

# BLESSED WILLIAM JOSEPH CHAMINADE

And Holy Scripture

by Brother John M. Samaha, SM

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade's spirituality and Marian doctrine were sown in Scriptural soil. He was steeped in both Testaments of the Holy Bible.

The 1988 Marian Year letter of instruction over the signature of Cardinal William Baum from the Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation*, explained that the foundation of Mariology is Sacred Scripture. Mary is presented as a "given" (*datum*) of revelation because of her unique role in salvation history. More than a century earlier, Father Chaminade (1761-1850) was aware of these principles for a sound Marian doctrine.

Guided by these same principles, his emphasis on Mary's Divine Maternity and Spiritual Maternity was rooted in Scripture, Tradition, and pastoral piety presented by the Magisterium. Like the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Chaminade plumbed the riches of Christology and ecclesiology to demonstrate Mary's relation to the mystery of Christ and to the mystery of the Church, and to manifest her mission in salvation history.

In the carefully researched two volumes of *Marian Writings* compiled by Father Jean-Baptiste Armbruster, S.M., we find 733 citations of Sacred Scripture in the preserved writings about Mary by our Founder. Chaminade refers to the Old Testament more often than the New Testament: OT, 276 times; NT, 245 times. These occasions are found mostly in his notes, spiritual conferences, and letters. This frequent and familiar use of Scripture is translucent evidence that, unlike many founders of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, he was not tainted with the Jansenistic aversion to use Holy Writ.

Jansenism, an austere and rigorous heretical movement begun in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, demeaned human nature and limited the possibility of human holiness. It was tinged with determinism and akin to Calvin's predestination. Jansenist rigorism, though condemned by three popes, had a lingering and widespread influence that infected moral and spiritual writing in much of Europe. Formed by the French School of Spirituality, which emphasized the centrality of the Incarnation and its consequences exemplified in the mysteries and states of Christ, Chaminade was spared the misguidance of Jansenism.

In addition to the strong reliance on the Johannine and Pauline Scriptures characteristic of the French School of Spirituality, Blessed William Joseph leaned heavily on certain books of the Old Testament: Genesis, 37 citations; Psalms, 35; Proverbs and Song of Songs, 35 each; Sirach (Ecclesiasticus/Wisdom), 47; Isaiah, 16. These books often compare Mary to wisdom and offer a description of the Mother of God or of her maternal favor. Proverbs 8, quoted 25 times, and Sirach 24, quoted 36 times, seem favorites of Father Chaminade. These are also the two most used chapters in the Marian liturgies of the Church.

Proverbs and Sirach are the finest examples of Old Testament wisdom literature. Proverbs 8 is a compendium of moral and religious instruction, especially for youth. It demonstrates wisdom's relation to God and personifies wisdom as a prophetess. Sirach praises wisdom for its reflection of God's goodness. Like the best of Catholic biblical tradition, Chaminade recognized these texts as prefigures of Mary. This insight is beautifully reflected in the Liturgy of the Hours and in Masses honoring the Virgin Mother of God.

According to Father Armbruster, this indicates a certain doctrinal identity Chaminade shared with Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), chapter 8, which deals with the Mother of the Messiah.

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade used the whole of the Bible to teach us about Mary in a pastoral and wisdom-like manner.

#### *A biblical theme employed by Chaminade*

The memorable text of Father Chaminade's apocalyptic thought, based on Genesis 3:15 and several parallels in Revelation, appears in his *Letter to the Retreat Preachers*, August 24, 1839.

"Every period in the history of the Church has its record of the combats and glorious victories of the august Mother of God. Ever since the Lord made her and the serpent enemies of each other, she has constantly vanquished the world and the powers of hell. All the heresies, the Church tells us, have bowed to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and little by little she has reduced them to oblivion.

"...To her, therefore, is reserved a great victory in our day, for to her belongs the glory of saving the faith from the destruction with which it is threatened.

"We have come to understand this design of Providence, and we have hastened to offer our feeble services to Mary in order to labor under her direction and to carry on the conflict at her side."