

BLESSED WILLIAM JOSEPH CHAMINADE

*Do we know him sufficiently?
Do we appreciate him enough?*

by Brother Joseph Jansen, SM

Shortly after the death of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, Cardinal Donnet of Bordeaux , France, wrote:

"Father Chaminade was an eminent person, an excellent man. We did not know him sufficiently. We did not appreciate him. We shall never know all that we owe to him. Trace to its origin any good work, any charitable institution in Bordeaux and at the head of every one of them we find the name of Father Chaminade."

Today the cardinal's words are a clarion call to all Marianists urging us to learn more about our father in faith, ever deepening our appreciation of his person and his work.

Hopefully these observations will whet your appetite for a deeper drink and a stronger taste of Blessed William Joseph, the faith-filled and spirit-driven dynamo of Bordeaux. We will discover an aspect of his life not well known: the many "good works" that he animated directly or indirectly in the Archdiocese of Bordeaux.

The Saragossa experience of several years of prayer and reflection at the foot of Our Lady of the Pillar provided him, the refugee, with seminal thoughts about new Church structures in post-revolutionary France. Upon his return to France, a mature and energetic Chaminade plunged into the multiplication of lay faith communities. This was his response to the needs of the times. His primary work in the period 1800-1815 took place in and around the city of Bordeaux. Through the "sodalities" (lay communities of apostolic faith), he was able to initiate and multiply many good works and charitable institutions throughout the Bordeaux area.

Blessed William Joseph knew the generative power of the "both-and" dialectic, that is, pursuing the holistic union of spirituality and justice. In his own person he fine-tuned this integration, demonstrating that the essential is the interior, and from that prayerful interior springs a host of good works; that from a serious reflection on God's Word flows a real and significant outreach to others, especially the poor and the needy. Reflection, meditation, prayer -- these are the wellspring of action on behalf of justice

and charity. He taught the "both-and" dynamic by living its tensions. He instilled this same spirit in his sodalists and their faith communities.

The result was an explosion of praying communities that were also and simultaneously social action communities. These communities found it natural to wed contemplation and action. These communities understood that being Christian meant daring to live the simple oneness of faith/action. In these communities pursuit of both spirituality and justice fed each other in a mutually enriching dialectic.

Chaminade's work and spirit generated many communities of faith for young men, young women, married men, married women, and priests, as well as other pious associations such as the Association of Fathers of Families, which included every trade and profession, and the Association of Women, which planned and sponsored retreats. Additionally there was a wide range of apostolates in favor of the poor and the neglected of society. Some examples:

- Free services of doctors and lawyers for the poor
- Orphanages
- Institutions for deaf-mutes
- The House of Mercy for young women trying to redirect their lives
- The Library Society that organized public libraries
- Study clubs
- Child labor groups, especially for chimney sweeps and abandoned children
- The Bakers' Guild and other associations for workers
- Vocational training programs
- Formation for juvenile prisoners
- Visitation of hospitalized patients
- Prayer groups

How's that for effecting positive structural change? In the wake of the just-completed revolution these good works provided a much-needed boost for society in the civil and religious areas. Chaminade's "both-and" response, inspired by the Holy Spirit and mediated by Our Lady of the Pillar, was what was needed by post-revolutionary France.

To complete his vision of the Family of Mary, he founded in 1816 the Daughters of Mary Immaculate and a year later, the Society of Mary. This dynamism and energy of the Spirit acting in and through the prayerful Father Chaminade initiated a new springtime in the Church of France and beyond.

No wonder Cardinal Donnet spoke as he did. And he was not alone. Cardinal Andrieu called Father Chaminade "the St. Vincent de Paul of Bordeaux." Monsignor Beaupin dubbed him "the precursor of Ozanam." Some years later Father Boutin referred to him as "the forerunner of Catholic Action."

Today prayer groups that were once centered on prayer only are becoming more socially concerned and active. And social concern groups once centered on action only now insist on prayer and reflection. Chaminade is justly considered a forerunner of both spirituality and justice, as well as a precursor of post-Vatican II lay communities of apostolic faith which are both prayerfully centered and faithfully acting for justice and charity.

Cardinal Donnet was certainly correct in his assessment. We need to know better Blessed William Joseph Chaminade and appreciate him more. Yet, even with more knowledge and greater appreciation of this outstanding apostle of Mary, we will never fathom our debt to him.

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Slightly edited by Bro. John Samaha, SM.