Appendix: Marist Iconography in Australia: 1872 - 2000

In the course of summing up the evolution of Marist Pedagogy in Australia over the past 125 years, I decided to investigate the development of Marist iconography over that same period, to see whether there were any parallels. At first glance, there were no obvious parallels. For the first hundred years, the representations of Fr Champagnat circulated in Australia remained staid, reverent and traditional, the only notable change being due to improvements in printing, from the monochrome engravings of the early images to the colour plates that became available from the 1950s onwards. The early circulation and regular re-issue of these images do, nevertheless, demonstrate that throughout their service in Australia, the Marist Brothers have always proclaimed their belief in, and loyalty to, the inspiration of their Founder. It was only in the aftermath of Vatican II that the iconography of the Founder really changed in style and this does parallel the re-visioning of the order’s work, both in Australia and internationally, which took place at that time. Similarly, the contemporary retreat of the brothers from their school apostolate and the transition of Fr Champagnat from a model teacher and catechist to a model of Catholic sanctity and commitment is reflected in the current trend towards representing the Founder in classical iconic imagery. For what it is worth, therefore, this brief sketch of Marist iconography in Australia has been included as an appendix.¹

One advantage of this iconographic approach to our subject, was to remind us, quite forcibly, that although he was born both well after the Reformation and grew up, after the French Revolution, Fr Champagnat lived and died in the pre-Modern, pre-Industrial Age. The schools he first founded, for instance, functioned for less than two thirds of the year, because the children were needed, at home, to assist in the agricultural and cottage industries, on which their livelihood depended. The Marist Founder never rode on a train, nor had his photograph taken, and it is entirely characteristic of the man, that he never took the time out to have his portrait painted, either.² It is also quite characteristic of the reverence in which he was held, by his followers, that on the day he died, they dressed his body in a soutane, surplice and stole, sat the body in a chair, and summoned a local artist, M. J. Ravery, to have his likeness taken. (Figure1). The resultant portrait is reproduced, in full colour, in the bicentenary edition of Br Jean Baptiste’s Life; but it was not reproduced in the original version of the Life, which was published in two volumes, but without any illustrations.

¹ The following outline of the development of Marist Iconography is partly based on an article in Marist Notebooks No. 6 1994, by Br Fernando Hinojal; partly on a bibliography of Champagnat biographies, also published in Marist Notebooks No. 4 1993. The stages in the development of the iconography in Br Fernando’s article are replaced here, though, by stages more suited to the Australian situation.
² In the last few years a photo of the Founder’s body, laid out for burial, has surfaced, which some brothers, including Br André Lanfrey, believe might just possibly be authentic. However it is so ‘early’ that, even if authentic, it does not contradict the point being made here about Fr Champagnat’s pre-modernity. Nor does it affect the outline of Marist iconography presented below, since the photo had no Marist circulation in either the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, least of all, in Australia.
in 1856. Although the early Superiors were satisfied with this image, it still strikes the contemporary viewer as, quite evidently, a ‘death mask’, the portrait of a dead man and of one who has died, moreover, of a wasting illness. The cheek bones are prominent, the lines around the mouth are deep, and the eyes are downcast, fixed on a pectoral cross, held in the subject’s right hand. Even in colour, the portrait is hardly appealing. In the black and white version, in which it was, eventually, most widely circulated, the portrait is even more daunting and austere. (Figure 2). It underlines the qualities of ‘recollection’, poverty, detachment and mortification which feature so strongly in Br Jean Baptiste’s, rather Jansenistic, account.

A shorter, ‘popular’ edition of the Life, intended for pupils and partially illustrated, was published, in Lyon, in 1885 and it does include a monochrome, gravure version of the ‘death mask’, as a frontispiece. (Figure 2). An English translation of the complete Life was also published by Burns, Oates and New York, in 1887, and it was this edition, two hundred copies of which, Br John Dullea imported for the Oceania Province that same year. This consignment was mainly intended for the education and edification of the young brothers, because Br John feared that wider circulation would draw too much attention to the Order’s French origins, in Irish Catholic Sydney. Besides, the Marist Founder had not yet been declared ‘Venerable’, thus wider dissemination of his image and biography would have been somewhat premature. This English edition is partially illustrated and contains the same monochrome, gravure version of the death mask, published in the pupils’ edition, as a frontispiece. This is the main, visual image of the Founder, with which the first two or three generations of Australian Marist Brothers would have grown up.

Sometime before the turn of the twentieth century, the first three-quarter life-sized statue of the Fr Champagnat was cast by Vermare and Sons, of Lyon, and erected, among other places, at Neuville College, in the French Marist Brothers’ Nord Province. It was a cast of this statue which was brought to Australia, by Br Stanislaus Healey, after the expulsion of the brothers from France in 1903. It was first erected, in Australia, at St Joseph’s College, Hunter’s Hill, by Br Clement Murray and, from that model, (Figure 3), identical copies were regularly reproduced and erected, in virtually every Australian Marist Brothers’ school, including St Patrick’s, through until the 1960s; thus making it the second-most widely circulated image of Fr Champagnat, in Australia, throughout that period. The face on this statue is generic, rather than a genuine portrait, but the pose is indicative: the Founder is standing upright, clad in soutane, clerical rabat, and full-length cloak: in his left hand he holds a closed book, facing outward, on which is inscribed the word Regulae: Rules. The ‘message’ is obvious: regularity, dedication, discipline, obedience.

By the time of the brothers’ expulsion from France, Fr Champagnat had been declared ‘Venerable’ in a Lyon diocesan process, but, as a precaution against invasion, confiscation and sacrilege, his remains were removed from the tomb, at the Hermitage,
and hidden in a private house near Les Maisonettes, an outlying hamlet of the La Valla parish. In 1920, the Vatican issued a formal proclamation on the ‘heroicity’ of Father Champagnat’s virtues, thereby officially confirming his ‘Venerable’ status, and his remains were, soon after, ceremonially returned to the Hermitage. The re-furbished tomb was embellished with an oval, half-length portrait of the Founder, based, probably, on the Ravery ‘death-mask’, but without the surplice and with his features rounded and restored to what they might have been, before the onset of consumption. (Figure 4). This image was apparently, quite widely circulated in France, in the form of prayer cards, distributed to benefactors and such; but it does not seem to have appeared in Australia, at least, until perhaps, the 1970s.6

Instead, the next Australian upsurge in Marist iconography was stimulated by the centenary of the Founder’s death, in 1940, and although this anniversary was certainly celebrated in Australia, the new examples of the iconography appear to have originated, mainly, in Europe. In the 1947, English edition of Br Jean Baptiste’s Life, for instance, there are several ‘new’ images of the Founder. Apart from the oval portrait, just mentioned, the two, most significant, images show Fr Champagnat in quite clearly didactic poses. The first, opposite the title page, shows the Founder kneeling and offering a bouquet of lilies to an apparition of the Virgin and Child. Wound through the bouquet is a ribbon on which are inscribed the words ‘Hidden Life … Education … Catechism … Vows.’ (Figure 5). The second, (Figure 6), shows the Founder, again, in soutane, rabat and cloak, in a classroom, surrounded by half a dozen primary-aged school boys. In his left hand, is another closed book, this one labeled Ave Maria, and with his right hand, he is pointing over his shoulder, to a statue of the Virgin and Child. Above his head, on the wall, hangs a large crucifix, flanked by two framed maxims: ‘Everything to Jesus, through Mary’ and ‘God sees Me’. Behind the Founder’s left shoulder, hangs a large rectangular map of the world. The ‘sub-text’ to all of this, hardly requires much elucidation. Apart from the universal spread of the Order, little had changed in its expression of piety, in one hundred years.

In the lead up to, and the aftermath of, Fr Champagnat’ beatification, in 1955, there was another, quite considerable, outburst of iconography. A new half-length portrait was commissioned, for the actual ceremony in Rome, which later received very wide, almost universal, circulation in Marist Australia. (Figure 8). The face, like the earlier statue’s, is bland and generic, with no noticeable similarities to the death-mask. The Founder’s hands are clasped at chest-height as though in prayer, and his head is surrounded by a halo. The same halo is everywhere, in the coloured illustrations, to a children’s Life of Bl. Marcellin, which, again, originated in Europe, at that time; but which was also widely disseminated in Australian Marist schools. (Figure 7). Contemporaneously, an almost life-sized, full-length portrait was commissioned in Australia. (Figure 9). It shows Fr Champagnat standing in full clerical garb and cloak, holding a large crucifix in his left hand, while his right hand rests on the shoulder of a young, teenage boy, who is reading an exercise book. In front, to the Founder’s left, an old man sits on a rock, telling his rosary beads, while behind him, two brothers, dressed in their habits, but with sleeves rolled up, are carrying large rocks, to build a dry-stone

6 Br Fernando Hinojal, op.cit. p. 12.
wall. To his right, the ground falls away steeply, to reveal an overview of La Valla, nestling on the other slope of the valley. The Founder’s face is thinner and sharper than that shown in the Roman portrait and there is no halo; but behind his right shoulder is an apparition of the Virgin and Child, surrounded by billowing clouds. This image did not receive such wide circulation in Australia, but the original canvas was placed in the Dundas scholasticate, adjacent to the foyer and to the main entrance of the chapel, and became familiar to the whole Dundas generation of scholastics.

After the beatification, internationally, a number of more substantial art works were commissioned: a new reliquary for Bl. Marcellin’s earthly remains was designed for the chapel at the Hermitage and decorated with an enamelwork portrait. A medium-sized free-standing chapel was built, with world-wide donations, next to the Champagnat farm house, in the hamlet of Le Rosey, on the outskirts of Marhles. It was architect-designed as a memorial to the Founder’s character and, besides the rough-hewn granite of the fabric, it was decorated with statues, carvings and stained glass which dramatise his vigour and the depth of his conviction. Soon afterwards, when the Marist General House was transferred from St Genis Laval, to Rome, in 1961, the main chapel in the new complex was decorated with ceramic reliefs of scenes from Fr Champagnat’s life. These post-beatification art works are usually quite consciously ‘modern’ or ‘contemporary’ in idiom, but the ‘image’ they project is quite traditional: Bl. Marcellin is represented as austere, industrious, zealous and his deep religious convictions find expression in the traditional outlets of nineteenth century French piety – devotion to Our Lady, ‘that Good Mother,’ and to Our Lord, ‘in the Crib, on the Cross and in the Tabernacle’.

Thus, for the entire century after the publication of Br John Baptiste’s *Life*, the Champagnat iconography which was circulated, throughout the Marist world, and particularly in Australia, was encapsulated in a nineteenth century mould. This, to be sure, was characteristic of the whole Catholic Church. From soon after the accession of Pius IX, through the First Vatican Council of 1870 and, especially, after the ‘Modernist Crisis’ of 1900-1910, official Catholic theology stood still. To the very minimal extent that he had been either theologically or ecclesiastically ‘political,’ Fr Champagnat could be regarded as an ‘Ultramontanist’ and, during his lifetime, that ‘wing’ of the French Church had been more liberal and progressive than the older ‘Gallican’ reactionaries, who had survived the Revolution; but he, himself, was never, ever, a radical. Moreover, after his death, the Ultramontanist party in France, as in Britain and elsewhere, grew steadily more conservative and, after the First Vatican Council, convinced themselves that the decree on Papal Infallibility had not gone far enough, in its rejection of liberalism and of the modern world.7 Fr Champagnat would certainly have supported this extension of the Pope’s authority, and he would, therefore, also have accepted the more moderate Pope Leo XIII’s 1879 imposition of Neo-Scholasticism as the philosophical basis for Catholic higher education - insofar as it had any bearing on his own, much more modest,

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educational aspirations. These developments, or rather, lack of development, explain the apparent time-lock on Marist iconography, because, as one commentator puts it:

The subjection of man to history is the insight which, more than any other, characterizes the modern age, (and) neo-Scholasticism with its concept of static truth, had no sympathy with, or understanding of, the category of history.

Vatican II’s exhortation to return to the charisms of the Founders, therefore, created an expectant audience for the modern critical-historical studies of Fr Champagnat such as those by Brs Pierre Zind, Alexandre Balko, Gabriel Michel, and, in Australia, in 1984, by Br Stephen Farrell. These studies retrieved, to some extent, a warmer, more human aspect to the Founder, than that which had dominated Br Jean-Baptiste’s Life and this new, more human, perception of Fr Champagnat soon found expression in a new wave of almost poster-art iconography. The bulk of this new material, or, at least the major part of what has circulated, most widely in Australia, was the work of a young Spanish artist, called Gregorio Domínguez, who was, for a few years, a member of the Marist Brothers. Painting under the name GOYO, he has produced a variety of Marist and Champagnat iconography ranging from portraits and posters through to comic-strips and wall friezes. His early work, especially, shows a strong affinity to those 1970s Californian portraits of Jesus, based on Chris Christopherson or Che Guevara. (Figure 10). Some older brothers, and the more serious students of the Founder’s life, found them altogether too ‘pretty’ and human: not sufficiently austere and uplifting. A contrasting series of monochrome, almost silhouette-style, portraits was therefore produced, to provide balance. (Figure 11). Nevertheless, it was GOYO’s imagery which circulated most widely in Australia: in 1989, when the two provinces celebrated the bi-centenary of the Founders birth; in 1997, when the 125th anniversary of the Australian foundation was commemorated; and even in the lead up to the canonization of St Marcellin, in 1999.

By 1999, however, popular Catholic iconography’s honeymoon with pop-poster art had faded considerably, as had the institutional Church’s enthusiasm for embracing popular culture and encouraging social activism. Poster art had never had things entirely its own way and, from at least the early 1980s, there was a move to retrieve and to popularise the tradition of ancient, Eastern Orthodox iconography. At first, inexpensive, but faithful, reproductions of well-known classics became popular. Then, iconographic treatments of more contemporary religious figures, such as Dorothy Day, of the Catholic Worker movement and Archbishop Oscar Romero, of El Salvador, began to circulate. In the 1998 Australian publication, In the Footsteps of Marcellin Champagnat, although a modified GOYO poster, (Figure 12), graces the book’s front cover, the first image that parallels the printed text is a small monochrome reproduction of an icon-style portrait of the Founder, which had been commissioned in Australia. (Figure 13). In the GOYO image, Fr Champagnat, in full mid-life vigour, smiles from the page, dressed in soutane and rabat, but with his hands on his hips, sleeves rolled up, ready for physical work and

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8 In Br Jean-Baptiste’s Life of Fr Champagnat, which was published fifteen years before the First Vatican Council, he has the Founder discouraging a young brother from advanced theological studies and also affirming his own personal belief in Papal Infallibility. Furet, op.cit. p. 354.

9 Dwyer, op.cit. p. 352.
inviting the beholder to join in. The super-imposed photographs suggest involvement in the running of schools and outreach to aboriginal children. In the icon-style image, by contrast, the golden halo and stylized outline of the folds in his cloak, frame and freeze the figure. The face is also stylized and almost as remote as in the ‘death-mask’. In the crook of his left arm the Founder holds a half-open book and in his right hand, a rolled-up scroll. A stylized version of the Hermitage and the hill-country round La Valla, form the backdrop. It is an invitation to veneration, contemplation and, perhaps, study; not to action, imitation or participation. After a century of virtual stasis, and twenty-five years of popular appeal, Marist iconography seemed to have come full circle. Internationally, led by Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger, and in the Sydney Archdiocese too, under the recently appointed Cardinal Pell, the Church was moving consciously, and fairly explicitly, away from the optimistic vision of the Second Vatican Council.\footnote{John Allen ‘The Counter-Revolution’. \textit{The Tablet}. 7. 12. 2002.} \footnote{See, for instance, Christopher Pearson’s account of Cardinal Pell’s speech to the \textit{Catalyst for Renewal} Forum in \textit{The Weekend Australian}. July 12-13, 2003.}