

# 2016 – 2017

## BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS

### The Daughters of Mary Immaculate

### The Society of Mary

#### *This Year Has Been Named the Year of Mercy*

It is fitting that we direct our thoughts to Venerable Marie Thérèse Charlotte de Lamourous as we enter the Marianist Bicentennial.

Marie Thérèse de Lamourous is the link between Fr. Chaminade and Venerable Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon. Marie Thérèse was Fr. Chaminade's closest collaborator from the times of the Revolution and Exile. Fr. Chaminade was her spiritual director. Marie Thérèse was sent by Fr. Chaminade to aid Adèle as she established the first community of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate.

In addition, Marie Thérèse de Lamourous was called to take over the *Misericorde* or Mercy House. How appropriate to honor her as we enter into the Year of Mercy.

May Marie Thérèse pray for us and help us to appreciate this part of our vocation as Marianists. Jesus, the Son of God, became the Son of Mary in order to save the world; that is, to bring God's mercy and love into this world.

We thank Sr. Laura Leming, FMI, for this insightful look into the life of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous.

*Fr. Paul Landolfi*

# A Sociologist Considers the Contributions of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous

Laura M. Leming, FMI

Where has this woman been all my Marianist life? The Marianist world is not immune to the penchant that many historians have had until recently to overlook the contributions of women. As with so many other women in history, we are only lately recovering and reconsidering the contributions of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, a woman who may hold an important key to how we live Marianist life into the future.

Marie Thérèse de Lamourous was a contemporary of William Joseph Chaminade<sup>1</sup>, just a few years older and a collaborator in devising ways to rebuild the church of Bordeaux. Hers was one of the first names listed on the women's section of the Bordeaux Sodality. But she had her own ministerial interests apart from Chaminade and pursued them along with the various ways she assisted in the founding days of the Marianist Family. The legacy for which she was revered and remembered in Bordeaux was her leadership of the Misericorde, a home and rehabilitation center for women who had resorted to prostitution in the chaotic post-revolutionary period.

Recently our community re-read her life story to prepare for sharing on how she inspires us. I realized that my view of Marie Thérèse is greatly influenced by the work and study I do as a sociologist. With every page I found myself thinking how amazing it was to find parallels with the urgent needs and "best practices" in doing social ministry that we confront today. Let me elaborate a bit by highlighting some aspects of Marie Thérèse's "method" that I think have bearing on our call to practice social justice in all of our ministries.

## **Responding to Critical Human Need**

The work of the Misericorde was Marie Thérèse's "cher projet"<sup>2</sup> in the second half of her life and the basis for the reflections that follow. If she had never taken this up, or if she had died young like Adele de Tranquellon, the other woman in the triumvirate of Marianist founders, her life still would have been amazing. The leadership skills and wisdom she acquired as a leader and effectively, a pastor, of the underground church of Bordeaux during the Revolution gave her the resources she became known for throughout Bordeaux as "the saint of Bordeaux."

Marie Thérèse is a model for us in following one's call wherever it leads, especially beyond one's comfort zone. Asked to take up the work with women at the bottom of Bordeaux' social milieu, Marie Thérèse's initial inclination was aversion. But she revisited that decision using a principle of good discernment, to explore our aversions for signs of grace and call. Tentatively, after wrestling with this difficult decision even in her nightmares, and consulting

with spiritual companions, Marie Thérèse visited the Misericorde and on the spot, decided to take up residence there.

Then like today, political, economic and even ecclesial turmoil put women at risk for living in poverty and turning to (sometimes being forced into) the sex trade in order to survive. Even some women who had been turned out of convents fell victim to these circumstances. The Misericorde was a voluntary program for women who wanted to leave prostitution. Almost nothing in Marie Thérèse's upbringing could have predicted that at the age of 46, the well-respected woman would choose to live in a community with women who had a past as sex workers. Marie Thérèse read the signs of the times and recognized her own capacity to respond on a local level to this critical human need – a need which continues to our own day.

## **Negotiating Changing Environments**

Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, of the three Marianist founders, was perhaps the most experienced and shrewd at negotiating the difficulties of shifting political, economic and ecclesial circumstances. As a lay woman in the underground church she had more freedom in the public realm than Chaminade, who needed to disguise himself. Later she had the financial acumen to serve as his representative in property negotiations. The Misericorde was a unique ministry and civil entity in France and it took compromise to establish its legal standing to receive contributions and create small business enterprises to generate operating funds. In fact, the mix of business and pastoral sense Marie Thérèse developed is a legacy for the Marianist Family. All over the Marianist world, we are exploring new means of addressing the needs we meet as we walk with populations that may be new to us: AIDS orphans in Africa, street children in India, migrant workers or people on death row in the United States.

Whether consciously or not, Marie Thérèse left all of us a “method” of social ministry in a similar vein as Father Chaminade left us methods of spiritual growth (the System of Virtues) and community development (the Office System). The practices Marie Thérèse employed in her social ministry rest on four principles: cultivating human freedom and dignity, recognizing and drawing out leadership, creating access to a living wage, and linking local situations to global realities.

### **1) Freedom and Dignity**

The Misericorde, unlike most rehabilitation programs, was a community where each member was a willing participant. If young women were referred by their families, Marie Thérèse insisted on interviewing them alone. Then they would return home with family members and come back to the Misericorde on their own if it was their choice. Today we recognize that having this sense of freedom is an important component of empowerment and commitment. The women (some of them really girls, as records show some as young as 15) would only be invested in the community life and work of the Misericorde if they had chosen it

freely. Moreover, Marie Thérèse believed that people who once occupied statuses demeaned by society can and should be welcomed to make a viable contribution and provided the means to do so.

## **2) Developing Leadership**

Recognizing the leadership potential of the residents of the Misericorde was important for two reasons. Smooth administration of the growing enterprise required shared responsibility, and the women needed to build confidence in their own potential and giftedness. The latter is of prime importance for people (then and now) who are accustomed to living on the margins of society where their voice doesn't matter and their gifts are often overlooked. Marie Thérèse recognized that her "daughters" needed the small successes within the community to strengthen their capacity to move beyond the Misericorde as contributing members of the society. She encouraged independence even while creating a safe space which some of the women made their home for their entire lifetimes. De Lamourous extended the gift of the community, which the Marianist family cherishes as a special charism, to those most in need of that gift. This point deserves our scrutiny today, especially where Marianists are living in the over-developed world. How are we called to extend this gift that we have received to those who most need community in our own time?

## **3) Access to a Living Wage**

One of the challenges Marianists face in confronting the legacy of Marie Thérèse is her practical recognition that for many, sharing our spiritual resources is simply not enough. People need to have access to honest and dignified ways of being part of an increasingly globalized economy. In her day and time, Marie Thérèse was able to read the economic needs and capitalize on them, not for personal profit but for her "daughters'" livelihoods. She created concrete opportunities for women through what today we would call work-training job-readiness programs and especially micro-enterprises. She set up workrooms within the Misericorde where women performed a variety of services like sewing and laundry work. When the opportunity arose to create a small business doing contract work for the government, the Misericorde became known as a producer of fine cigars! Micro enterprise is a way of creating pathways into the economy for people who have few skills and legal avenues to gain access to financial opportunity. As inequality grows in the over-developed countries such as the United States, creating these pathways for people at lower socio-economic levels is becoming an ever more critical need.

## **4) Linking local and global concerns**

Part of Marie Thérèse's success in social ministry was keeping a balanced perspective between the "personal troubles" at hand and "global issues." Her immediate concern was the pressing situation of the women in poverty. But Marie Thérèse's ties to other groups with far-

reaching aspirations seem to have contributed to a sense of hope and vision – a connection to a wider world. The women of the Misericorde had opportunities in the community to meet and interact with people who had broad visions and a sense of mission. The Bordeaux sodality, founded at about the same time that Marie Thérèse undertook this ministry had direct ties with the Misericorde. Its members provided service there and welcomed Misericorde residents as sodalists. Marie Thérèse also had links to a Foreign Mission society, whose members frequented the Misericorde, sharing their experiences in Asia. Keeping the links between immediate concerns and global realities allows communities to be grounded but also to have vision and a sense of connection to something larger than themselves.

## **Unifying Faith**

Undergirding all of these elements of Marie Thérèse’s “method” is her strong faith in God’s Providence and her reliance on that in her day to day life. A favorite story told of her is when there was very little food at the Misericorde, she would knock on the tabernacle door and tell God that her daughters needed something to eat. Marie Thérèse was eulogized as a woman who walked in God’s presence “with an undivided heart.” Marie Thérèse’s pragmatic action in response to urgent human need was nourished and sustained her attention to and trust in Providence. We can well remember this today as communities that strive to maintain a deep spiritual source while attending to the critical needs we see in the neighborhoods and even the world around us.

## **Living our Legacy**

Living the legacy of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous calls us to appreciate even more deeply the focus on lay empowerment that was part of the original inspiration of Chaminade and Adele. Their insight that the collaboration of men and women, and lay and religious was the more responsive model of church for their day still has force for us today. Marie Thérèse’s way of being in the world has timely relevance for people of mission who continue to confront dehumanizing poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She leaves us a set of practices for social ministry that can inform the action and reflection of our communities today. Marie Thérèse combined immense spiritual resources with practical resourcefulness in negotiating the political and economic realities of her day. As heirs to her legacy we are called to do no less.

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<sup>1</sup> Founder of the Bordeaux Sodality and the Society of Mary (Marianist Brothers and Priests) and co-founder with Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon of the Daughters of Mary (Marianist Sisters).

<sup>2</sup> Literally, the “dear Project,” was a phrase used by Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon to express her passion for what she understood as her life work, founding a community of women (first the Association and then the Marianist Sisters) and spiritual collaborators, the third order of lay women living in small numbers doing apostolic work throughout the countryside. As is often the case there is no good translation, but we might think of it as a special calling or sense of mission.