Marcellin Champagnat was born at Le Rosey, a hamlet near St. Etienne in France, on 20th May, 1789. This was a fateful year because it was the year in which the French Revolution began. Marcellin grew up on a small farm where he lived with his parents, Mary and Jean Baptist, his 4 brothers, 4 sisters and aunt. As soon as he became of age he was sent to school. Both the methods of the teacher and the conduct of the pupils made a deep impression on Marcellin's mind. At the age of 14 he had no idea of becoming a priest. In fact he was already anxious to earn some money by raising lambs for the market. He had learnt the basics of farming, together with many other jobs it involves — carpentry, masonry, and so on.

Many priests were killed during the religious persecutions of the revolution. The Archbishop of Lyons was anxious to find more vocations. One day a priest from the Seminary was sent to Le Rosey. Having called on the Champagnat family he inquired if any of the boys were interested in the priesthood. Thinking about this invitation, Marcellin decided to accept it.

Marcellin had not had very much schooling and when he entered the Seminary he found the other students were far more advanced than he. To make matters worse, he was older than the others. Because of this he found the studies very difficult and made very slow progress. At the end of his first year he was asked to go home and think about his future. After talking to his family and praying about his difficulty, he decided to return to the Seminary and make a fresh start. The priests who ran the Seminary were very impressed with his new enthusiasm and dedication to study. Because of his reliable and responsible conduct he was placed in charge of the other boys in the dormitory. Since his bed was slightly separated from the others he was able, when all his class mates were asleep, to open his books and learn the following day's lessons. This enabled him to make progress by leaps and bounds.

Following his mother's example, Marcellin had a great devotion to Mary and he was delighted to find she had an honoured place in the Seminary.

Marcellin had a group of friends in the Seminary who shared similar ideals and goals in life. Their main idea was to found an Order of priests who were to devote themselves particularly to missionary work and to the education of youth. In Marcellin's mind, another idea was dawning: "It's not only an Order of priests we need, but also a group of Brothers, who can be devoted exclusively to the teaching of youth."

Marcellin was ordained on 22nd July, 1816, at the age of 27. His first appointment was to the parish of La Valla. He set out for his new home immediately. Having suddenly caught sight of the village clinging to the hillside, with its church spire pointing skywards, he knelt down on the bare ground and prayed that God would bless his future work.

Soon there was an eager group of children crowding to his catechism classes. Sometimes they even arrived before the church was opened. The grown-ups too flocked to the church every time he was to give a sermon. He was severe in denouncing scandalous conduct and his influence on the parishioners produced rapid improvement.

In spite of his many duties, Marcellin still believed in the idea of founding an Order of Brothers. Once when he was called to the bedside of a sick boy he found that he knew nothing about religion even though he was twelve years old. For two long hours Marcellin spoke to the boy about God and finished by hearing his confession. He was just in time as the boy died soon after. From then on he was more determined than ever to begin the Order of which he dreamed.

Having obtained two young men who volunteered to be the first Brothers, Marcellin bought a little house near his presbytery. It was in a poor condition but his carpentry and masonry skills enabled him to repair it. The two young men moved in on 2nd January, 1817. So the Marist Brothers' Order was born. In the small house the two lived as a family. They prayed, studied and worked together. Their work consisted in making iron nails to earn themselves a living. In the Spring they received a third companion and then a fourth, and soon the little community had increased to five members.
With the growth of the community, Father Champagnat thought it was time that it should have its own Superior. Brother John Granjon was duly elected by secret ballot. Champagnat then hired a school teacher who agreed to come and live with the Brothers and teach the children of La Valla. He also instructed the Brothers in the methods of teaching and soon they were able to give him a hand with the pupils. In a short time the Brothers were able to go out and teach in the villages around La Valla. They were well received by the parents who were delighted to see that someone was interested in their children.

An episode is often told to highlight Fr Champagnat's deep compassion and confidence in Mary. In February, 1823, a Brother became seriously ill in an isolated village. Marcellin was keen to comfort him, however, the weather was bad and the snow was falling heavily. Despite the poor conditions, he and one of the Brothers set out on foot across the mountains. They found the Brother in great pain, but at least on the road to recovery. They had to return home and Marcellin thought they would save time by going back over Mt. Pilat. The snow was still falling heavily as before and, after several hours of walking, they realised that they were lost. The Brother was soon exhausted and collapsed in the snow. It seemed that they would both perish. Marcellin comforted his companion and they both recited a prayer to Mary asking for help. They started walking again, and soon after saw a light coming from a nearby farmhouse. They were saved!

With the arrival of a new group of young men the house at La Valla became too small. A larger house would have to be built and Father Champagnat knew of the ideal place in a valley between La Valla and St. Chamond. As this project required a large amount of money Champagnat was forced to borrow some, as well as rely on local supporters who believed in what he was doing. The Brothers did the building themselves with Champagnat working by their side. It was a difficult task as they had to quarry out a whole solid rock face to make their bricks. Also, confident that the Brothers would grow, Champagnat designed a large building. In all, this venture proved to be a very onerous, and at times, dangerous task. However, after a year of hard work, the building, which became known as "Our Lady of the Hermitage" was completed and open for use. One remarkable thing is the fact that there was not a single accident during the whole time of construction. There were, however, several close calls.

Many people had looked upon Champagnat's foundation of the Brothers with scepticism. These attitudes became worse during the building of the Hermitage. He was laughed at and ridiculed by many people. One of these was the local Bishop who told Champagnat that he was a "madman" and that he would not support him. The fact that Champagnat's venture was so successful shows that these people were mistaken and lacked Champagnat's vision and faith.

During the following winter the Brothers' schools began to flourish in the district. However, in 1830, another Revolution broke out and everything came to a halt. Once more the country was shaken by disorder, riots and religious persecution. Troublemakers whispered that priests were hiding arms and ammunition. The rumours even said that a certain nobleman, and enemy of the state, was hiding at the Hermitage. One day a government official appeared on the scene to search the house. He was accompanied by a squad of soldiers. Father Champagnat calmly said he would show them over the house to see if guns were hidden there or not. The men quickly saw the rumours were false, and prepared to leave. But the priest insisted that they must be thoroughly convinced, and took them through the house from top to bottom. As one of the rooms was locked, and Father could not find the key, he sent for an axe and broke down the door.

In 1836 Father Champagnat went to Paris to have the Brothers' Order officially recognized by the French Government, but received no co-operation. Although discouraged, he did not give up and in 1838 tried again, however, the results were the same. Soon after this, his health deteriorated and he decided that a leader would have to be elected from among the Brothers. On 12th October, 1839 Brother Francois was elected the Brothers' first Superior General. Marcellin's health grew worse during the following winter. He began to have violent pains in his back and his legs became very swollen. On 11th May, 1849, feeling himself growing weaker he asked to receive the last rites. On 18th May, Father spoke his last words to the Brothers and during the following days his life ebbed slowly away. On the morning of 6th June, 1840, while the Brothers were singing the "Salve Regina" in the chapel, he died.