On October 11, 2012, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. It is also the anniversary of the publication of the Catholic Catechism. It has been designated by Pope Benedict XVI as the beginning of a Year of Faith. Vatican II did much to clarify and strengthen Catholic faith. Its decisions were inspired by the Holy Spirit. This year Catholics are asked to embrace the teachings of Vatican II and to grow in practical faith – one that lives by these truths in charity. For this reason we look to Blessed William Joseph to help us grow in faith throughout this year.

Though born in 1761, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade still remains relevant for our times. Known as a man of faith, he firmly believed in the Church. He established the Marianist Family, a network of faith communities. This was his vision, for he said that the Marianist Family, though founded in the 19th century was suited more for the 20th century. The Church, in beatifying him and naming his work an Ecclesial Movement, assures us that this man is quite relevant for our 21st century.

Fr. Joseph Verrier, SM, in his book, Melanges Chaminade, grasps the disposition necessary to understand this man, his message and his work. He entitles the first Chapter, In Meditation Before Father Chaminade. As we enter this Year of Faith, we step back to ponder in the presence of this man, our Founder.

Every person is a mystery. When God chooses a particular person for a special mission on earth, we should be excited. God chose Blessed Fr. Chaminade to inaugurate a particular way of living out Christianity. Every spirituality’s goal is to become like Jesus. The particular viewpoint God inspired in Fr. Chaminade was to become like Jesus, the Son of God, Who became the Son of Mary for the salvation of humanity. This has become the Marianist ideal.

Chaminade - Father and Founder

Founders are fathers and mothers for they give birth. They participate in the creative act of God from whom all new life comes. God chooses and prepares them for their mission. Yet they remain free, and it is to their credit that they cooperate with the inspiration God gives them. Founders engender life. They are the authors of new
energies capable themselves of infinite development. Founders bring forth life, i.e., they educate. They prolong themselves in posterity.

Blessed Fr. Chaminade is father in this sense. He brings the Marianist Family to life. Did he perhaps see the Marianist Family in that flashing moment on May 1, 1817 when Fr. Jean Lalanne expressed the desire to give himself completely to God in the work Fr. Chaminade was doing?

The Founder replied:  
This is what I have waited for so long a time. May God be praised. His will is manifest and the moment has come to put into execution the plan I have pursued for twenty years and which He inspired in me.

Blessed Fr. Chaminade and his first followers were so convinced that God had inspired this work. Do not doubt it, the Marianist Family is the work of God for the glory of Mary. God in His mercy has willed the foundation of the Institute.#

What was Blessed Fr. Chaminade like?

How can we describe him? A person’s mettle is tested under fire. Scripture asserts The one who has not been tempted, what does he know? Some people work best under pressure. Pressure brings out qualities in them that they never dreamed they possessed. Yet under pressure, the weaknesses they do have stand out conspicuously.

Blessed Fr. Chaminade stood his ground as he saw the Revolution draw closer and closer. He prepared a hideaway. With his brothers he refused to take the Civil Oath of the Clergy that would mean the approval of a French Church separated from the Holy Catholic and Roman Church. Chaminade sensed what this meant. The signs of the times were not hard to read. But he knew where his duty lay. He was a man of faith. Fidelity to God at any cost became his top priority. He had been ordained a priest, a good shepherd in the service of the flock, a mediator. He would not abandon his people now when they needed him most.

Coupled with fidelity to God was Fr. Chaminade’s sense of God’s protection through Divine Providence. This was a real facet of his personality. He experienced it concretely during the revolution. What a feeling it must be to live in the vivid consciousness that the least mistake might spell the end! The Founder spent the day, never knowing whether he would make nightfall or become just another statistic of the revolutionary government. Among our Marianist Blesseds we have eight martyrs.
Blessed Chaminade might have been another one. God spared him from dying for the faith, but blessed him with the grace of living for the faith. Some of the stories we hear sound like a Douglas Fairbanks Jr. swashbuckling adventure, but Blessed Chaminade wasn’t playing hero. He prepared well. He did everything humanly possible first, always trusting in Divine Providence. He would say later: Yes, we must expect and believe in miracles, but only after trying to solve the situation by all human means. Blessed Fr. Chaminade was a prudent man, cautious, even conservative. He did not rush where angels fear to tread. Every day he saw the guillotine and the tumbrel carrying the victims. Quietly he gave them conditional absolution and prayed tearfully for the repose of their souls.

Believing in Providence, though it does not eliminate fear, it does help us cope with it. Blessed Fr. Chaminade was afraid. *Why did you betray me?* he said to the innkeeper in Bordeaux who had hid him under a barrel and joked with the soldiers, *“he is under this vat”*. She was known as a jokester. There were days when only the thickness of a board saved him from the guillotine. Leading such a cautious life, Fr. Chaminade grew daily to recognize how much we are in the hands of God and how often God comes to our aid.

One of the finest chapters in Blessed Fr. Chaminade’s life came after the Revolution, when he was asked to serve as administrator for the Diocese of Bazas and to be the liaison for the reconciliation of those priests who had unfortunately taken the civil oath. In this Blessed Fr. Chaminade’s faith was shown by his charity and mercy, while not compromising in the least the necessity of their complete repentance.

Blessed Chaminade was a person who knew how to adapt to the needs of the times. He took the very theme of the Revolution – liberty, equality, and fraternity – and spelled it out in terms of Christian faith in the Mystical Body of Christ and the Spiritual Maternity of Mary.

**Family Values are the Key to One’s Faith**

Blessed Fr. Chaminade was born into a very large family. He was the youngest of 14 children. His father, a cloth merchant, had his own business and was fairly well off. His mom and dad were good practicing Catholics; there was an atmosphere of faith and reverence that pervaded the home. The family attended Mass and received the Sacraments regularly. They prayed both in bad times and good. Even to think of a pilgrimage of thanksgiving to the shrine of Our Lady at Verdelais implies a faith and a reverence that is intentional and not automatic.
This faith learned from his earliest years became a characteristic of Blessed Fr. Chaminade’s entire spirituality. He was a man of faith. The Marianist who pioneered the American Province, Fr. Leo Meyer, was stopped one day by an old man who asked, “Are you a Marianist? I am a former sodalist of your Founder, Fr. Chaminade. What a man of faith! When he spoke on faith, he never tired! Oh! What a man of faith”!

A true sign of faith in a Christian family is the respect which parents render to those consecrated to God. As young people search for their vocation and contemplate the various states of life, the family creates an atmosphere in which this is supported or hindered. The Chaminade family supported their children in this search. They prayed together, reverenced Mary and the Saints, were loyal to the Gospel, and faithful to the teachings of the Church. This created a healthy attitude towards the priesthood and religious life. In fact, four of the Chaminade boys eventually became priests and religious.

His family not only provided the atmosphere for his eventual choice of the priesthood, but his Jesuit brother, Jean, took charge of his actual religious development. He followed the Jesuit system of the Spiritual Exercises and the “election” of the standard of Christ. This has been a decisive influence for many in the Church, both lay and religious. Jean observed his young brother’s growth in the spiritual life and gradually opened William Joseph to the ways of mental prayer. Blessed Fr. Chaminade made private vows when he was 14. Even today one can see similar acts of generosity among the young. So much depends on a person’s orientation to this.

Blessed Chaminade even looked for an Order to join and tried a live-in in a nearby monastery, but was disillusioned. He was looking for silence, charity, faith, prayer and found instead routine, superficiality, and indifference. He had developed a fairly good sense of values and a deep appreciation for the interior life.

We don’t always recognize it, but often the experiences we have in our youth prepare us for tasks that we are given later. Blessed Fr. Chaminade’s gradual growth in union with Christ, living the life of the Spirit, prepared him later to counsel Sodalists and religious as they progressed in the spiritual life.

Blessed Fr. Chaminade’s home training also developed in him a nobility, a sense of being a gentleman. Insistence on politeness, good manners, simplicity without affectation, correction for lapses in these matters – all played a part in his maturing. The natural give and take in a large family helps to rub off the rough edges of a person. Yet this interplay of brothers and sisters does much to form one in service, consideration, generosity, and other virtues. His mother frequently pointed out the price he had to pay.
if he was to become a good person. It has to hurt in order to be nice, pleasant; it must cost us something. Blessed Chaminade’s insistence later on modesty, i.e., the general attractiveness and goodness that makes us sense the presence of God, finds its roots in his home training. Silence of signs # is just this goodness radiating from one’s whole being.

At one pre-revolutionary period of his life, Blessed Fr. Chaminade and his brothers, Jean and Louis, administered the College of Mussidan. William Joseph was the Treasurer. Under their influence the College gained a great reputation. Their purpose and method was forthright: “good order, discipline, a well-understood piety, all mingled in a family spirit full of joyfulness, with brilliant and solid study, with a perfect material organization.” Chaminade experienced then what he would later insist upon with the groups in the Marianist Family: family spirit and union without confusion. These are definitely faith-based virtues. His insights into the value of schools and a Christian education certainly came from this experience at Mussidan. He had been a student there under his brother Jean. The Jesuits had been disbanded. Schools were there to hand on the faith and to form apostles who would continue sharing the good news. There Blessed Fr. Chaminade was in charge of Temporalities. Perhaps this is where he derived his views on the Three Offices: Zeal, Instruction, and Temporalities #.

Mary’s Role in Blessed Chaminade’s life

Blessed Chaminade is incomprehensible without some notion of Mary’s role in his life. The key concept of his life is the Spiritual Maternity of Mary, “Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary”. For Blessed Fr. Chaminade, belief in Mary does not fill a psychological need; it is not a defense mechanism for a guilt or fear complex. It is deeply rooted in faith. God chose Mary. God’s gifts are never taken back. Mary is not put on a shelf after her Yes at the Annunciation. She is the mother of Jesus and still fulfills her maternal vocation today.

Blessed Chaminade’s love for Mary manifested itself throughout his life primarily in great confidence in her. She was his powerful advocate. She inspired the works that he was able to found. He accepted the trials that he encountered as a means of purification. He persevered in the confidence that Mary would confirm her work.

And trials he experienced! Consider the Revolution; difficulties in starting the Sodality; losing his chief collaborator Therese de Lamourous, to a different work, the Misericorde; political difficulties because of the indiscretion of some of his sodalists; financial worries; troubles within the Societies he founded; the loss of some of his chief
collaborators; and the trials of his last years. Blessed Chaminade’s life was one of constant purification.

Is it any wonder then that, as he grew more and more in his appreciation of the mystery that is Mary, he could say: I live and breathe only to propagate love for her. For Blessed Fr. Chaminade, Mary is a living person, not a statue. He develops a mature relationship with her as a son. He wants to work with her. Everything in his own life and in the works inspired by him are centered in his dedication to Mary.

So as we enter the Year of Faith we ask Blessed William Joseph Chaminade to help us become men and women of faith. May he teach us how to pray in faith, and how to make decisions based on faith. This was really how he lived.

May the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit be glorified in all places by the Immaculate Virgin Mary. Amen.