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World Council of the Marianist Family
Consejo Mundial de la Familia Marianista

MARIE-THERESE, WHO ARE YOU?

A reflection on the role of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous in the Marianist Family

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I. A GREAT ECCLESIAL PERSONALITY

Marie Thérèse de Lamourous was undoubtedly a very great figure among the Christians of Bordeaux of the first half of the 19th century. The Marianist Family can boast of having counted within it such a personality.

What place do we have for her today in the Family of our Marianist charism? The responses vary enormously, from a practical ignorance of her to the attribution of the title of "Foundress" of the Marianist Family. This diversity indicates a certain confusion. A unity of understanding and dissemination of the charism on this point is important. This brief document is a proposal for clarification in order to determine more clearly the place of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous in our Family.

1. A MODEL OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

The life of Marie Thérèse demonstrates extraordinary **Christian virtues**, among which are:

Her courage. She faced great dangers in the name of her faith, especially during the Revolution. Like other laypersons, she hid priests or helped them to carry out their clandestine ministry. Often putting her own life in danger, she displayed exceptional coolness in the most perilous situations.

Her strength. This she revealed in the midst of many family trials, a particularly complex political and ecclesial situation and a seriously failing health. She held up under all these difficulties. Finally, despite a great repugnance to do so, she accepted the responsibility of the house of La Miséricorde without ever looking back.

Her prudence. Intelligent and fine-tuned, she caused no difficulties and knew how to circumvent danger without exposing herself unnecessarily.

Her wisdom. A woman of great common sense, respectful but free, she was often consulted and many appreciated her; she was very close to two Archbishops of Bordeaux, the holy Charles François d'Aviau and his successor, Cardinal Jean Louis Lefebvre de Cheverus.

Her theological virtues were particularly evident:

Her faith with which she faced many human and circumstantial obstacles and her ability to let herself be guided by God in the midst of events. She put herself totally into the hands of Providence when she had to pay for a house she had bought without having the money for it or enough to meet the on-going needs of her growing community.

Her hope enabled her to persevere in the midst of the greatest difficulties without abandoning herself to discouragement.

Her charity made her expend herself in the service of all, especially for the women victims of prostitution whom she took in at La Miséricorde. Her goodness quickly earned her the title of "Good Mother."

One of the secrets of such an accomplished life is found in the help she received through her **spiritual accompaniment,** to which she gave a great place in her life. Among her excellent accompaniers were Abbé Noël Lacroix, Carmelite Père Simon Pannetier, martyr of the French Revolution, and, from 1795, until her death, Blessed Father Chaminade. The latter exerted a strong influence on her and helped her, in particular, to free herself from a case of scruples. With his approval, she pronounced in 1796 an act of offering to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in expiation for the evil committed against God in those troubled times. That act had a great importance in her life and she renewed it several times later.

2. A WOMAN OF ACTION

Marie Thérèse worked with great energy and a great sense of organization. She knew how to associate others with what she was doing. She knew how to perceive hidden talents or generosity and get them to work outwardly. This ability was particularly useful to her in the work she had to do in La Miséricorde.

Her capacities were what, in March 1801, made Father Chaminade choose her as the **first person to be in charge of the Girls' Sodality.**

In the same way, at the time of the **birth of the Daughters of Mary** in Agen, Father Chaminade, unable to go himself, delegated Marie Thérèse to assist them in the first weeks of setting up

their community. Her presence and the wisdom she had gained from her own experience were highly valued; she earned a great deal of esteem and affection there.

Far from being a unique example, her activity was part of the great current of the Bordeaux laity born in the midst of the revolutionary period, a current that could boast of the presence of several martyrs.

3. AN ADMIRED FOUNDRESS

The work accomplished at La Miséricorde provoked great admiration, not only **within the Church, but also in the civil and political society** of the time. She thus succeeded in receiving the support of the imperial government or, in Paris, of important benefactors, thus enabling her to continue the work undertaken. In order to ensure its permanence, from 1813, La Miséricorde adopted the statutes of a religious congregation with simple vows.

Beginning in 1817, to stimulate the faith of her protégés, and to work for the missions, she organized with the priests of the Foreign Missions of Paris an "**Association of prayers to ask for the conversion of the infidels.**" The missionaries leaving for distant countries would come to La Miséricorde and sign a contract, promising to offer the hardships of their mission for the amendment and the perseverance of the young women who, in exchange, would pray for the conversion of the infidels entrusted to the missionaries. This work continued until 1931. Several of these missionaries were martyred and some of them were canonized.

The experience of Marie Thérèse was called upon to help **open houses similar** to La Miséricorde in several cities. Several works, and therefore several founders, draw directly or indirectly from her work. Thérèse Rondeau came to train with her in Bordeaux and then founded La Miséricorde of Laval, Madame Fournié did the same for Cahors, then Mlle Yon for Libourne. The Laval Miséricorde would itself be associated with a similar work in Poland; from among the members of that Polish branch one day would come Saint Faustyna Kowalska, who is at the origin of the devotion of Divine Mercy, now universally widespread. In all these places, Marie Thérèse de Lamourous is venerated as a saint.

The **death of Marie Thérèse in 1836** provoked, in Bordeaux especially, a considerable movement of faith and devotion, which manifested the great admiration of the Christian people for her life and activity. Two biographies were published shortly afterwards. That of Father Pouget, SJ, of 1843, was widely disseminated and soon translated into English, German, Italian and Polish.

II. AN EXCEPTIONAL FIGURE OF THE MARIANIST FAMILY

The strength of her personality, the remarkable qualities of her Christian virtues, her close relationships to Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, and especially to Father Chaminade, her influential presence at important moments in Marianist history, suggest that she belongs within the Family.

Yet it must be recognized that her place is generally undefined and sometimes ignored. In recent times, she has sometimes been portrayed as a Foundress. What should we think about that and how should we describe her place within the Marianist Family?

1. WHAT IS MEANT WHEN ONE SPEAKS OF A FOUNDER OR FOUNDRESS?

This is the first point to be clarified in order to determine whether the place of Marie Thérèse corresponds to that particular role.

One is considered as Founder or Foundress who

- receives a call from God,
- intended to be shared with others, disciples,
- each of the latter recognizing in the example of the Founder/Foundress, an illuminating clarification of God's call to him/her.

This identification is such that it is not unusual for the call to be perceived through the very example of life or action of the Founder/Foundress, whether living or not.

That is so necessary that it will always be possible to find in each "disciple" traits common to the Founder or the Foundress. The opposite could lead to doubt about the reality of the person's vocation.

This call received by the Founder/Foundress and then shared by other members includes:

- an emphasis on a particular aspect of the Gospel,
- embodied in a spirituality and community lifestyle,
- expressing itself in a privileged apostolic domain in response to the calls of time.

The inheritance of the Founder or Foundress is reflected in **a privileged contact of his/her disciples** with him or her:

- by imitating his/her testimony of life and his virtues,
- and in the deepening of his/her message and writings,
  as founding elements for the life and mission of those disciples.

This personal contact constitutes the charismatic identity of the Institute and can therefore never be lacking.

The call received by the Founder or Foundress gives him/her the **criteria to guide the Institute** in its chronological and geographical development and to exercise discernment for all the necessary decisions:

- incorporation, formation and accompaniment of members of the Institute,
- opening or closing works,
- adaptation to new contexts or cultures,
- type of mission to adopt and how to carry it out,
- particular peculiarities for the collective prayer or for the spiritual life of each member,
- identification signs (costume, titles ...)
- ...

All these characteristics are harmonized by means of the Constitutions of which the Founder or the Foundress is, if not the editor, at least the principal inspiration.

The role of the Founder or Foundress is formalized through the Church's recognition of the movement or congregation born under their influence.

2. MARIE-THERESE AND THE FONDATION OF THE SODALITIES OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF BORDEAUX

Here is an area where her influence is indisputable. Let us look at the facts with which she was associated and the role she played.

2.1. The events

Beginning in December 1800, at the invitation of Fr. William Joseph Chaminade, the first young men who formed the nucleus of the Marian Sodality met. This masculine branch made official its commitment on February 2, 1801. On the following **March 25**, it was the turn of nine girls to dedicate themselves to Mary, thus giving birth to the female branch of the sodalists. Marie-Thérèse, who was part of this group was then 46 years old, while the one closest to her in age was only 24 years old. She was given responsibility for the girls' section, which would have 60 members within a year. She would henceforth be the "Mother" of this section, until 1809. In the framework of these functions, it is possible that she helped Father Chaminade in the drafting of certain texts intended for this section, just as other leaders did for the other sections.

At the beginning of 1801, she took **responsibility for La Miséricorde**, with the approval of Father Chaminade. Despite this heavy burden and despite a rather fragile health, she remained active in the Girls' Sodality until 1809.

A group of adult women had been recruited by Father Chaminade and the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Rauzan, to aid La Miséricorde at its beginnings. This group formed, from 1804, the nucleus of the "Ladies of the Retreat," a new branch of the Sodality of the Immaculate.[1] After leaving the girls' branch, Marie-Therese became the Mother of this group.

When the Little Society of Agen, founded by Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, came into contact with the Bordeaux Sodality in the summer of 1808, epistolary contacts developed between Adèle and Father Chaminade, and sometimes also, with the Mother of the girls' section, Mademoiselle de Lamourous.[2]

2.2. Interpretation

The foundation of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception of Bordeaux was inspired by Fr. William Joseph Chaminade. It is sufficiently clear in his correspondence that there is no need to

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[1] Cf. VERRIER Joseph, *Histoire de la congrégation*, 1965, T. 2, pp. 59-60.

[2] These letters have been lost, but evidence of them remains in Adèle's correspondence: "Well, my dear Agathe, what have you to say about all the graces that are coming to us from Bordeaux? Father Chaminade certainly seems to be a holy man. How flattering the welcome he gives us. Now, let us try to be worthy of the high opinion he has of the Society.
And the letter from our Mother, Mlle de Lamourous? I find her most charming and affectionate. Let us respond to her exhortation to help each other to win hearts for Jesus Christ and his holy Mother" (Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, *Letter 97,* March 15, 1809, to Agathe Diché).

say more. He can, without any doubt, be considered as the Founder, as Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon can be of the *Little Society*, born in Agen to support the girls of that group in their Christian life.

Can we consider Mlle de Lamourous as a co-foundress of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception?

Favorable elements:

- Her role was important from the beginning and for an extended period, especially in the girls' section. She was in charge of it for nine years.
  Her responsibility for the Ladies of the Retreat is later and more difficult to evaluate.
  Despite her heavy responsibilities at La Miséricorde, she fulfilled these tasks attentively.

- It is possible that she helped Father Chaminade in the drafting of certain texts, without that being easy to determine with certainty.

- The richness of her personality, linked to an important ecclesial and charitable responsibility, could not remain without influence on the members of the Sodality, young or adult, who were generally characterized by a great desire for Christian life and commitment.

Elements that pose questions:

- It does not seem that, in the early days of the Sodality, as well as subsequently, the title of "Foundress" was attributed to Mlle de Lamourous, either within the movement or on the part of outsiders.

- The role of Mlle de Lamourous in the drafting of founding documents is possible, if not probable, but is not established in an indisputable way. Other personalities intervened in this field, such as Bro. David Monier or other members of the Sodality, without considering themselves as founders of the Sodality.[3]

[3] See, for example, the documents published in *The Chaminade Legacy*, Vol. I, nn. 60-66. See also in the same volume the Introduction, pp. xxx & xxxvi (specifically about Doc. I-66) and p. 22 about the writing of Doc. I-93, entirely from the hand of Brother Monier.

- More recently, the decree recognizing the MLC as an "international private association of faithful," of March 25, 2000, associates this movement with Father Chaminade and Mother Adèle, but does not mention Marie Thérèse de Lamourous.4

- Within the lay branches, the life of Mlle de Lamourous is known, but her writings are not, without this seeming to pose any problem at the present time for the movement. A similar situation for Father Chaminade or Mother Adèle would be considered abnormal: the deepening of the writings of a founder, a foundress, is part of the normal connection that the disciples have with him or her.

3. MARIE-THERESE AND THE FOUNDATION OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY

3.1. The Involvement of Marie Thérèse

In 1816, Marie Thérèse received from Father Chaminade himself the mission of assisting, in his place, the beginnings of the new community of Agen. This action was in a well-defined framework since the first Constitutions (published in *The Chaminade Legacy,* Vol. 5, Doc. 2) had already been drafted by Father Chaminade, as evidenced by his letter of December 6, 1815, while the first Regulations were already under development in Bordeaux.[5] In taking the responsibility for the writing of these documents, Father Chaminade had acted as a true co-founder alongside Adèle, and he was conscious of being so, as other details of this episode show.

By that date, and already for three years, La Miséricorde had evolved towards the status of a congregation with simple vows. As a result, Marie Thérèse could bring to this new foundation all her experience and wisdom, in spite of the differences between La Miséricorde and the new foundation, which Father Chaminade envisaged according to the model of an Institute with solemn vows. For Marie Thérèse, it was a question of transforming a group of fervent friends into a religious community, of introducing them to the way of life proper to that institution and to all the concrete aspects in which it was incarnated. It was not an easy task.

Father Chaminade wrote to Mother Adele: "... I do intend sending you Mlle de Lamourous shortly before my departure, to guide you through all the preliminaries to your organization as a community. This lady is highly experienced, readily tactful to a nicety and very exact. She seems to be the very

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[4] ... « faithful to the charism of the Venerable Servant of God, the Reverend Father William Joseph Chaminade, and to the charism of the Venerable Servant of God, Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon ... »

[5] *Letter 59*, to Mlle de Trenquelléon.

person to make all the preparations, so that at my arrival I may devote myself exclusively to instilling in you the spirit of your state, etc...."[6]

Arriving on the very day of the foundation, on May 25, 1816, Mlle de Lamourous took charge of the situation: presentation of the aspirants to the Bishop of Agen, pooling of the assets contributed by each, distribution of work, conferences on the religious life twice a day: nothing was wanting, and when Father Chaminade arrived on June 8, everything was in order.

Another vital element is that it was Marie Thérèse who encouraged Father Chaminade to choose Adèle as superior of the new community. The vivacity of this young girl had at first disgusted her, and she had openly expressed her doubts, but Adèle's reaction of total submission had immediately revealed to Thérèse the profound spiritual qualities hidden behind Adèle's excessive sensitivity.[7]

After Mademoiselle de Lamourous's return to Bordeaux, the two foundresses remained in contact, and exchanged several letters, unfortunately all lost.[8] They would not meet again until eight years later, in 1824, when Mother Adèle came to install a novitiate in Bordeaux, near La Miséricorde.[9]

3.2 Interpretation

This brief description shows the deep and lasting impact that Marie Thérèse had on the nascent group. Some aspects are similar to the style of influence exercised by a foundress, in particular because of her involvement in the organization of life and by ensuring the very first initiation into the religious life of the founding group. Something of this first impulse will most probably have been preserved and even transmitted to the next generation, creating an early tradition.

However, it should be noted that:

- no writing of Marie Thérèse seems to have been preserved in connection with this first initiation, so no text that played a founding role within the congregation;
- for her task, Marie Thérèse relied on the existing documents drafted by Father Chaminade, assisted by his secretary, Bro. David Monier;
- the correspondence exchanged after her departure between her and Mother Adèle does not seem to have had the objective of provoking changes in the convent, unlike the letters or visits of Father Chaminade, which were often accompanied by precise

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[6] G.-J. CHAMINADE, Letter 64, of February 19, 1816, to Mlle de Trenquelléon.
[7] Cf. SIMLER Joseph, *Guillaume-Joseph Chaminade* ..., 1901, p. 350.
[8] Adèle mentions, in her letter of September 16, 1816 : « *La mère Lamourous nous écrit de jolies lettres ; je vous envoie une partie d'elle* » ; Lettre 308, à Lolotte de Lachapelle.
[9] Cf. Adèle de BATZ de TRENQUELLEON, Lettre 516 du 29 juillet 1824.

indications on reforms to be implemented or new aspects to be taken into consideration;

- never did Father Chaminade, Mother Adèle, or even other members of the congregations of brothers or sisters, seem to attribute the title of foundress to Marie Thérèse, even though they explicitly attribute it to each other;[10]

- at the hearing of the seventy witnesses selected for the opening of the cause of Marie-Thérèse, in 1911 in Bordeaux, no Daughter of Mary was present and only two male Marianists, one of them being Fr. Henri Lebon, Assistant General and undoubtedly present as such.[11]

The influence exercised by Marie Thérèse cannot be hidden, nor forgotten, but it must be admitted that it was very brief. Does not the expression used by Father Chaminade in his letter 64 give us a key to the interpretation of the role of Marie Thérèse: "I haven't the least intention of sending you a superioress from here, but I do intend sending you Mlle de Lamourous shortly before my departure, to guide you through all the preliminaries to your organization as a community"?[12]

Was not her influence above all that of her sanctity, her exceptional tact, and her profound penetration into the thought of Father Chaminade, whom she had then known for 21 years, as his *dirigée*, collaborator and spiritual friend?

III. CONCLUSIONS:

MARIE-THERESE, WHO ARE YOU FOR THE MARIANIST FAMILY?

1. WHAT IS CLEARLY ESTABLISHED

Marie-Thérèse de Lamourous belonged to the Marianist Family from 1801 until her death in 1836. She is a glory for all its members.

She has always been considered with great admiration and affection in the midst of the Marianist Family, who truly venerate her.

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[10] See, for example, Fr. Chaminade's *Letters* 427 and 440; on Fr. Chaminade, Adèle's *Letter* 512 (§6).
[11] The « List of Witnesses Heard » in the course of the process in Bordeaux is to be found in the *Positio super virtutibus*, Rome, 1978, pp. 988-990.
[12] W.J. Chaminade, *Letter* 64, of February 19, 1816, to Mlle de Trenquelléon.

She exerted an important and significant influence in the early days of this Family, especially at the time of the creation of the women's sections of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception and in the years that followed, as well as in the beginnings of the organization of the first Daughters of Mary community.

In both cases, that action and that influence were linked to an important leadership responsibility, very temporary for the Daughters of Mary, much longer for the Sodality of the Immaculate. It was carried out in a spirit of close collaboration with Father Chaminade, who entrusted her with those responsibilities.

Naturally, the exceptional personality of the Servant of God could not leave others indifferent and she exercised of herself a natural influence wherever she was present.

2. REASONS WHICH SEEM NOT TO PERMIT THE DESIGNATION OF MARIE-THERESE AS A FOUNDRESS OF THE MARIANIST FAMILY

It does not appear that Marie Thérèse was given the responsibility of defining the spirit of the one or the other of these branches, much less of both.

No founding text can be clearly attributed to her (while others did have this privilege, although it was always under close supervision by the Founder: Monier, Lalanne, Fontaine, ...).

Never was the Servant of God referred to in the beginnings as the foundress at the heart of one of the Marianist foundations.

None of the statutory texts of any of the branches, yesterday or today, ever mentioned Marie-Thérèse de Lamourous among the founders; this is particularly important for the texts that defined or define our ecclesial identity and which were, as such, ratified by the diocesan or universal authorities of the Church.

Never has any of the writings of the Servant of God been incorporated into a corpus considered as constitutive of our charismatic identity.

The designation of Marie Thérèse as foundress does not well describe her role and hence makes it more difficult to define it properly. Far from serving her cause, this term can even harm it, causing a negative reaction to her person so as to be sure not to grant her a place that does not seem appropriate.

Finally, and in the case where this point merits clarification, the Sisters of La Miséricorde do not consider themselves attached to the Marianist Family, even though Father Chaminade was their ecclesiastical superior from their foundation until his death.

3. ACCOMPANIED BY FATHER CHAMINADE

Marie-Thérèse knew Father Chaminade before there was even a mention of the foundation of what was to become one day the Marianist Family. To be accompanied by him for more than forty years was an essential element of the life of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous.

As an excellent spiritual director, Fr. Chaminade did not attempt to mark her with his own perspectives, but helped her to develop the many natural talents present in her and to orient them according to a vision of faith. The freedom he left her was visible when he allowed her to accept, against all expectations, the responsibility of La Miséricorde: he neither pushed her nor stopped her. He helped her to free herself from the internal obstacles of scruples, to offer herself radically as an offering of reparation, to structure with exigency and moderation her spiritual life.

From a more external point of view, he also accompanied the work and then the congregation of La Miséricorde as its ecclesiastical superior. By her own admission, at her usual pace, Marie Thérèse "does almost everything, with some advice," but it was, however, a relationship more for mutual exchange and reflection.[13] One of the signs of this collaboration, and of the influence of Father Chaminade, is preserved for us in the series of eleven conferences which he gave to the Sisters of La Miséricorde between November 1819 and May 1820.[14]

An Influence within the Marianist Family, Marie-Thérèse de Lamourous was also herself affected by this direct and prolonged contact with Father Chaminade. Their long mutual association gave her the opportunity to fully understand the Founder's thinking and to act on his behalf on several occasions, sometimes on temporal affairs, and especially for the good of the foundations he was working on.

4. PROPOSALS

4.1. What can we deduce from it?

Should Marie Thérèse de Lamourous be excluded from our Marianist memory? Certainly not! It would be a serious injustice to her historical contribution to our origins. To forget such a figure would be a great impoverishment for all of us. It would be to lose a great example of social action and charity, and it would be to go against our two Founders who held her in such high esteem.

4.2. What is to be done?

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[13] CHAMINADE, *Letter* 165 of July 10, 1821.
[14] Cf. "Conferences at the Miséricorde of Bordeaux", *in* : *The Chaminade Legacy*, Vol. 5, no. 46.

1. Make sure to give her her full place as an eminent member of the Marianist Family. Make known her life and her testimony as an essential element, necessary for the understanding of our history. At the same time, we must also ensure that our two Founders occupy the first place in our devotion and affection since they are those with whom we are called to identify because of the call that we have received from God to belong to their spiritual family.

2. Take action in favor of her beatification and then canonization in order to give her her rightful place in the Church and the devotion due to her in the Marianist Family.

3. Place her image willingly in our homes, but avoid ambiguous representations or dispositions which lead us to believe that she would be part of a trio of founders.

4. Discard the use of the term "Foundress" in relation to the Marianist Family.

4.3. A "Founding Group"?

Would it not be appropriate, in order to do justice to some of the most important members of our history, to draw, around the two Founders, a **founding group** made up of the persons who had a significant influence on the development of one or more stages of the foundation. This founding group could be constituted by those who played a major role in the birth of our various branches and without whom we would not be at all what we are today. Membership in this group would not be linked primarily to the sanctity of life, but rather to the personal influence exerted on the foundation.

Some, such as Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, or Jean Baptiste Lalanne, could undoubtedly be included in such a group, and perhaps also Jeanne and Agathe Diché, David Monier, or perhaps even the members who formed the foundation group of each of the branches. It would not be absolutely necessary to make an exhaustive list. It would be possible to take advantage of certain dates to give thanks to God for what we owe them, while endeavoring to know them better in order to inspire ourselves with their generosity.

May this reflection serve the unity of our Family in the understanding and celebration of its history and charism.