

# Pilgrimage from India to Rome and Beyond

*By Bro. Showraiah Ravulapalli SM, a Marianist Seminarian from India*

The seminarians from Chaminade International Seminary in Rome journeyed on a 10-day pilgrimage walking with Blessed Father Chaminade and visiting foundational places. It was a feeling mixed with joy, emotions and blessings. A walk accompanied by Blessed Chaminade himself explains the route he walked 200 years ago. A journey filled with joy, encounters and emotions.

The pilgrimage explored the foundational places of Marianists in France and Spain. There were seven of us, including Fr. Eduardo Manalo, the previous Superior General of the Society of Mary, who directed the reflections of our pilgrimage. The long-awaited and dreamt-about day to visit the birthplaces of Blessed Chaminade and the Society of Mary has come true for me.

With a lot of joy and happiness, we arrived in Bordeaux (the birthplace of the Marianists.) On September 18th, we took a walk visiting various places and reached Madeline, the residence of Father Chaminade. It was a triple feast for me; the visit to Madeline, the feast of our Marianist Madrid martyrs and my birthday. As I entered the church of Madeleine, my joy began to rise with the beat of my heart. Slowly my eyes began to get wet, and my nose began to breathe deeply. I walked slowly to the room of Blessed Chaminade. I was alone in his room, sitting most probably where he once sat 200 years ago. It was an experience of encounter, an experience of Pentecost.

I slowly walked around the room, touching every bit of thing in his room. Every time I touched something, I felt a touchback of our Blessed Founder. What a joy – an experience filled with emotions. I paused for a while to remind my conscience that it was only me who was touching. There is no reverse touchback. But my conscience refused to listen to me.

I sat looking at the picture placed behind the altar in his room. It was a picture I had never encountered before, Blessed Chaminade with big eyes, wide open, with very bright and thick black eyeballs staring at me. Staring at me with a deep love of communication, looking at me without even blinking. It was a deep love I probably experienced from my mother when I was born, and she looked at me for the first time three decades ago.

I wanted to ask him why he was staring at me so intently. But the power of his sight did not allow me or give me a chance to do so. What does he want to tell me? Is he wishing me a happy birthday? I got up and made another round touching all that was placed in his room again. This time it was to see if I get the touchback again. As I write now, it reminds me of a child looking at the mirror for the first time and seeing another baby resembling him in the mirror doing whatever they do. Does our Blessed Founder resemble me? Or am I resembling him?

On my walk back home, I had the great feeling of walking in his footsteps. Placing my foot exactly where he might have set his once upon a time, and surprisingly my foot sometimes was a little bigger than his footprints but other times smaller. As I write, I still feel the same as if I were in Bordeaux.

The next day we went to Mussidan and Perigueux. My feeling of walking with him and meeting him continued. I could imagine him playing around as a child with other children and Mary having an eye on him, most probably indicating the future. What a joy!

Then came another spot I longed to witness – the tomb of Blessed Chaminade. It's a place where he is resting yet always guiding the Marianists. I became very emotional, touching the tomb and spending a little bit of time sitting, supporting my back on the pillar of his tomb. I don't know why, but I repeatedly told him I was sorry. I could not spend much time in prayer but said, "here I am at your feet." I got some flowers for him and told him thanks. Thanks for everything. What a joy! It was like I was bidding farewell to him. How nice would it be if my flowers remained fresh forever at his feet? I chose the flowers in different colors, thinking of his different foundations representing different flowers, making one single bouquet (MLC, FMI, SM, etc.) It gave me a feeling of joy, contentment, emotions and grace pouring.

Talks by Fr. Manalo resembled the journey of walking with our Founder. It felt like a child learning to walk. A feeling of grounding oneself in the spirit of our Founder. What a joy!

Finally, in Zaragoza, where Chaminade was a stranger on his day of arrival, but after three years in 1800, there was a resurrection. He rose from the death of pain with a mission to form people in faith of which fruit I am here today. What a joy!

I sat at the foot of our Lady and told her, “Here I am at your feet” (same as I told Father Founder at his tomb.) I asked her to make me what she wants me to become, not as I wish to be. I asked her to be the source of my life as she was for our Blessed Founder. I told her to bless us (Marianists) to be the carriers of her, not just her name alone.

For a short time, I reflected on how Blessed Chaminade would have spent his three years at Her feet. Maybe with a lot of confusion, pain, prayer and hope. I asked Her to bless me with the same hope and trust. Did I get a replay? My pilgrimage ended with significant serenity at the foot of our Lady of Zaragoza. Some may experience great serenity sitting in the basilica, but I felt it just sitting at Her feet alone. What a joy! What a way to end the pilgrimage and provide hope to continue the walk with the Founder for the rest of my life – with a serenity and a feeling of completion. What a joy! What a joy! What a joy!