

Marianist Moment:

Venerable Mother Marie-Thérèse Charlotte de Lamourous



“Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all the rest will be given, over above.” (Matthew 6:33). This is the passage Marie Thérèse lived by as evidenced by this true story noted in a Bordeaux newspaper after her death in 1836.

Picture this: Eighteenth century France during the time of the French Revolution, and a bold, courageous, no-nonsense woman bent on providing the basic necessities for the young women in her care, begging among the affluent in the area only to have doors slammed in her face. Not one to give up, Mademoiselle Marie-Thérèse Charlotte de Lamourous

entered a small chapel with her young wards and plainly stated, “My Lord, your children have no bread.” Very shortly upon leaving the chapel, someone was there with the needed items. (Stefanelli, *Mlle de Lamourous*, 408).

Marie Thérèse was born in 1754 in Pian, a small town not far from Bordeaux, France. Her rural upbringing prepared her well for the challenges she faced throughout her lifetime. Her mother had been a teacher, home-schooled her children and died when Marie was young. Marie’s father was a lawyer, but not a good business man. He was driven to sell family property to make ends meet.

During the French Revolution, noble families were not allowed to live in the larger cities of France, so she and her father took refuge on their farm in rural Pian. Marie was able to hide there, in a way, serving the community as an underground spiritual mentor and pastor.

The local priest, threatened by the government if he did not renounce the faith and declare faithfulness to the new Republic, chose to take the schismatic oath. Marie rejected this action and went underground to serve the people with all the necessary elements of the faithful, including catechism, sacrament preparation, even hearing confessions. She knew her strengths and her limitations. She listened and counseled as needed, but did not offer absolution. After the Revolution, she found it difficult to convince the people to return to their local parish. Eventually, with Marie Thérèse’s encouragement, the local pastor revoked the oath and returned to the faithful.

After the Revolution, Marie Thérèse hoped to relax and care for her family in Pian. This was not to be since she was beckoned into service by an old friend, Jeanne de Pichon, who had worked with the rehabilitation of prostitutes. Many of the women were desperately driven into prostitution due to the loss of fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, leaving no one to care or provide for them. At the same time, Chaminade was hoping she would assist him with his pastoral ministries. Ultimately, he left the decision to her and she found herself doing both.

The Miséricorde house was not far from Chaminade's Chapel of the Madeleine. Marie Thérèse visited Jeanne de Pichon and a few of the women she had gathered to meet her. The visit brought a great sense of peace, which was unusual for her. Upon leaving, negative feelings returned. A short time later, after a dream during a brief illness, Marie Thérèse agreed to help these young women. It was not an easy beginning. With Chaminade's guidance, she established discipline by forming a Rule for the house, which proved very successful and required little change over the years. Three stipulations remained: the women came freely, left freely and had to be devoted to changing their lives.

Marie Thérèse was committed to making sure the women reached their full potential and were outfitted with the skills they needed in their future. They learned shared responsibility, autonomy and inspiring personal dignity. Under her tutelage, the young women of the Miséricorde developed skills that would serve them once they left the house. They learned to sew, repair military uniforms, and darn socks. But the most successful venture was the making of French cigars. They were considered the best cigars in Bordeaux, according to a government agent, and it could have been very lucrative for the Miséricorde. But due to ongoing bureaucratic changes, it was often difficult to maintain permits and contracts and therefore, stability.

Never having planned to establish a religious order, it was only out of necessity that the Miséricorde became a religious institute. A woman of Bordeaux left a financial gift to the Miséricorde. Because the Miséricorde was not recognized by the government as either a house of refuge or a religious institute, Marie Thérèse could not collect the gift. After consultation with Chaminade, and others, she consented to the designation of a religious institute. The first professions were received in 1818.

Ultimately, the Miséricorde was recognized by the Church as a religious institute and a "refuge" for penitent prostitutes by the government.

Marie Thérèse and William Chaminade shared a 40-year collaboration. He was her spiritual director, and she a well-respected confidant. Their mutual respect and admiration served them well. They helped each other in their spiritual endeavors, according to their strengths.

Due to her strong organizational skills, Chaminade even sent Marie Thérèse to help Mother Adèle as she established the Daughters of Mary Immaculate. Her legacy is her unfailing commitment to the women of the Miséricorde and the Family of Mary. Numerous houses have been formed across Europe and even in the United States and Canada by women who tried to duplicate her work. Some still remain today.

“If only we had the generosity to surrender ourselves entirely to the Spirit of God! How He would guide us! How He would turn everything to our best advantage!”

(Letter from Father Chaminade to Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, December 8, 1798)