

LA VALLA, A HOUSE FULL OF RADIANT LIGHT

Architect - Province of L'Hermitage, Spain



1. DEVELOPING THE PRELIMINARY PROJECT

“IN YOU IS THE SOURCE OF LIFE,
BY YOUR LIGHT WE SEE THE LIGHT” (SAL 36,10)

It was December 2011. When the preliminary remodeling project of La Valla was already taking shape, I went to Avila for work reasons. This city is a small ‘Spanish Capital’, Saint Teresa’s hometown, and the place where Saint John of the Cross exerted his influence – the two great Carmelite mystics of the 16th century. One afternoon after work, I visited a newly-opened small museum that goes under the suggestive name of *Mysticism Interpretation Center*. The place just blew my mind, and the consequences of this visit have been far-reaching.

Suddenly, the remodeling project fell into place. I clearly envisioned the renovated La Valla House with its own identity as Marist *birthplace* and *spirituality interpretation center*. This broad and enriching spiritual vision was precisely the ‘structural link’ that would order and give deep meaning to the work.

How had I come this far? The architectural rehabilitation I had been entrusted with aimed at rendering the heritage of this *birthplace* visible and understandable, highlighting its structure and meaning. In my opinion, there were three important goals. First, to look at the past in order to restore its historical sense, the “Marist roots”. Second, to look at the present and upgrade the House, making it functional and comfort-

Panoramic view
of La Valla



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Joan Puig-Pey



able, suitable for welcoming people in a conviviality atmosphere. And third, as in the case of the Hermitage, rather than becoming a museum, it should be a place in which pilgrims could touch Champagnat's spirit, renew their Marist commitment, and refresh their confidence in the future. It was a matter of highlighting the place's "roots", but also its "wings".

*Renovation work of
La Valla – 2013*

2. CHAMPAGNAT HOUSE

**"AT LAST OUR FEET ARE STANDING
AT YOUR GATES, OH JERUSALEM!" (SAL 122,2)**

The municipality of La Valla-en-Gier is located in a beautiful mountain setting deep in the countryside, on the doorstep of the Pilat Natural Park. Champagnat House provides suitable spaces for contemplation, dialogue and celebration. When visitors arrive here after a long journey – sometimes starting thousands of miles away – they find a domestic-scale small building in which they hope to find a welcoming atmosphere and experience a spiritual encounter, a true "Visitation". The restored spaces and the objects on display had to be a mediation allowing them to discover Marcellin Champagnat and his first brothers, but also the spirit inspiring both them and his followers today, brothers and lay people.

Pilgrims nowadays – as citizens of the 21st century – are usually agitated and full of 'inner noise' when they arrive here.

Therefore, the House should gradually and gently lead them to the daily life experience of the 19th century. This is why pilgrims do not access the House directly from the main street, but must get there on foot, following the façade until they reach the big playground of the neighboring school, and finally head

*The "Maison Champagnat"
in La Valla*

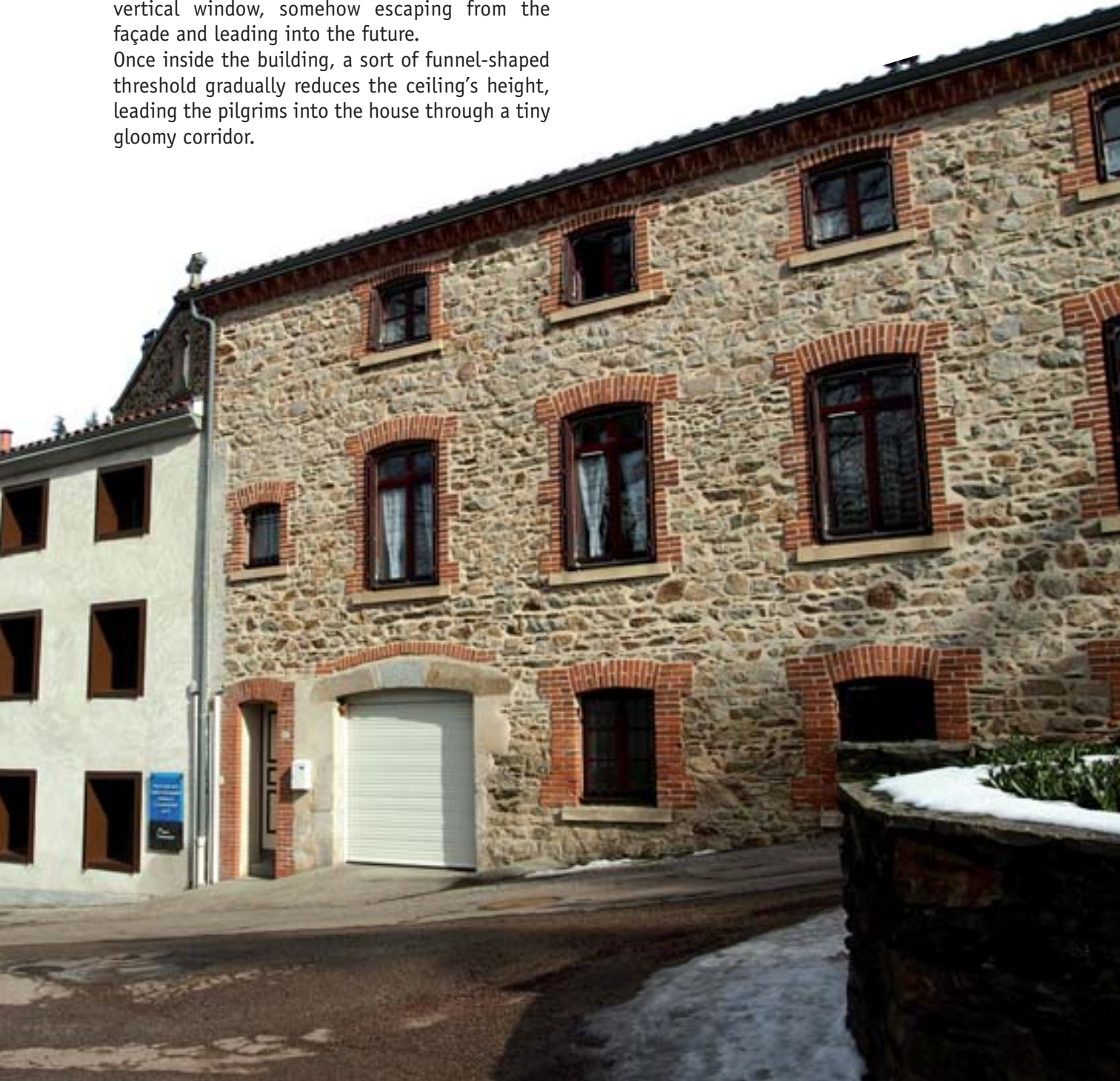


around the building to the door. It is a short itinerary allowing them to notice the passage of time just by looking at the façade and its different windows, which are an insignificant architectural element, and yet give witness to the building's history: wooden windows with small glasses in openings on the façade framed with carved natural stone, evoking the 19th century; iron-framed aluminum windows with a single glass, recalling modernity and the present; and, finally, a great vertical window, somehow escaping from the façade and leading into the future.

Once inside the building, a sort of funnel-shaped threshold gradually reduces the ceiling's height, leading the pilgrims into the house through a tiny gloomy corridor.

An image of Mary hidden in a niche appears unexpectedly, letting the pilgrims know they are entering a singular place.

The different interior spaces, the balanced combination of rustic and natural materials, the significant and evocative objects in specific positions, and finally, the contrast between modern and 19th-century architecture intimately move the visitors' heart and open their mind to this timeless encounter embracing past, present and future.



3. THE THREE FLOORS OF LA VALLA HOUSE

**“YOU MUST LOVE THE LORD YOUR God
with ALL YOUR HEART,
with ALL YOUR SOUL,
with ALL YOUR STRENGTH”**

(Dt 6:5)

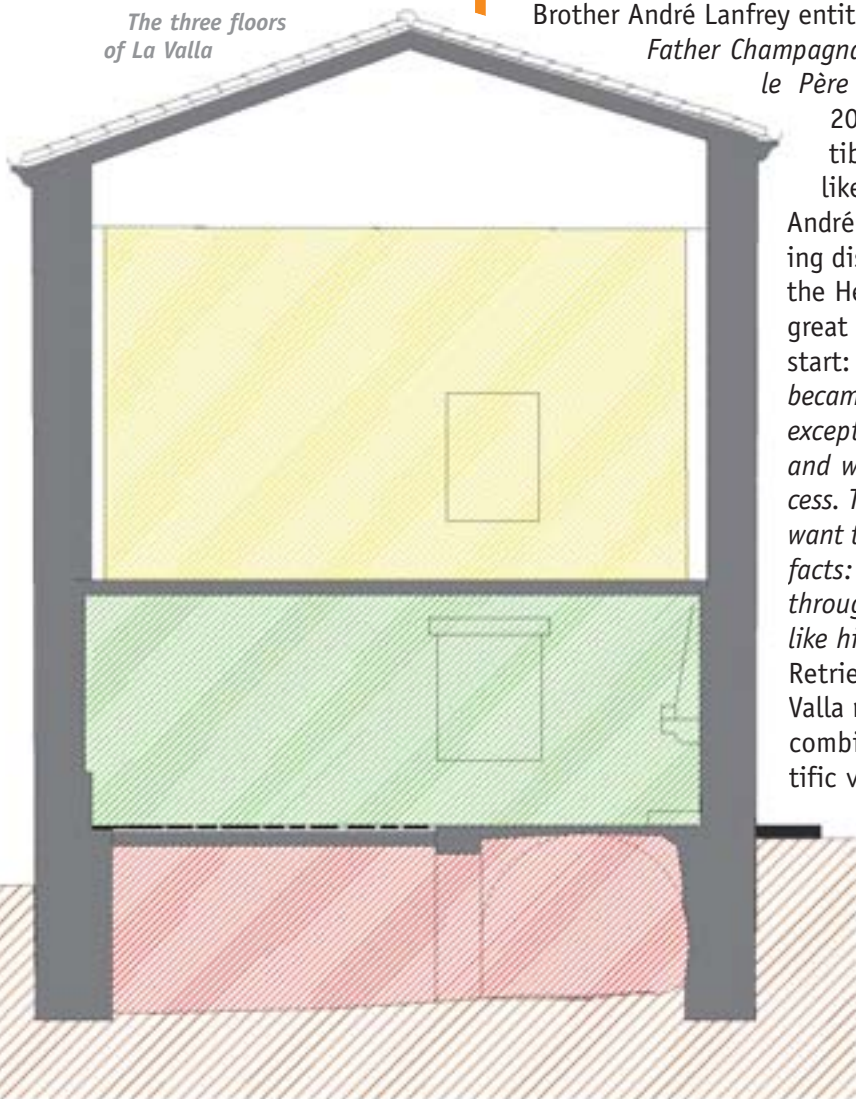
In the very first draft, I decided the building would have three main floors – basement, ground and first – that would be updated to meet European standards.

I was engaged in these thoughts when I received an article by Brother André Lanfrey entitled *Mysticism, Utopia and Institution in Father Champagnat (Mystique, utopie et institution chez le Père Champagnat)*, published in January 2011. Architecture creates an indestructible complicity between people, almost like music does.

André and I had held thorough and challenging discussions during the renovation work at the Hermitage. His article, which I read with great interest, captivated me right from the start: *“Marcellin Champagnat, son of a farmer, became a priest and a founder: this is quite an exceptional destiny that makes us look back and wonder what was the key to such a success. There are two ways to go astray when you want to present a scheme illustrating historical facts: you either try to explain everything through religion, or through human sciences like history, sociology, economy, etc.”*

Retrieving and conveying the ‘spirit’ of La Valla required a unifying narrative that could combine symbolic language with the scientific vision of human sciences. The fact that the little house Marcellin rented in 1817, in which he lived until 1824, belongs to the realm of *matter* and *physics*, and was built in a concrete time and space, falls under a scientific view that gathers information according to its own method: the house is an object you can touch and see, which you can smell – humidity,

The three floors of La Valla



old wood, flowers in the garden – whose noises you can listen to, and at a temperature you can measure and regulate. It is an aging object, which underwent a fire, was rebuilt and expanded. Using human sciences, we could study it under the light of history, geography and economy.

But we also needed a symbolic approach to “tell” the House subjectively through symbols and metaphors, poetry and art. How can we *touch* Marcellin when visiting *his* House, how can we *feel his spirit*? In the metaphysical realm, the measure of spacetime becomes relative, and we perceive what is absent through the mediation of what is present. This is how we could open our imagination to the 19th century, and perceive the first Brothers’ ‘apostolic breath’. Different texts were progressively complementing and enriching the remodeling project, enabling informed visitors to experience the encounter they expect.

In the same article, Lanfrey goes on saying that each person and every society somehow rest on three key anthropological notions, which are relevant in the analysis of both a secular destiny and a religious journey.

“First, mysticism indicates something that transcends us and lays outside ourselves, which can be secular – good, beauty, humanity – or have to do with divinity. Second, utopia is the project of renewing the world according to a peaceful and ideal scheme. And third, institutions, the bodies in charge of ensuring people’s common good in the future (state, Church, school, etc.), which use management as a valuable instrument”.

Lanfrey concludes his article by considering the three anthropological notions as *structural pillars*, and making a proposal that implies a wider mindset and greater freedom:

“Professional managers would consider Champagnat as a textbook example because somehow he was a good model of entrepreneur. In fact, his entire life shows he was able to combine – not perfectly but boldly enough – the three pillars on which every human creation rests, be it either a company, a Church, a nation or – more modestly – a Congregation:

The mystic pillar brings the kind of solidity that is founded on transcendence, and the ability to trans-



fer a profane thought to the sacred domain. It generates constancy and self-motivation. The utopic pillar is concerned about transforming the world, and is a source of inspiration and action. And the institutional pillar confronts mysticism and utopia with reality and time”.

The threefold scheme I had been working on improved thanks to this reflection, which gave rich symbolic meaning to each floor of the House. But what architectural language could I use to express it? At that point, I remembered the conversation I held in the summer of 2010 at the Hermitage with Augustin Hendlmeier, a German Brother from the Province of Central-West Europe.

Brother Augustin was silently watching the New Building as he stood on the small bridge across the Gier. He kindly greeted me when I walked by and asked me: “Are you the architect?” “Yes”, I replied. “I can tell you are an outstanding disciple of Mies van der Rohe, the German architect and father of the Modern Architectural Movement of the 20th cen-

ture!" I was very surprised and asked him: "And who are you?" "I'm Brother Augustin Hendlmeier", he said. When he explained to me that he lived in Dessau, the German city where this architectural style was born, I understood his remark. With the precision of an architecture critic, Augustin almost quoted the words I myself had used regarding the Hermitage, especially the New Building: "The New Style of modern architecture is characterized by its functionality, great clarity, the unity of its forms and, above all, its great simplicity. Looking at this new construction, I realize I'm witnessing the same style of the

Modern Architectural Movement that revolutionized Europe in the 20th century which, in my humble opinion, perfectly reflects Marist simplicity".

With contained emotion, he went on saying: "The harmony between the old and the new building is a real success. **We must see this as the sign of rebirth into a new dimension of Marist history deeply rooted in this place**, which also guarantees the continuity of our specific character and spirituality.

He ended up by expressing a deep desire: "Let us be inspired by Saint Marcellin's spirit, who would have certainly greeted with eagerness this new symbol of hope. Let us be inspired by the renewed spirit of the Hermitage!"

It was clear. Modernity had to preside over the restructuring of La Valla so as to face the challenges of the 21st century, using the same revolutionary language of the 20th-century pioneer architects who faced the challenge of breaking free from Art Nouveau and Neoclassicism.

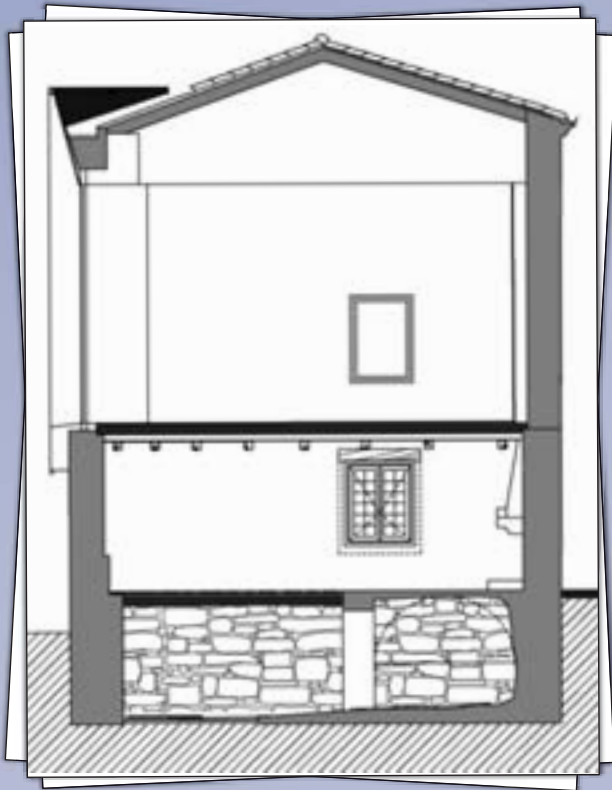
4. A TOUR INSIDE THE HOUSE

Despite its small size, several itineraries inside the renovated La Valla House are possible, depending on the order we follow when visiting the different floors. Each itinerary offers a singular experience to the Marist pilgrims.

In 2014, Brother Emili's traditional message on the feast of Saint Marcellin Champagnat explained the three years of preparation for the Institute's 200th Foundation Anniversary in 2017 through the use of images:

"To help us, three Marist icons will guide us on our journey.





First

The 'Montagne Year': we are invited to become Jesus for the Montagnes of today, to accompany them in their journey with tenderness and gentleness.

Second

The 'Fourvière Year': partners in mission, that is, gathered together around the figure of Jesus; on the one hand, without looking back, but at the same time, without separating ourselves from Jesus and simply going our own way.

And thirdly

The 'La Valla Year': an invitation to cultivate the mystical dimension of our lives, that personal encounter with Jesus, the Bread of Life, so that we can also give life in fullness to the people around us".



2. LA VALLA:

FIRST FLOOR OR UPPER ROOM. THE MISSION



JOAN PUIG-PEY,
ARCHITECT

PROVINCE L'HERMITAGE, SPAIN

“You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end” (ACTS 1:8)

We already mentioned the image of Mary in a hidden niche after the small corridor when we enter the House. At that point we find the door to a bright and spacious staircase leading to the *Upper Room*. This name evokes the

“space” in which the experience of the Pentecost took place, and clearly insinuates what can happen in this floor. It is a four-meter high and spacious contemporary-style room. Three of the walls face outside, and it has no decoration except for a small canvas on an easel that suggests a painting in progress. It portrays Marcellin next to a Brother, pointing at the Gier Valley with his arm, facing a horizon that is open to the future. The painting's message is enough to fill the entire room with meaning: “Set out!” The fact that the painting is unfinished indicates an ongoing message for our present time: “If you listen to him today, do not harden your hearts!”

Each architectural element in the room speaks about today. The windows on each of the outside-facing walls, for example, are like bridges between the inner and the outer worlds. Looking at them together, they form an abstract pattern, a unique geometry of holes. The one facing East is so high that it frames the sky. There is another same-sized and vertically aligned window underneath offering a horizontal sight towards Maisonnettes, the tiny village where Brother François was born. On the South wall, a same-sized and vertically-aligned window brings our attention to the neighboring school's courtyard, and also offers



LA VALLA: FIRST FLOOR OR UPPER ROOM. THE MISSION

Joan Puig-Pey



a glimpse in the distance of the valley in which Notre-Dame de l'Hermitage stands. Next to this window, we find the painting on an easel mentioned above.

Another window of unusual proportions surprises the visitor. A one-meter-wide, four-meter-high, and one-meter-deep window aperture on the façade faces La Valla, although you need to get very close to it if you want to see the town. The first thing you notice when you step forward is a huge France-Telecom antenna. Unheard of! We run into the 21st century being inside the house: instant online communication, Internet, Twitter and Facebook... The world of the future enters the House of La Valla to challenge us! The Upper Room, large, white and bright... is an empty space welcoming the present and the future. The tongues of fire of the Holy Spirit descend today under the form of bits and QR codes!

We are invited to become Jesus for the Montagnes of today, to accompany them in their journey with tenderness and gentleness, Emili tells us. Yes! This space invites us to “look beyond our noses”, to widen our inner space, to shed our light and lift our spirit so as to dream of a new world and discover a new utopia. We can do this thanks to Marcellin’s inspiring courage and abnegation, and following the first brothers, who set out in search of the most unexpected frontiers. The Upper Room of Champagnat House is a prophetic space speaking to brothers and lay people today. Are you also setting out...?

Given the domestic nature of the House, this space is unique because of its large proportions contrasting with the lower floors. At the same time, it is welcoming and unpretentious. With its delicate architectural structure and modern language, it confirms – without imposing it – our vocation to face the evangelical mission today by traveling light. The languages of fearless faith and innovative modern architecture meet at the Upper Room in a complementary way, allowing us to hear the revolutionary voice of the Spirit, who whispers to Marists and architects alike: *Come, open up, take a look...! Renew without fear!*

The Upper Room of La Valla confirms our faith with the fire of Pentecost, in the same way it confirms a unique way of being an architect for me:

giving witness to light, to new forms and colors, to a new sense of proportion and beauty at the service of people. Confirmed in my profession – the field in which I collaborate with Him, without ever ignoring my responsibility in the construction of the world He wants – I can make the arrival of His Kingdom possible. Pentecost confirms each brother and lay person in the Marist charism, and in their particular gift as architects of welcoming living spaces, in which the Montagnes of today can find the rest, conviviality and dialogue they yearn for, tasting the Marist family spirit, and celebrating the experience of His peace and love.





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2. LA VALLA: GROUND FLOOR: FRATERNITY

**“How good, how delightful it is to live
as brothers all together!”**

(Ps 133: 1)

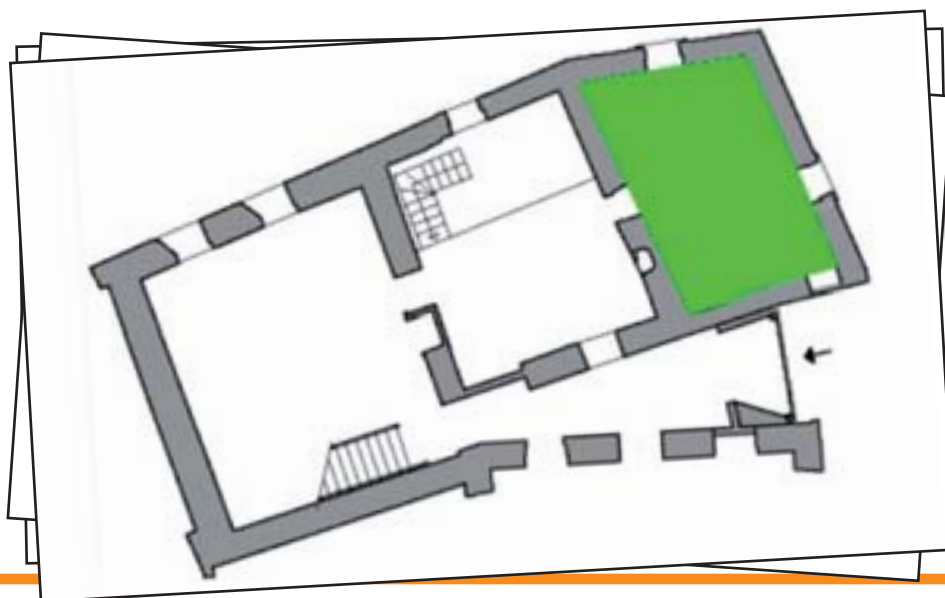
WE GO BACK TO THE GROUND FLOOR THROUGH THE LARGE STAIRWAY FILLED WITH LIGHT. IT IS THE MIDDLE FLOOR OF THE HOUSE AND HAS DIRECT ACCESS FROM THE OUTSIDE WITHOUT STEPS OR OTHER OBSTRUCTIONS.

Visitors arrive now at the geometric center of the House, and see in front of them the stairway leading to the basement, the old door on the right to the room where the famous table is, and another modern door on the left leading to the memorial room.

The ceiling is 2.6 meters high – a domestic proportion in contrast with the Upper Room – and rests on rustic wooden beams, which somehow match the gray polished concrete floor with wooden inlays nailed in as they used to do in those days. The walls made of natural stone combined with old lime plaster create a rough atmosphere with almost no decoration or any reference to the comfort we enjoy today. Only a Naïf-style painting next to the entry representing Marcellin’s encounter with the Montagne boy, and a large fresco evoking a scene from a 19th-century one-room school, indicate that the place dates from a different century.

WE GATHER AT THE TABLE AROUND JESUS

We enter the Champagnat Room through the old door and find the first brothers’ dining table within a setting that has kept the same materials Marcellin contemplated. It is a meeting point, a place for dialogue, where you recover strength and share with others. We gather at the table around Jesus!



Ground floor of La Valla. This floor corresponds to the intermediate level of the house, which is directly accessible from the outside.

Gathered together around the figure of Jesus, thousands of lay men and women around the world feel called to live the Gospel like Mary, according to the tradition of Father Champagnat and the first brothers (Emili Turú).

Our downward itinerary that began in the Upper Room reaches this intermediate point symbolizing Marist fraternity, and we clearly sense that it needs the support of a solid ground on which we can build the experience that makes people say “*see how they love one another*”. Contemplating the table of fraternity in its context, in this renewed space we can easily reach without obstacles, symbolizes that the *new* access to the experience of Marist fraternity is simple, spacious and resembling a family. This is what Brother Emily himself wrote in the document quoted above: *Our last General Chapter invited us to a new relationship between brothers and lay people, to better serve the inspiring mission entrusted to us by the Church.*

No mission is possible without COMMUNION

In fact, this new relationship is solid – *and serves better the inspiring mission* we confirmed in the Upper Room – when it rests on a fraternal experience. Within the House, the space for mission lies above the dining area where the table is, because no mission is possible without communion.

We easily understand the religious and symbolic meaning of the objects we see in this unobstructed space: an image of Mary, and a painting portraying the Montagne story, two signs indicating the essence and quality of fraternity, which is not self-

enclosed, but linked to other levels of experience – such as this floor is connected with the other two within the House.

THE TABLE OF A COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

The experience of fraternity around the table is not self-contained in the Champagnat Room: there are windows opening to the outside world. Fraternity is visible and expansive in any institution with a Christian ethos. As André Lanfrey states, within the *institution* – *understood as the body responsible for making the law and ensuring the common good for the future of the humble congregation – management appears as an element of great value*. Yes, management is essential in any structured body. If the middle floor were empty, the House would be a prodigy of mystical devotion and missionary activity, but would lack the *fraternal soul* that breathes and thrives on the contact and interaction around a family-size table, where management takes place quietly, mysticism and utopia face reality, and we ensure our common good. If the table was too big, it would give the impression that management prevails above all... It would be the table of a Council of Ministers!

Therefore, the symbolic and religious perspective allows us to see the institution as a body with a soul, as the body of Christ, the Church, in which we all drink the water flowing from the Lord himself, from the same Spirit, as we will see and explain afterwards in the basement.

The origins of the Society of Mary remind us that, as religious and laity, we come together for mission,

and are called to be the Marian face of the Church through our particular way of being and building Church, brother Emili tells us.

The fact that the Marist memorial room (with the Naïf paintings) and the image of *Notre-Dame de Pitié* are also on this floor is not only due to architectural and functional reasons but has a special meaning: the history of the Marist origins starting in La Valla entails the cooperation between all present and future members in order to reach the unity of a single human body, ensuring they all take care of each other and excluding division.

January 2, 1817, was a time of much effort, of growth and desertion, of new members, a difficult story that went on thanks to the Brothers' cooperation in unity, which generated a particular 'visage' and way of being. The architectural reform now allows us to understand better how La Valla House tells the story of a newborn community looking for an experience of fraternity and solidarity among its members in order to build the Church. For this reason, the table and the memorial room are on the same floor.

WHAT INSPIRED, CONSOLIDATED AND DROVE THE FIRST BROTHERS FORWARD?

And this brings us to a final question: *What inspired, consolidated and drove the first brothers forward?* We can answer without a doubt that it was the experience of fraternal communion, which ignited their souls and hearts, and led them out of La Valla to explore new horizons. The fact of finding the image of Our Lady of Sorrows (*Notre-Dame de Pitié*) in the same space as the table reminds us that the road is hard, that moving forward is often painful, and it helps us understand better this first chapter of our Marist story.



On the left of the table of La Valla, before its renovation and on the right, after.



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2. LA VALLA: THE BASEMENT. Mysticism

**“Seek out the Lord while he is still to be found,
call to him while he is still near.” (Is 55:6)**

MYSTICISM IS A REFERENCE TO TRANSCENDENCE LAYING OUTSIDE ONESELF, WHETHER OF SECULAR NATURE – GOOD, BEAUTY, HUMANITY – OR CONCERNING DIVINITY.

The lower level of Champagnat House is a basement mostly excavated from the rock. The restoration has cleaned it up, respecting its original size, and leaving it almost intact: visible carved

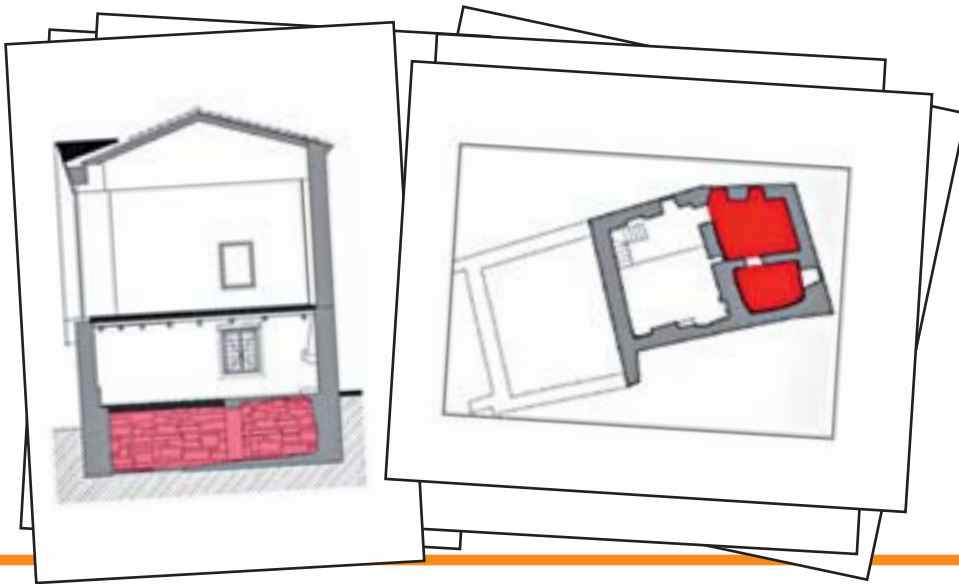
rock, rough stone masonry, and lintels with old wood remains. There are few decorative objects: the huge stone on which the first brothers used to forge nails, and a cross in the most intimate area of the small vaulted cellar... The basement has three consecutive small and dark rooms, with an intermittent water spring. A ten-step metal staircase descends into it from the ground floor.

We can perfectly read the story of the Foundation's early days in 1817 in this space: a typical 19th-century farmhouse construction, forging nails as part of a precarious economy, cold and damp winters, and a hard life without the convenience and comfort to which we are used today.

This space allows a powerful symbolic reading: going down into the basement, into the hidden cellar within the house, evokes the 'descent' into the space of mystical experience. There is an inscription evoking Saint John of the Cross presiding over the entrance to a very similar cellar in the Barefoot Carmelite convent of Fuenciscla in Spain:

*“Lead us to the inner cellar,
where life is in God transformed,
where faith becomes bright and quiet,
where death becomes life renewed”.*





*The basement floor
of La Valla*

It is the innermost dwelling, the kingdom of silence and contemplative prayer, without fanfare, often in darkness. Ten steps lead down to this intimate space. Ten, a number symbolizing completeness in the Scriptures: ten commandments of the law; ten lepers healed by Jesus; ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom; ten silver coins belonging to the woman in Luke's parable... Ten steps leading within ourselves and symbolizing a path to fulfilment.

The renewed La Valla House makes us realize without effort that both the consistency of our fraternity and the purpose of our apostolic mission are based on the mystical experience of unity with Jesus in the depths of our heart.

The staircase going down to the cellar is made of the same metal that covers certain walls of the Hermitage and the walkway over the Gier River. This fact connects La Valla to the Hermitage, and also means that the path into the depths of our heart requires solidity and strength, the same attitudes we need to go up from the old 19th-century building in the Hermitage to the new construction symbolizing the 21st century.

The cellar also evokes the fact that wine needs a concrete amount of time to mature. We cannot stay forever in the intimate cellar, in this dark, moist and silent setting! When life is transformed, when faith becomes bright and quiet, we must go back upstairs to the fraternal room, and then set out to the world, letting people 'drink from us' as witnesses to life renewed.

In addition, there is an intermittent water spring in the basement that flows only in the rainy season. This would be a big drawback in an ordinary house. In La Valla, however, it is rather powerful symbol: "From their heart shall flow streams of living water" – the gospel of John tells us. "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me! Let anyone who believes in me come and drink!" – Jesus himself proclaims.

In a word, the La Valla basement states that a solid and full mystical experience is essential for a complete Marist spiritual life. The 'cellar experience' within ourselves sets the necessary foundations, and opens an inexhaustible source of energy; it keeps our soul 'fit', and prepares us to begin each day 'in good shape'.

André Lanfrey tells us in his article:

Mysticism brings a kind of solidity that is founded on transcendence, and the ability to transfer a profane thought to the sacred domain. It generates constancy and self-motivation. But it can be reduced to esotericism and/or forgetfulness of the real world.

LA VALLA: THE BASEMENT. MYSTICISM

Joan Puig-Pey



In order to avoid these two dangers – esotericism and alienation – we must return to the ground floor and confront the mystical experience with the reality of our time, reading our life under a social perspective. We must climb up the ten steps, coming together again around the table, rediscovering that the Marists, brothers and laity, are united in the same life flowing from Christ, in which there is no room for anything esoteric or alienating.

In this foundational place, Marcellin gathered his brothers around the table and mystically made them become his own body, bestowing his spirit on them, a spirit we can still perceive in La Valla today.

We find the cross of Jesus in the intimacy and darkness of the La Valla House basement. The icon that pilgrims and visitors find at the end of their descending itinerary lights up the journey to the center of their hearts. The cross invites us to worship and contemplate, and to take it up in the following of Jesus. The silent and dark cellar transfigures the darkness of death into radiant light.

In the renovated La Valla House, spirituality – people’s natural disposition to delve into, share and develop the characteristics of their spirit – finds an architectural, symbolic and religious expression that defines it without using many words.

La Valla is bonfire, a powerful beacon of light for today’s world.

Personally, the task and mission of renovating La Valla House has been a kind of ‘cherry on the cake’ regarding my professional experience in the Marist world, a journey that somehow began in 1988 when I registered my first daughter at *Immaculate Conception Marist School* in Barcelona. My son Pau – with whom I have shared great and unique experiences of visual creation – was born that same year. Twenty-seven years later, we both have reached the maximum and radiant level of satisfaction in La Valla.

**“I have received
in abundance, and
in abundance I give”**

*Le Corbusier,
architect 1887-1965*