



Jean-Baptiste Berne Information Sheet

In 1820, the religious institute known as the Marist Brothers was but three years old. Their founder, St. Marcellin Champagnat, was busy with many things but he steered the young congregation through its early years. However, he was also a curate in a parish and responsible for the spiritual and material welfare of many people.

He was called one day to the bedside of a seriously ill woman to hear her confession. He found her in a destitute condition—even lacking any fuel for a fire. Marcellin consoled her whilst he heard her confession and asked her to place her trust in God. As well, knowing that this was not enough, he brought her all that would be necessary in the way of food, clothing and fuel. He procured a nurse for her and arranged a doctor for her. Sadly, she died soon afterwards.

Champagnat adopted the son she left behind, Jean-Baptiste Berne, aged 9, and bought him to live with the brothers. The boy had known little love and no control; he had formed bad habits that had started to ruin his character and to corrupt his natural innocence. He resisted the efforts of the brothers to care for him, returning their love, food, clothing and education with insults and ingratitude. He could not settle into a normal home or school routine and ran away several times, taking up the life of a vagrant. Each time the brothers searched him out and brought him back home. Some of them became discouraged and felt the boy to be a hopeless case, a waste of time and meagre resources. Most felt that Jean-Baptiste would be sent away before too long.

Not so Champagnat. He urged the brothers to be patient, to pray for the boy and to remember that he had nowhere else to go. To send him away was to send him to a life of poverty, crime and loneliness. Champagnat believed that the Lord had entrusted

the boy to him and to the Brothers, and he was to be treated as if he was their own child, “We have adopted this child, we have no right to abandon him, we must keep him and form him”.

With courage and perseverance, the efforts of the Brothers and Champagnat prevailed, and the boy was turned around. He settled down to a normal life and accepted the help, love and the kindness being offered him. In time, he asked to be admitted to the institute and Champagnat joyfully agreed. Jean-Baptiste Berne became “known in religion” as Brother Nilamon in 1825. Unfortunately he was to die at the tender age of 21 on the 10th of October 1830 in the arms of Champagnat, after thanking him for all that he had done.

