

In this article, Sr. Marie Laurence Cosnard, Provincial of France for the Marianist Sisters, looks at the past and the present. She sums up our beginnings as a Marianist Family and shows us who we are today. The article highlights the International Council of the Marianist Family and shows its relationship with all the national and local groups in the Marianist Family. It portrays the entire Family: the Lay Marianists, the Alliance Mariale, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate and the Society of Mary. The International Council is composed of the leadership of these groups.

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FATHER CHAMINADE AND THE RECHRISTIANIZATION OF FRANCE

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At the beginning of the 19th century Father Chaminade, desirous of re-Christianizing France, founded the Marianist Family. To his followers he gave as missionary mandate the very words of Mary to the servants at Cana: “*Do whatever he tells you (John 2,5)*. From May 2016 until January 2018, the male and female religious are celebrating their bicentennial. More broadly, the Marianist Family includes between 7,000 and 8,000 persons established on five continents in more than 30 countries.

William Joseph Chaminade was born on April 8, 1761, at Perigueux (Dordogne). Youngest child of a cloth merchant whose household lay very near the cathedral, William pursued his studies at the college-seminary of Mussidan, before making his vows in the congregation of priests of St. Charles of Mussidan. The congregation took as its model the Italian bishop St. Charles Borromeo. William was ordained a priest in 1785. In 1791 at the height of the Revolution, he refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. He settled then in Bordeaux to carry out an underground ministry for several years at the risk of his life. In 1797 he was required to seek exile in Spain. He arrived at Saragossa (in Aragon) on October 11, 1797, vigil of the great feast of Our Lady of the Pillar. [The shrine of Our Lady of the Pillar] was the greatest Marian pilgrimage site in Spain.

During his exile Chaminade reflected on the future of the Faith in France. With others, he worked out with a plan of re-Christianization adapted to the new times. He understood that it would not be enough to rebuild old structures; rather that he must seek other means and allow himself to be guided by the “signs of the times.”

Convinced that an isolated Christian is a Christian in danger, he gave thought to the benefit of founding a “congregation” of Christians, “a movement” in imitation of the Marian congregations of the Jesuits, to help those Christians to be stronger in the faith and more eloquent in their witness to it. The extraordinary and devoted zeal of certain laypersons who, in spite of all the risks involved, had helped him in carrying out his ministry during the years of the Revolution, brought him as well to the realization that every baptized person can play a role in the mission.

Already he intended to ask from the Pope the authorization to evangelize beyond the traditional structures of the parishes. Later on he would say that this was the “inspiration” that grew progressively in him. It is said that one day, while he was at prayer, he was even given a sort of “vision”: he saw gathered all around the pillar of Mary young people of every origin come to place themselves at his disposal to help him in his mission. Following his return to France in 1800 he gathered in Bordeaux groups of young people, men and women, whom he formed and guided in the spiritual life in order that they might become missionaries in their environment. This was the birth of the sodality,—(its full name was the Sodality of the Immaculate) —placed under the protection of the Virgin Mary. Father Chaminade established himself in the Chapel of the Madèleine in Bordeaux. Since certain persons wished to go further in their involvement, he proposed in 1808 a form of consecrated life in the world that he called “the State.”

This same summer of 1808 he began a relationship with Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon (1789-1828) who had founded near Agen (Lot-et-Garonne) an association for prayer and for encouragement in the Christian life by means of correspondence, very much like the work of Bordeaux. This young woman from a family of nobility wished ardently to become a religious. Ever under the influence of the Holy Spirit, Father Chaminade founded with Adèle in 1816 at Agen the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, a religious institute in service to the Congregation (sodality) of lay persons. He edited the first constitutions and confided to Marie Thérèse Charlotte de Lamourous, his adjunct for the Congregation (sodality) and foundress of the Daughters of the Misericorde of Bordeaux, the task of guiding the first steps of the small group at Agen. This group was made up of six young women who took up residence at “the Refuge” on May 25, 1816. Fifteen days later the new sisters made the acquaintance of Father Chaminade.

One year later, Monsieur Lalanne, a sodalist, confided to Father Chaminade his desire to consecrate himself to God. Thus was born at Bordeaux on October 2, 1817, a new community of religious men: the Society of Mary, which soon would be known as the Marianists. Its primary mission was to be “the man who does not die,” for the

purpose of supporting the groups of lay persons who by reason of their Baptism stood as the first evangelizers. The Rule of Life was the same as that of the sisters at Agen, with the necessary adjustments, in particular because of the presence of priests. Other areas of apostolate, notably that of Christian education, developed very quickly, in a world where all was to be reconstructed. From the time of the foundation, Father Chaminade gave as missionary mandate for his followers the very words of Mary to the servants at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you." (John 2,5)

Father Chaminade had a concept of a certain universality of works, and equally, the idea of adaptability of means to be utilized in the mission directed at the needs of specific times and places. He wanted to be able to address himself to "all classes, both sexes, and those of every age group, but especially to the young and the poor." (Letter of August 24, 1839) On September 16, 1839, Father Chaminade addressed himself to Pope Gregory XVI to ask for approbation of the Constitutions of the two Institutes, perceived as two sides of the same entity. He closed his letter thus: "These two orders have taken as a distinctive name that of the august Mary; may they be able to make her known, praised and loved over all the earth! For I am deeply convinced that Our Lord has reserved to his holy mother the glory of being in a particular way the support of the church in these latter days."

Following upon some grave financial problems brought on by the imprudence of one of his followers and some conduct that he judged detrimental to the Society of Mary, Father Chaminade underwent painful ordeals during the last four years of his life. His council went as far as to exclude him. But he had the joy, before his death on January 22, 1850 at Bordeaux, of seeing his successor and his assistants gather round him and be reconciled with him.

His tomb at the Cemetery of the Chartreuse is surmounted by a statue of the Virgin Mary and bears numerous *ex votos* of the faithful. On October 18, 1973, after a detailed study of the writings and activities of Father Chaminade, Pope Paul VI declared him Venerable. On September 3, 2000, he was beatified in St. Peter's Square in Rome by Pope John-Paul II. The Marianist family is able thereby to celebrate him in its official liturgy on every continent, in every place where it is established. Chaminade's feast day is January 22, the day of his death.

Additional Remarks

Father Chaminade and the Virgin Mary

History recalls that during his childhood, William Chaminade suffered a severe ankle injury. He prayed at that time to the Virgin Mary and made a vow to make a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Verdelais (Gironde), located 40 kilometers southeast of Bordeaux. After experiencing a healing that defied natural explanation, he made this pilgrimage with his elder brother John-Baptiste, a future Jesuit priest. He would retain throughout his entire life a special devotion to the Virgin, and it is to her, naturally, that he would confide the two institutes that he founded. More broadly, the creation of the Marianist family takes its place as well in the context of the Marian renewal at the beginning of the 19th century. (Father Jean-Claude Colin founded the Marists in 1822.)

Two Hundred Years of Unique History

In the story of the Marianist spiritual family, it is unique that it is not the religious who have given rise to the movement of lay associates; rather it is the lay congregations (sodalities) which have given birth to the two religious institutes. These latter have been given as their primary task to assist the spread of the missionary vocation of all the baptized. The Marianist congregations (sodalities) realized rapid development. In 1809 a group of 60 young women flourished in the Agen region, living the same charism as Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, and being shepherded by her. Adèle was declared Venerable by Pope John-Paul II on June 5, 1986. After several years of maturation and testing, some members expressed a desire for the consecrated life. In the post-Revolutionary setting, they embraced a consecrated life in the world. Thanks to the tenacity of Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, who confided her plan of religious life to Father Chaminade, this latter figure laid out a rule for a regular religious life in community. So it was that on May 25, 1816, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary was born at Agen, then the Society of Mary on October 2, 1817, at Bordeaux.

To establish themselves in small communities of faith; to form an alliance with Mary in order to make Christ known, loved and served—this was the secret of this family devoted wholeheartedly to the mission, in a complementarity of vocations. From May 2016 until January 2018 the entire Marianist Family, throughout the world, is celebrating the birth of religious life in its midst.

The Marianists: One Great Family from the Beginning

Today the Marianist Family includes between 7,000 and 8,000 members throughout the world, established on five continents in more than 30 countries. The Family is composed still of the four original branches, which are, in the historical order of appearance:

Lay Marianist Communities (CLM), still called in certain countries “fraternities.” Recognized recently by the Vatican as an “private association of lay faithful,” these groups bring together approximately 6,515 members over five continents. They have often developed in proximity to Marianist communities (but not always, as in Australia and Haiti). In France there are about 500 members.

The Marianist Alliance (L’Alliance Mariale), recognized by the episcopate, made up of some 50 members, consecrated lay persons, present on four continents.

The Marianist Religious Sisters (Daughters of Mary Immaculate, FMI) who number 343, distributed over four continents in 14 different countries.

Finally *the Marianist Religious Brothers (Society of Mary, SM)* numbering 1,123, at work in 35 countries over four continents.

Each branch of the Family obviously prescribes its own proper organization. *With regard to the Marianist Family, this Family is endowed, on the international level as well as in the various countries, with a structure that shares the most interesting elements of the local (national) groups.* We speak here of the Council of the Family which brings together in its midst those with responsibility for each of the branches of the family. The statutes of this Council declare that the Marianist Family “understands itself...as a spiritual family which brings together lay persons, religious sisters and male religious on an equal footing;” that the validation of the identity of each branch rests in its union with the others;” that the “progress of the Marianist Family grants increase to each branch in identity and fruitfulness.” The statutes underline therefore a strict interdependence between the branches, in a “union without confusion,” as the founder loved to say. It can be seen that it is very much a matter here of a unique institution in the Church for a family wholly inspired, or better, wholly animated by a common spirituality.

The Marianist Spirituality

FAITH

"Everything is possible to the man of genuine faith ... Let faith be our strength!" (William Joseph Chaminade) Faith in Christ our Redeemer living today is the center of all. Faith lays the foundation of our life of believing and witness. For Chaminade, "Faith is ... a powerful mover;" it is, to be sure, "a gift of God:" it leads us "to triumphs that appear utterly impossible." "The spirit of faith is none other than the Holy Spirit!" It is He who comes to dwell in us "in faith of the heart."

ALLIANCE WITH MARY

"It is not possible to be Christian if one separates the Son from the Mother." (William Joseph Chaminade) In order to make Jesus better known and loved, we form an alliance with Mary, his mother. We must first of all come to know her in order to learn from her Christ and the way to him; we must know and love her in order to allow ourselves to be formed by her in the image of Jesus, her first-born son. "Go to Jesus through Mary," said Father Chaminade. We must love Mary and come to serve her in allying with her so as to give better witness to Jesus the Christ, in service to those around us.

ATTENTION TO THE WORLD IN OUR AGE

"We have taken as motto: *DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU!*" (William Joseph Chaminade) It is to the world of today that we must boldly proclaim Christ. We seek to better know him, to dwell in him, in order to be an effective leaven in the mass. We cultivate a creative boldness and a new attitude of openness to the world that we are seeking to evangelize.

PRAYER

"Let our entire day be a continuation, as it were, of prayer." (William-Joseph Chaminade) To have the boldness and the power for giving witness, we need to remain grafted into Christ by prayer. For our founders, prayer is vital: "Never will you better carry out the scope of your works," says Father Chaminade, "than when you pray more qualitatively." For his followers, he put in place a method of prayer, and left them "the obligation to become saints." How become holy—a saint—without remaining bound permanently, by prayer, to the Trinity Itself, source of all life and all holiness?

FAMILY SPIRIT

“Isolation is a defect for a Christian.” (William-Joseph Chaminade) We will possess the boldness and the strength to give witness if we constitute a true family, living out a genuine family spirit. [We are] a family made up of four branches of the same tree, devoted to the same task—to make Christ known and loved today--, each branch with its own specific nature, and respecting the specific nature and the autonomy of the others and those responsible for them.

FORMATION OF COMMUNITIES

“Each sodalist is a permanent missionary, each sodality is a perpetual mission....” (William-Joseph Chaminade) The lay members of the Marianist Family live in the world, like a leaven in the mass, but are found on a regular basis in small communities of faith (CLM: Communities of Lay Marianists). They live in the image of the first communities of the earliest church and the first Marianist sodalities of Bordeaux.

THE MISSION

“It is a holy militia that advances in the name of Mary.” (William Joseph Chaminade) The mission to make Christ known and loved among the peoples of this age is the very *raison d'être* of the Marianist Family. Like Pope Paul VI we stand convinced that mankind has need of witnesses rather than overlords – witnesses close to them, who know and love them, who accept them such as they are and who are willing to collaborate in the action of the Holy Spirit already at work in them. We know that, as Father Chaminade said, we will only lead people to Christ through his mother. May we remain confident and not hesitate to proclaim the hope that dwells in us.

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