

In this month's issue we look upon one of the Foundresses of the Marianist Family, Thérèse de Lamourous. She was one of the first and a chief collaborator with Blessed Fr. Chaminade in the founding of the Sodality of Bordeaux and the Daughters of Mary. The following are some notes gathered from the *Positio* on her virtues by the Historical Office of the the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome in 1978.



Thérèse's life is divided into three periods:

1. From birth to the religious persecutions in France arising from the application of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. (1754-1791)
2. The years of persecution (1791-1800)
3. Her life and activity after the persecution (1801-1836)

Thérèse died when she was 82.

Thérèse's Childhood and Youth (1754 – 1791)

The Servant of God was born November 1, 1754 and received Baptism in her parish Church on November 4, being named Marie Thérèse Charlotte. She was the oldest daughter of Louis Marc Antoine de Lamourous and of Elizabeth Vincens, nobles, who lived in a rural area, Le Mayne at Barsac in the Gironde.

The family atmosphere was decidedly Christian. Her father had three aunts in religion. Her mother who was orphaned when she was quite young had been raised with the Ursulines of Bordeaux and had been with them until she married Louis. Her mother wished to pass on to her daughter the solid and complete education that she had received herself. She was successful in this, despite the work and cares involved in taking care of ten other children, five of whom would die prematurely. At school Thérèse opened herself to piety, simplicity, to helping others, to the love of God and of neighbor, as much as she could. The family resources were modest. When her father closed the eyes of his parents and had them buried at Barsac, he decided to move to Bordeaux to assure a better formation for his children. At Bordeaux, probably May 28, 1767, Ascension Thursday, Thérèse made her first Communion in the Church of St. Pierre.

From then on, guided by holy priests, such as Fr. Norbert, a discalced Carmelite, Fr. Seraphin Odoloron, a Capuchin, Fr. Francois Vigier, a secularized Jesuit, and Fr. Noel LaCroix, Thérèse assiduously received the sacraments and developed her interior life. Her mother continued to help Thérèse to develop her mind, and as the daughter related with some choice friends, she developed that ease of manner which really helped her in her future work.

Thérèse was inclined very much to the life of Carmel, but her spiritual director did not approve of this, perhaps because of her precarious health. Thérèse never considered marriage. In his funeral eulogy, Fr. Barres would say: "*Her name was at the head of all the good works of the city*".

In 1784, one of her sisters, Marie Thérèse Elizabeth, married Joseph Frix de Labordere, a lawyer for the parliament of Navarre. In the same year her brother, Jean Armand, left a career in the army to settle in Santo Domingo. A year later Thérèse lost her mother and found herself alone with a sexagenarian father and two much younger sisters.

The Years of Religious Persecution (1791-1800)

Thérèse's conduct during the terrible years of the persecution was such that, when peace returned, three eminent prelates – Msgr. D'Aviau (1802-1826), Cardinal J.L. Lefebvre de Cheverus (1826-1836), and Cardinal Donnet (1836-1882), expressed the gratitude of the diocese in her regard.

From the inception of the debates on the lawfulness of the oath regarding the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, she placed herself on the side of the refractory clergy and took up their cause in promoting their catechism¹. In 1793, when the hunt began for the priests and faithful who had not taken the oath, she put her life on the line and offered all her resources to Fr. Joseph Boyer, administrator of the diocese. She was available for any mission he would give her. Courageously and cleverly, she bribed officials to obtain useful information regarding proposed arrests, thus saving many lives from the guillotine. Several hours before Fr. Pannetier appeared before the military commission which would condemn him, she succeeded in penetrating the prison. When she left him, after having received his final recommendations and blessing, the religious said to her: "*Remember to serve God in man*".

As most members of noble families, she also had been constrained in 1794 to leave her home in Bordeaux and to retire to the country, to Pian-Medoc, on a property that came from her mother's family. She remained there until 1800, living in poverty and suffering physically and morally, exercising in an extraordinary manner a great influence on the population. She didn't hesitate to return from time to time to Bordeaux, undoubtedly to remain in contact with Fr. Boyer. However, it was especially at Pian-Medoc that she acted. Thanks to her the faithful once again returned to the parish Church. In the absence of any priests she gathered the parishioners together for prayer, for the instruction of youth, to assist the dying and to comfort the sick. She made herself all to all to maintain the faith while waiting for better days. Such her activity, such her popularity, that in 1795 she was able to bury her father from the parish Church and have those sent from Bordeaux to arrest her, themselves refuse to carry out their mandate.

Her zeal put her in relationship with Fr. William Joseph Chaminade. When he was inscribed mistakenly on the list of emigré priests and had to seek refuge in Spain, she began a correspondence with him that nourished within her sentiments of humility, abnegation, sacrifice and immolation in reparation for the sins committed in those violent and chaotic times. In 1796-97, in agreement with her director, she offered herself to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary as an expiatory victim. Since then, and despite any resistance and weakness of nature, she applied herself to live out this offering.

¹ There is some belief that Fr. Chaminade wrote a tract against this oath. If so, perhaps it was this that Thérèse helped promulgate.

The Years Consecrated to the Misericorde (1801-1836)

With the establishment of the consular government in Paris, Fr. Chaminade's return to France, and the opening of negotiations between Rome and France for the return to religious peace, Mlle de Lamourous's life enters into another period, that which will be far more important in the eyes of her contemporaries and will form her character to a greatness that she would never have thought herself.

In July 1801, one of her friends, Mlle. Germaine de Pichon de Longueville, had helped an unfortunate prostitute by obtaining a place for her to live as the girl tried to redirect her life in an honorable and Christian manner. The poor girl knew many others who desired the same thing. Mlle Pichon offered them shelter by renting a house for them. She understood very quickly that her charity would be vain unless someone with a good reputation would come to live with them. It would be like a sheep coming back to the sheepfold without a shepherd.

Mlle Pichon's own health did not permit her to take on this task of devotedness herself. She thought of Mlle de Lanourous and consulted Fr. Chaminade on this point. At first Fr. Chaminade was negative, but later encouraged her to follow her idea. Meanwhile the Servant of God had expected something like this. Had she not offered herself totally to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary as a victim for the conversion of sinners? Thérèse reflected, prayed, sought counsel and one day came to the house opened by her friend with the intention of never separating herself from these poor women whom grace had placed on the road to salvation. She was to pass 36 years with them and there would be close to 300 when she left this world to enter eternity.

Beginnings are difficult. Thérèse was not discouraged and never looked back, sustained by her faith in Him who said: "*Seek first the Kingdom of God and His justice and the rest will be given to you in abundance*". She surmounted all the obstacles, organized, gained the confidence of the clergy and civil authorities, rallied public opinion, procured work for the penitents and helped them to find in their work, in their silence, in their prayer and in their joy, that pride which brings a sense of honor and peace before God and in the esteem of others.

For many years, Mlle de Lamourous never dreamed of forming any kind of association. She thought to live in the house with the help of one or two persons whom her zeal might attract and with occasional help from some of her nieces whose education she was supervising. In 1807 she bought the major part of the old convent of the Annunciades, which had been put up for sale. The following year, Napoleon I, passing through Bordeaux on his way to the Spanish frontier and hearing of her devotedness and the success of the Servant of God, ordered that the building, which she had acquired from the State, be given to her gratuitously and that a generous amount of money be given also for the renovation of the building.

Though Thérèse had spent all her time and resources for the penitents, she was able to take care also of the children of her 3 widowed sisters. She also helped Fr. Chaminade develop the Marian Sodality which he had organized for the Christian formation of Bordeaux's youth. Nevertheless, as the number of penitents increased from year to year, she concentrated more and more on the Misericorde. In 1813, entrusting the direction of the Misericorde to her oldest niece, whom she sustained and guided by an assiduous correspondence, Thérèse went to Paris to defend

the interests of Mercy House. During four months she went from place to place, office to office, not being daunted by any obstacle, in order to assure her daughters the basic means of existence.

To the extent and measure that the number of penitents and sincere conversions increased, she understood more clearly that in a city like Bordeaux there was a permanent need for a house like the Misericorde. To insure its permanence there was no better way than to gather a group of sisters, specialized in this apostolic work. The idea matured little by little. In her return from Paris, having consulted many persons and having prayed, she wrote up the basic statutes of the Misericorde which Msgr. D'Aviau revised and approved on Sept. 18, 1813.

After the events of 1814-1815, the fall of the Empire, the 100 days, the second restoration, the Servant of God participated in the foundation of the Daughters of Mary at the request of Fr. Chaminade. This was the last time she was away from the Misericorde for any length of time. In 1818 she opened her house as a novitiate. Her continued success led many others to ask her help in founding similar houses in their cities. She never had the intention of founding a religious congregation in which she would be superior general. Her age and her health on the one hand, demanded prudence. On the other hand, she thought that each city should develop its own House of Mercy, conducted by persons who knew well the characteristics and particularities of their own locale. She was always willing, at any time, to receive at Bordeaux those who wished to study her methods, however. She was disposed to help all founding efforts, but she didn't believe herself called to initiate and to assume the responsibilities other than what was connected with the Mercy House of Bordeaux.

What happens regarding Laval only confirms Thérèse in her views. On the recommendation of the Jesuit Superior at Laval, Mlle de Lamourous receives a young Lavalloise, (Mlle Rondeau), who wishes to start a similar foundation there like in Bordeaux. Mlle Rondeau passes three months at the Misericorde and so appreciates Mlle de Lamourous that she wants to become one of her spiritual daughters and to depend completely on her guidance.

Through her entreaties a compromise takes place. She will be admitted to the novitiate and it will be as a novice of Bordeaux that she starts the Misericorde at Laval. By correspondence, Mlle de Lamourous will remain in close contact with her, guiding her and assisting her all the more. When the house at Laval is well-established and able to function without her presence, Mlle Rondeau will return to Bordeaux to study more profoundly the Rules of the sisters and, if she still desires to remain in this work, will make profession according to the Constitutions of Bordeaux. Eventually the house at Laval will become a daughter of Bordeaux.

The foundation at Laval took place in October, 1818. In July, 1820 in order to further develop and consolidate the results obtained by Mlle Rondeaux, her novice, Mlle de Lamourous consented to send temporarily her niece, Laure de Labordere, in religion, Sr. St. Jean-de-Dieu, with her best supervisor.

She could not have done better. Soon stricken with a critical illness, Mlle de Lamourous had to recall her niece and the supervisor in Oct. 1821. Further, although at Bordeaux the Archbishop and civil authorities allowed her complete latitude in her efforts before fixing the

statutes and rules of her Institute, at Laval the municipal council, public opinion and certain advisers of Mlle Rondeau were amazed to see delayed a definitive organization.

Under these conditions, was it not wiser for Thérèse, forgetting herself, to allow each house to follow its own way and to assume its own responsibilities, all the while living a common spirit? Mlle de Lamourous believed much more easily at that time that there would be no authority of a Superior General over houses situated in different dioceses without raising, here and there, delicate problems, truly harmful conflicts, as we can see in the life of St. Jean-Antide Thouret or in that of Blessed Ann-Marie Javouhey. This decision did not lessen in any way Mlle de Lamourous' interest in the work at Laval, which she maintained until her death, nor in the filial affection that Mlle Rondeau had for the Servant of God. The pieces gathered on this subject in this *Positio* testify to this abundantly.

Mlle de Lamourous lived another fifteen years after she had recalled Sr. St.-Jean-de-Dieu. During this time she made copious notes regarding the Constitution of the Misericorde. She always maintains control over the direction of Mercy House and develops the Misericorde by restoring the ancient chapel of the Annunciades to free those places, up to now off limits, for use in public worship. She keeps in close touch with her penitents and applies herself to form Sr.-St.-Jean-de-Dieu to be her successor. She also has the joy of seeing Mlle Rondeau come to find near her the full use of her strength and her faculties. As previously, she exercises a happy influence on those who come to seek her counsel and comfort. Above all, Thérèse suffers and this prolonged suffering during fifteen years, with few periods of respite, then without interruption, both physical and moral, aridities suffered with patience, with faith and submission to the will of God, is not the least amazing or the least beautiful aspect of this life vowed to the divine glory and so well fulfilled.

At the beginning of September 1836, Mlle de Lamourous receives the Anointing of the Sick. The following days she receives Holy Communion as Viaticum frequently, and on the 14th, around 6:00 p.m., she gently expires.

On Friday, the 16th, without respecting her express desire to have a simple and discrete burial, as she had decided for every superior of the Misericorde, Bordeaux gave her an exceptional funeral, presided over by the Vicar Capitular of the diocese, *sede vacante*.