

## 24. The young Montagne

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*Marcellin's own experience of quitting school at an early age because of an incompetent village teacher started him thinking of brothers while he was in the seminary. Religious brothers would be tremendously helpful in the apostolate. Barely three months after taking up his ministry as curate in August 1816, matters came to a head for him on October 28 in the sickness and death of the young man, Jean-Baptiste Montagne. Two months later, on January 2, 1817, the first two candidates presented themselves. The Institute had begun.*

He was summoned to a hamlet, one day, in order to hear a sick boy's confession. As usual, he set out at once. Before proceeding with the confession, he put a few questions to make sure that he was sufficiently instructed to receive the sacraments. To his great surprise, the child knew nothing about the principal mysteries and, in fact, didn't even know whether God existed. Greatly upset at finding a twelve-year-old in such ignorance, and fearing that he would die in such a state, he sat down beside him to teach him the mysteries and truths necessary for salvation. It took him two hours for the instruction and confession. It was extremely difficult to impart even the most fundamental truths to a child who was so sick that he scarcely grasped what was being said. Having heard his confession, and helped him make several acts of love of God and of contrition as preparation for death, the priest left him, to minister to a sick person in an adjoining house. As he was leaving that place, he asked after the sick youth, to be told by his tearful parents that he had died a moment after the priest's departure.

Then he felt an upsurge of joy at having been there so opportunely, but it was mingled with a shudder of dread at the danger run by the poor boy, whom he had perhaps just snatched from the gates of hell. He went home overwhelmed by those feelings and saying over and over to himself: "How many children are in the same predicament every day, exposed to the same dangers because they have no one to teach them the truths of faith".

Then he became obsessed, with overwhelming intensity, by the thought of founding a Society of Brothers to obviate such disasters through the Christian education of children. The result was that he went off to see John-Mary Granjon and tell him everything that he planned to do.

Life of Marcellin Champagnat, Bicentenary Ed., I, pp. 58-59

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The young Montagne has become the symbol of the target group of Champagnat's charism: a youth, from a quite poor, rural area, uneducated, ignorant of the basics of religion. This boy's image has remained with the Institute throughout its history. In our own day, in our discernment, we ask ourselves who and where are the Montagnes of today.

