of the society and Church in which Marcellin and the first Brothers lived. Of course Marcellin and the Institute were born into pre-existing cultures and it is therefore necessary to step back some time before these births to see the larger picture. However, it cannot be emphasised too strongly that this is the merest sketch of life in France and the Church just before and during Marcellin's time. For more detailed information on Marcellin and the Institute, it is important that the Papers of Brother André Lanfrey available on the Institute's website are consulted.

## Life in France before the Revolution

Marcellin was born in 1789. In the context of the history of France, and, indeed, of Europe, this was a year of major significance. However, in order to understand why it was so significant for France, for Europe and, indeed, for the Institute, it is necessary to have at least a basic knowledge of what life was like in the country and in the Church before that year.

In the years leading up to 1789 France was a monarchy, the King at that time being Louis XVI. In theory the King consulted his parliament, but he had not called meetings of this body for many years. The parliament was made up of three separate "Estates". The First was that of the Clergy, the Second that of the Nobility and the Third, was made up of representatives of the common people. When decisions had to be made each Estate voted separately. Thus, it was possible that the first two Estates could combine to outvote the Third, even although the clergy and nobles of France together made up only 5% of the population. Both the nobles and the clergy were exempt from taxation. Very few of the "common people" were able to vote in

elections as a certain level of income or property was needed before the right to vote was granted. Dissatisfaction with this state of affairs had been brewing for many years and a financial and political crisis in 1789 brought it to a head. Riots broke out in many parts of the country and the government was unable to cope. This was the start of what is known in European history as the French Revolution.

What was life in the Church like before 1789? Almost all of the bishops in the country were from noble families. There was a fundamental split in the Church concerning relationships with the Pope. On the one hand were the Gallicans who believed that the Church in France should control its own life, with the Pope having only a vague spiritual authority. Their opponents were known as Ultramontanists, who believed that the Pope should have control of every aspect of the Church's life. This split lasted long after the Revolution and was to have serious effects on the life of the Institute at the time it sought canonical recognition.

More serious was the theological divide. Spreading from what is now Belgium in the 17th Century, Jansenism offered a profoundly rigid and pessimistic view of Catholic life. According to the Jansenists a state of grace, although required of every Catholic, was very difficult to attain and even more difficult to retain. Holy Communion should be received only if one was absolutely certain of being in a state of grace. Many of the leading clergy and influential laity in France held Jansenistic views. The Jesuits in the main had been fierce opponents of Jansenism but had been expelled from France in 1764 and, because of political pressure from a number of European countries, had been completely suppressed by the Pope in 1773. Although Jansenistic theology had been condemned by the Pope in 1713, the effects of this theology lasted in the Church and in the lives of ordinary Catholics, some would say up to the 20th Century.

As for Religious Life in the Church in France prior to 1789, in many ways it could be said to be flourishing. The country and cities were crowded with monasteries and convents. However, there was often a laxity in the life of the monks and nuns. In addition to the older Orders of Friars, such as the Dominicans, Franciscans and Carmelites, the Brothers of Christian Schools<sup>1</sup> ran schools in cities and towns and some Congregations of priests taught in seminaries or went around the country giving parish missions. There were also numerous confraternities for lay people many of which were active in the fields of education or care for the poor and sick.

Education was the domain of the Church and the responsibility of the parish priest. The common view was that people needed education only up to the level required for their work. Many of the upper classes thought that educating people beyond that level would only lead to trouble. For the priest, the primary purpose of education was to teach catechism. Reading and writing were secondary to that purpose. In the poorer villages and hamlets schools were run by "Brothers" for boys and, sometimes, although of much lesser importance, by "Sisters" for girls. It is important to note that these men and women were not Religious. The titles "Brother" or "Sister" were given by parishioners to the men and women who assisted the parish priest. They could be married with families. Teaching was only one aspect of their work. This situation was also in place at the time of the beginning of the Institute and caused Marcellin endless problems. For example, there is a letter to Marcellin from a priest asking him to send an unmarried Brother who would teach in the parish school and would also be the secretary to the mayor, the cantor in the parish church, the bell-ringer and grave-digger.

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<sup>1</sup> Founded by Saint John Baptist De la Salle. They are known in English-speaking countries either as the De la Salle Brothers or Christian Brothers.

## **The Revolution Years**

Although Brother Jean Baptist Furet gives us some information about the childhood of Marcellin he tells us little about the effects of the Revolution on his life. Like many revolutions in subsequent years and in other countries, one of the principal aims of the 1789 Revolution in France was the destruction of the Church and the persecution of clergy and Religious. Clergy were forced to take an oath of loyalty to the Revolution, Religious Life was banned and Religious were expelled from their monasteries and convents.. This ban is the reason Marcellin's aunt, a Sister of St Joseph, was living with the family. Priests who failed to take the oath were hunted down and, unless they managed to escape, often executed. We know from later research that both Marcellin's mother and father were members of their parish confraternity. Like many parishes, this confraternity was a centre of resistance to the revolution's aims. Marcellin's father, while an official of the local revolutionary authority, was actively involved in subverting the revolutionaries' aims of destroying the Catholic Church by assisting priests to evade capture or execution and saving church vessels being sent for destruction. There is even a suggestion that the Champagnat home provided temporary refuge to priests on the run. Some reorganisation of parish structures was attempted with clandestine missionary priests providing Mass and the sacraments where and when they could. There was much reliance on the efforts of committed lay Catholics to keep the faith alive.

The violence and destruction of the Revolution lasted until 1799. By this time, the Church in France was a mere shadow of its former self. Very few elements of life before the Revolution would be taken up after this year, but the divisions explained in the previous section remained.

## **The post-Revolution Years**

In 1799 Napoleon Bonapart emerged as the political leader, first named Consul and later Emperor of France. However, in 1814 the monarchy was restored, much to the pleasure of the majority of Catholics, especially the clergy - hence the references to the "Most Christian King" in early Marist documents. People thought that the country would settle down and peace would be restored. The Church was able to resume its activities and it became a major political force in the country, with many posts in government ministries being taken by bishops, although, in many ways, it was being manipulated by the government. Crucially, education was again a field which the Church dominated. However, the years between 1814 and Marcellin's death in 1840 were to prove politically unstable, with frequent changes of government and the emergence of actively anti-Catholic politicians. There were periods in which the Church continued as a major political force and periods in which it lost its influence. On the level of local politics, the division of France into Departments, each led by a Prefect and Sub-Prefect, gave rise to varying levels of local political influence on education. This unstable environment was to cause great problems for Marcellin in his attempts to gain legal recognition for the Institute.

## **Life in the post-Revolution Church**

As Consul, Napoleon signed a Concordat with Pope Pius VII in 1801 which, although it restored the property the Church had lost in the Revolution, was much to Napoleon's advantage. The terms of the Concordat led to a reorganisation of the dioceses in France - a reorganisation led by the government over the course of a number of years. In later years this caused problems for the early Marists when the Diocese of Belley was formed from parts of the Archdiocese of Lyons, leading to a situation where the Diocesan Society of Mary was split over two dioceses, one of which wanted a diocesan missionary society while the other had no

need of one. Crucially, the Concordat gave the right of appointment of bishops to Napoleon and the French government.

It was perhaps in the area of education that the most significant developments took place after the Revolution. Both Napoleon and King Louis XVIII<sup>2</sup> in 1814 assumed that the Church would provide for the education of the French people. There were three specific areas which needed attention: elementary education, secondary education and the training of teachers.

## **Developments in the field of education**

Initially, as was the case before the Revolution, elementary education was seen as the responsibility of the parish priest and its primary aim was the teaching of catechism as preparation for reception of the sacraments. As before, priests looked to their parish (non-Religious) “Brother” or “Sister” to carry out this work. However, more and more priests were coming to see the benefits of having a group of dedicated men or women who would take responsibility for the running of the parish school and began to found communities to this end. Often a bishop would give a particular priest this task and recruits would be drawn from the whole diocese. Given the problems with communication in those times, it was common for two or more of these diocesan groups to have the same name, having been founded in different parts of the country. This situation pertains today with the name “Society of Mary”. There is the “Marist” Society founded by Father Colin in Lyons and the “Marianist” Society of Mary founded by Bishop de Chaminade in Bordeaux. The only model the founding bishops and priests had for community-life and teaching-methods was that of the De la Salle Brothers. The De la Salles were the only Congregation recognised by the government and because of this had a certain number of privileges. Probably the most significant of these was exemption from military service. As this privilege would be granted to any Congregation of men which attained legal recognition, it is easy to see why Marcellin devoted much time and effort to this.

The area of secondary education was, in the early days of the Institute, of little relevance. However, there was one aspect of this area which had the potential to cause Marcellin some problems. Prior to their expulsion from France, the main providers of secondary education had been the Jesuits. The Society of Jesus was restored by the Pope in 1815 and, in France, Jesuits opened a number of colleges throughout the country. It is important to note that the definition of a college was a secondary school in which Latin was taught. Over the years, as the government began to exercise greater control over a national educational programme, it demanded that its permission be sought to open and/or run a college. During the Institute’s La Valla years, Marcellin was suspected of running a college without the authorisation of the government. All the essentials of a college were in place: a priest living with a group of young men who wore a uniform (the original blue ‘habit’), lessons being provided (by the lay teacher), with the suspicion that Latin was being taught (even Father Rebod, the Parish Priest, suspected this). Indeed, it is thought that the person who accused Marcellin to the government Inspector of Education was the young lay teacher whom Marcellin had thrown out of the house. While there certainly were priests who ran unauthorised colleges under the guise of minor seminaries, this was not the case with Marcellin.

The training of teachers was another area which was to cause Marcellin a number of problems. With these new groups of men dedicated to teaching in parish schools coming more and more to resemble Religious Congregations, the initial training was a balance between formation for religious vows and training in the teaching methods of the De la Salle Brothers. Often young

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<sup>2</sup> King Louis XVI was executed in 1793. His young son automatically became King Louis XVII, but died in prison as a child. In 1814 Louis XVI’s brother was proclaimed King as Louis XVIII.

men, who had no intention of formally joining the group entered the “novitiate” solely in order to undertake the teacher-training programme. Providing this service was one way of a community’s gaining an income. This practice became so common that the general population assumed that “novitiate” and “teacher-training college” were one and the same thing. Marcellin’s attempt at running a combined novitiate/teacher-training college in L’Hermitage was, by his own admission, a failure as so many disciplinary problems had arisen.

Over the course of the first half of the 19th Century, governments, both “conservative” (i.e. monarchist and pro-Catholic) and “liberal” (i.e. in general, republican and anti-Catholic) began to take control of education. Responsibility for elementary education was taken away from parish priests and given to local authorities. Diplomas in teaching were made compulsory for those wishing to teach in elementary schools. These diplomas were of three grades depending on what subjects the individual was able to teach. School Principals were required to have at least a diploma of the second grade. Priests began to open private schools in their parishes to ensure that the catechism and other aspects of the faith were taught. All of this obviously put great pressure on Marcellin and his new Institute. In order to obtain legal recognition for the Institute and, equally important, exemption from military service for his Brothers, Marcellin needed to ensure that those Brothers he sent out to schools had the required teaching qualifications.

## **Conclusion**

The story of Marcellin’s efforts to obtain the recognition of both the Church and the State for his Institute is a fascinating one. Brother Jean-Baptiste Furet’s account is biased and tells only part of the full story. Marcellin’s letters, while vitally important as a source of information, were not written in a political vacuum; he was deeply affected by what was happening in the society and Church of his time. For an in-depth study of these issues, the Papers of Brother André Lanfrey need to be consulted. Without an awareness of the world in which Marcellin lived, it can be difficult to gain an understanding of the pressures he was up against.