

27. The Memorare in the snow

*urquoi
tre un
voya-
stable. Why was it that on this night of a snowstorm a farmer felt the need to pick up a lantern, and
maybe a warm cloak, and go outside? This night, a young couple named Donnet were to play host to
two travellers at death's door.*

In the month of February 1823, one of the Brothers of Bourg-Argental was seriously ill and Father Champagnat did not want his child to die without seeing him once more and giving him his blessing. The weather was bad and the ground covered with snow, but he was not deterred from making his way on foot to visit the patient, once he heard of his dangerous state. After consoling the Brother and blessing him, he made ready to return to La Valla, despite the efforts to dissuade him because of the great quantity of snow which had fallen that same day, and the blizzard that was still raging. However drawing on his courage, he chose to resist the pleading of the Brothers and the advice of his friends. He soon had reason to regret that choice.

With Brother Stanislaus at his side, he started for La Valla, across the mountains of Pilat; but they had walked for hardly two hours when they lost their way. As there was no trace of a path, they were forced to rely on luck or rather on the protection of God. A violent wind hurled the snow into their faces, making it so difficult to see that they didn't know whether they were going backwards or forwards. After wandering for a few hours, the Brother became so worn out that Father Champagnat had to take him by the arm to lead him and to help him keep his feet. It wasn't long, however, before he himself, benumbed with cold and smothered with snow, felt his strength failing and was obliged to stop. "My friend", he admitted to the Brother, "we are finished, if the Blessed Virgin doesn't come to our aid; let us have recourse to her and beg her to rescue us from the danger we are in of losing our lives in these woods and this snow". The words were scarcely out of his mouth when he felt the Brother slip from his grasp and fall exhausted to the ground. Full of confidence, he knelt down beside him, (now apparently unconscious), and said the Memorare with great fervor. After that prayer, he tried to raise the Brother again and to get him to walk. They had taken only a few steps, when they noticed a light shining in the distance; for it was night. They made in the direction of the light and arrived at a house, where they spent the night. They were both quite benumbed with cold, and the Brother especially was a long time recovering.

Father Champagnat declared, on several occasions, that if help had not arrived right then, they would both have perished and that the Blessed Virgin had snatched them from certain death.

Life of Marcellin Champagnat, Bicentenary Ed., II, pp. 343-344

*é de
en ce
signe* This emotionally charged event had a profound impact on Champagnat's personality and spirituality. He was in extreme danger; death seemed close at hand. How did he react at this 'moment of truth'? He turned to Mary. This prayer, the Memorare, at such a moment like this points to the inner unity of his life.

