

CHAMINADE'S MISSION: MULTIPLY CHRISTIANS

Homily by Fr. Joseph Stefanelli, S.M.,
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The mentions of Abraham and David in the
Opening refer to the Scripture readings of the day:
Hebrews 6:10-20 and Mark 2:23-28.

In our first reading we remember Abraham, who waited patiently and labored perseveringly for the fulfillment of God's promise. And in the gospel, Jesus himself tells of how David stepped outside the traditional structure of his society to adapt to new circumstances. Both these positions are certainly reflected in the life of Father Chaminade: a patient and persevering living out of his call to multiply Christians, and his ability to adapt and re-orient his life in response to the many changes of his world. Let us reflect briefly on his long life, characterized, as it was, by repeated reverses and renewed initiatives. Through it all we find the same purpose, the same goal, the same intent: to multiply Christians under the leadership of Mary, who first presented Christ to our world.

We begin at Périgueux, where he is introduced to the Mother of Jesus by his own devout mother. At the age of ten he goes to Mussidan where he will be pupil, teacher, administrator, business manager, priest. The Chaminade family -- Joseph, his two priest brothers, his sister, his parents -- will all live there. They invest all their time and effort and funds into changing a small, isolated, country school into an enlarged, improved, and highly-respected institute attracting boarding students from other areas of France. They intend to make of it a center of Christian radiation, where even the pupils become little missionaries to their families and neighborhoods. This is his dream for the future. But, after twenty years, the Great Revolution destroys the dream; it also soon leaves the Chaminade family jobless, homeless and penniless.

They all move to Bordeaux, where he borrows money to purchase a property. There he becomes a trusted and enterprising member of the local clandestine Church, carrying out his priestly ministry and serving as business manager for the clergy, most of whom are also homeless and penniless. A future archbishop, tracing back the origins of the multiple works of his diocese, will find the name of

Chaminade at the head of all of them. But then comes exile, to which he must adapt. While in Spain he makes plans to regenerate Christianity in France, for he knows that the present upheavals cannot last.

In 1800 he is able to return to France where he develops energetic groups of the laity, men and women, to live and spread the Christian faith, to multiply Christians. But that work, too, is snuffed out and, like the clergy and religious of the Revolution, it is now the turn of the laity to operate underground. Under his leadership, they do -- with amazing success and perseverance and expansion.

Out of that work, at the age of 55, he draws two religious orders. Originally intended for the guidance and maintenance of sodalities, they develop apostolic centers based on schools. By 1830 he is ready, in collaboration with the government, to launch a nation-wide teacher-training program, only to undergo another political reversal which drives religious out of all higher education.

The highlight of his long life comes in 1839. His foundations have been recognized by both state and church, and his constitutions for the religious groups have been received and praised by the Pope. He is exhorted to develop their spirit in all his disciples. Barely two years later comes the great crisis of 1841, when he is 80 years of age. He continues for almost ten more years to carry out what he thinks is his mission, undaunted by opposition, misunderstanding, criticism, and illness.

Throughout his life of plans, frustrations, hopes and disappointments he has been at peace with his God, with the beloved Mother of Jesus, with his soul. His dispositions are perhaps best summarized in his letter to an unsympathetic archbishop on receipt of the Roman document validating the election of his successor: "I accept this Decree from the sacred and most venerable Congregation with the same docility with which I would receive an order from Jesus Christ himself."

What was it that sustained this man during all these ups and downs, all these successes and tragic failures, all these dreams and disappointments? I believe there were two special insights. Like Abraham, he firmly believed that God would keep his promise, that "she shall crush Satan's head." His vocation, he was convinced, was to follow Mary's lead in bringing Christ into the world. His correspondence is replete with this idea which he seeks to communicate to his disciples. Like David, he firmly believed that God would provide the means to carry out his mission, that for those who love God, all things, both the ups and the downs, truly though mysteriously, work together unto good. He lived constantly in the presence of God,

convinced that the creator would surely achieve the purpose of his creation, however distant it might seem to be to us.

As we recall his memory today, let us hope that we, too, may share in those dispositions: Deus providebit; Maria duce: God is in charge; Mary will lead us.