On the Beatification of Father Chaminade

One of the great gifts that Blessed William Joseph Chaminade gave to the Society of Mary, and in turn, the Church, has been the mixed composition of the Three Categories (priests, teaching brothers, and working brothers living together in the service of Jesus and Mary). This facet of the Society of Mary is a core element, one that dates back to its very foundation. And it was affirmed in it first Constitutions, that of 1839.

"God has deigned to inspire an association, composed of all talents and all states, priests, and laymen, whose principal object is to form the children and young of every class; this association is the Society of Mary."

This focus on an inclusivity of “all talents and all states” also is seen in the Founder’s apostolic work with sodalities. His intent on a Family Spirit, a place where lay and religious are allied in the service of building God’s Kingdom, lives on in us today. But this modality of inclusivity—brother-priest and religious lay—is a value that many people find hard to embrace.

In working for three years with diocesan seminarians at Catholic University recently, this became very apparent to me. I am also reminded of this by an experience I had a few years ago when my brother, a Pittsburgh diocesan priest, and I visited a sick, elderly gentleman we knew. As we were leaving, he very respectfully said goodbye, but then he turned to me, pointed his finger for emphasis, and said, “See, if you had studied hard enough, you could have been a priest, too.”

By declaring him “blessed,” the Roman Catholic Church has affirmed our Founder’s vision of Church and community, and it has shown him to be model of Christian holiness. The September 3, 2000, beatification has again acknowledged that our Marianist charism is a gift to the Church. While it is important to celebrate this momentous occasion, let’s back up a little and see how the process for beatification began and how it came to fruition. We must not forget the sweat, toil, or the literal or figurative miracle involved in “making saints.”

Historical Sketch of the Beatification

William Joseph Chaminade died on January 22, 1850, and was buried in the Carthusian cemetery in Bordeaux, France, the center of his apostolic activity. In 1871 his remains were removed from the priest’s vault and taken to a large square plot where a
monument was erected to his memory. Father John Lalanne said, “We were witnesses during our younger days of his life and words. We affirm that we never saw him spend a day, not even a single hour at anything which did not relate directly to God and to the welfare of souls.”

Before long, people began to come to his tomb. Some of them remember him as a saintly old priest. Others knew only that a holy man was buried there. The cause for his beatification was opened in 1909 in that same city, Bordeaux. The cause was then introduced in Rome in 1918, and Pope Paul VI proclaimed in 1973 that Father Chaminade had practiced virtue in a heroic degree, which gave our Founder the title “venerable.” Twenty-seven years later, ninety-one since his cause was first started, he has been beatified.

Beatification is the highest honor, under that of sainthood, which the Church bestows on one of its departed members who it judges has practiced the virtues of the gospel in a heroic way, either with the reputation through a lifetime of living out the gospel or by martyrdom for the faith. After an investigation and the validation of a miracle for a non-martyr, the title “blessed” is given to such an individual and allows their commemoration in the Mass and in the Hours, ordinarily by a specific nation, religious institute, or region. Though a church may not be named for them, only for saints.

The blesseds, like the saints, are held up by the Church as examples of Christian discipleship which can be practiced by men and women of every age, every condition, and every period of history so that all of us are encouraged to do likewise. This crossing of national, cultural, and historical borders helps us to expand our limited horizons beyond our own historical and geographical ghettos. As Kathleen Norris notes in The Cloister Walk, saints and holy people are “witnesses to our limitations and God’s vast possibilities, as Christian theology torn from the page and brought to life.” Such is the case with the events surrounding Elena Graciela Otero de Gaudino of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In January of 1991 she began to suffer from a lack of energy and from breathing difficulties. In addition, she noticed a tumor on the right side of her neck. In February of that same year, the doctors decided on surgery to remove the malignant tumor in her thyroid gland. During the waiting time, Elena received no treatment.

The patient, aware of her grave condition, turned to God for help through the intercession of the Venerable Servant of God, William Joseph Chaminade. Relatives joined her in prayer, as well as friends and members of the Marianist lay communities and Marianist religious.

Suddenly, before surgery was performed, a noticeable diminution of the nodule of the patient took place, to the point of total disappearance within a few days and without medical treatment of any kind. The Archdiocese of Buenos Aires, the Vatican Council of Doctors, the Congress of Theologians Consultors, and the Ordinary Session
of Cardinals and Bishops all approved the authenticity of this miracle, and the decree was promulgated by Pope John Paul II last December. Later the beatification date was set.

A particular note of interest, a small part of Father Chaminade's body has been transferred from the Carthusian Cemetery in Bordeaux to the Chapel of the Madeleine. Two other major relics have been removed, one sent to the chapel of the General Administration, and the other to Pope John Paul II for the beatification. Father Enrique Torres, postulator for the cause, was in charge of this endeavor.

In addition to Father Chaminade, four other men—Popes Pius IX and John XXIII, Tommaso Reggio, and Dom Columbia Marmion—were beatified at the September 3 gathering, some with some with strong ties to the Marianists and to Mary.

- Pius IX, 1792-1878, elected to the papacy in 1846, was the last pope in the life of Father Chaminade. Pius IX received Marianist Fathers Joseph Simler and Louis de Lagarde in 1865, the same year that he approved the Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He also is the pope who proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

- John XXIII, 1881-1963, while a young priest and secretary to the bishop of Bergamo, Italy, read the life of Father Chaminade. While he was carrying out various functions as representative of the Holy See, he had the occasion to know the Marianists and to share in their lives. He visited the college in Tunis in 1951 and knew well the Marianist schools in Rome and Paris. Once elected to the papacy in 1960, he granted a long private audience to the Marianist General Administration. In 1961 he addressed a letter to the Superior General, Father Joseph Hoffer, which he signed personally, testifying to “his high esteem for the Society of Mary.” Father Hoffer and several other Marianists participated in the Second Vatican Council.

- Tommaso Reggio, 1818-1901, was born in Genoa, Italy. He served the Church as the bishop of Ventimiglia and Archbishop of Genoa. In 1878 he founded the Institute of the Sisters of Saint Martha, which presently counts around 600 religious who live in about seventy communities. He was a friend and collaborator with various “saints” of his time: John Bosco, Michael Rua, Antonio G. Glanelli, and Cardinal Ferrari.

- Dom Columba Marmion, 1858-1923, was born in Dublin, Ireland. A Benedictine monk, he served as abbot of Maredsous in Belgium and is noted for his work in the liturgical movement and the promotion of a spirituality centered on the Eucharist. His writings, which have nourished the spiritual life of many,
including many Marianists, include "Le Christ vie de l’aime," "Le Christ dans ses mystere," and "Le Christ ideal du moine."³

“During his homily, the Holy Father stressed that the five new blesseds have ‘five different characters, each one with particular features and mission, all united in their longing for holiness. It is their holiness that we recognize . . . holiness that is a deep and transforming relationship with God, constructed and experienced in the daily effort of adhesion to His will.’”⁴

At a papal audience the day following the beatification, Pope John Paul II said, ‘The personality and activity of the new Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, who always sought to do God’s work, calls all faithful to serious catechistic formation in order to develop and consolidate religious life and enter more profoundly into the meeting with Christ.”⁵

Conclusion
The beatification of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade was a unique moment in Marianist history, a time when the entire Catholic world heard our Founder’s name. It was a unique moment for presenting to the Church the figure and charism of Chaminade, and it also was a further validation of the charism that moves the Marianist Family today. The beatification was a time of renewed fervor among Marianists and a means for inspiring new vocations to our four branches: the Society of Mary, the Marianist Sisters, Marianist Lay Communities, and the Alliance Mariale.

Donald Boccardi, SM

---

¹ Constitutions of 1839, Apostle of Mary, Documentary Series, art. 340 (Marianist Publications: Dayton, nd.)
² Get reference.