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Can We Say that Marie Thérèse de Lamourous is a Founder and Mother of the Lay Marianists?

In the September 2022 *Give Us This Day* missalette, Robert Ellsberg, author of the *Blessed Among Us* profiles, identified **Venerable Marie Thérèse** as Founder and Mother of the Lay Marianists. One wonders how he decided to use these titles. Are these terms appropriate for Marie Thérèse? Let us look at some points in Marie Thérèse's life that may have led to Mr. Ellsberg's use of these terms.

Founder:

Marie Thérèse was invited by Blessed Chaminade to lead the Young Women's section of the Bordeaux Sodality in 1801, and her name was the first one listed on its register. Blessed Chaminade knew of her work from the time of the French Revolution, where she coordinated an underground community of Catholic men and women. She was responsible for the religious education as well as attaining the necessary sacraments for the people. Marie Thérèse was a leader Chaminade highly respected, so she became a significant collaborator with him in the Bordeaux Sodality. Since her name appeared first, this may lead people to consider her a founder because she was instrumental in the organization of the female branches (later, a Ladies of the Retreat group was formed for women who were older and married) of the Sodality. Here in the United States, I believe that this major role with the early Sodality has been a reason why we have used the term "founder" for Marie Thérèse and maybe as well for Robert Ellsberg in his short essay.

In Europe, however, "founder" is not used, only collaborator. A reason for this most likely stems from the essential fact that Blessed Chaminade had the inspiration for the Sodality and the Family of Mary. He invited Marie Thérèse to be part of the project, and she accepted the invitation. She was also invited to direct the Miséricorde after the French Revolution. It was a project she took over and then made her own.

Fr. Joseph Stefanelli stressed that Marie Thérèse never wanted to be founder of a religious community since she believed the Miséricorde to be a lay work and a local endeavor. But when other women heard of her project and wanted to start similar homes in other parts of France and even other countries, she was identified as a "founder." However, "spiritual founder" may be a better term. After a period

of residency at the Miséricorde, these women would take what they learned back to their cities. These houses were independent of one another.

Mother:

Marie Thérèse was given the title “Mother” because of her leadership and responsibilities. She was a caring and nurturing individual who exhibited unconditional love. She was faith-filled and demonstrative in her expression of love in the administration of the Young Women’s section and Ladies of the Retreat section of the Sodality and the Miséricorde. Marie Thérèse was firm but had a merciful demeanor in coordinating the necessary activities for these various projects. Men and women looked upon her as a mother because of these qualities. The penitent women or her filles (her beloved daughters, as Marie Thérèse called them) of the Miséricorde called her “Bonne Mère.” They were her second family. Even priests engaged in foreign missions would call her mother whenever they visited Bordeaux because of her support for their work.

Marie Thérèse could be identified as Mother of the Lay Marianists because of her intimate relationship with Blessed Chaminade. Chaminade was her spiritual director, and he relied on her when he needed assistance with financial and other concerns connected to the Bordeaux Sodality, the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary.

Fr. Stefanelli stated that “they gave each other support in looking for Providence in the major decisions and frequent emergencies which often accompany new foundations.” (*Marie Thérèse de Lamourous; Firm of Hand, Loving of Heart*; pg 11) She was known as “the saint of Bordeaux” at her death. According to Fr. Stefanelli, a Vatican official who was visiting Bordeaux soon after her death, felt that her cause for sainthood needed to be introduced because “...like all true saints she was humble . . . and her kind, generous, loving disposition was wondrously joined to the qualities of a fighter who struggled courageously and untiringly for what she believed was right.” (*Marie Thérèse de Lamourous; Firm of Hand, Loving of Heart*; pg 26) I find this to be a wonderful definition for Mother.

See:

Joseph Stefanelli, SM. Mlle de Lamourous. North American Center for Marianist Studies, Dayton, OH 1998.

Joseph Stefanelli, SM. Marie Thérèse de Lamourous: Firm of Hand, Loving of Heart. North American Center for Marianist Studies, Dayton, OH 2001