

A Marianist Moment - Family Online October 2023

Our Lady of the Pillar and Fr. Chaminade

In October, the Marianist world celebrates an important Marian Feast, Our Lady of the Pillar. The feast commemorates the apparition of Mary to St. James the Greater Apostle in A.D. 40. It is considered the first Marian apparition in recorded Church history and also the only one that occurred while Mary was still alive. It was actually a bilocation since she was living in Jerusalem.

During the early ministry (post-Pentecost) of the Apostles, James traveled to Roman Hispania (modern-day Spain). He was not very successful in his evangelization efforts and was frustrated and discouraged by the lack of conversions in the area. He was sitting on the bank of the Ebro River in Caesaraugusta (modern-day Saragossa) when Mary appeared with thousands of angels surrounding her. Her purpose was to console and encourage James in his ministry. Mary, with the child Jesus in her arms and standing on a pillar, asked James and the other disciples to build a church on the site, promising that “It will stand from that moment until the end of time in order that God may work miracles and wonders through my intercession for all those who place themselves under my patronage.” And so the Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar is the first church dedicated to Mary in history and remains standing to this day. (see “Why Our Lady of the Pillar is the patroness of Spain and the Americas,” by Alejandro Bermudez on www.catholicnewsagency.com)

As we know, Blessed Chaminade arrived in Saragossa in 1797 when he was exiled from France during the French Revolution. He and his fellow exiles, no doubt, had feelings of frustration, disappointment and even anger because of their situation. They received communications regularly about the events from their homeland such as “the ups and downs of French politics, status of French public opinion, military operations, police ‘visits to domiciles,’ and arrests and deportations.” (See Chaminade in Saragossa by Joseph Stefanelli, SM - PAC, Vol 25, No.7, December 1, 1992, Marianist Series 200)

Being a man of deep faith, Blessed Chaminade most likely knew the story of Our Lady of the Pillar. From his early childhood he had a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary (He visited the Shrine of Our Lady of Verdels due to his healing from a leg injury.) Spending time in prayer and reflection was not foreign to him. He would go to the basilica and spend much of his time before the statue. Granted, we have never seen any documentation concerning the issues that Chaminade may have brought to his prayer before Our Lady of the Pillar, but we may extrapolate that he wanted some type of consolation and encouragement due to his and his fellow exiles’ predicament. He probably sought some form of guidance of what to do for himself but more importantly for his fellow French Catholic Christians.

It was from these moments of intense prayer before Our Lady of the Pillar with his belief in the Divine Providence of God, that our Marianist historians concluded that Blessed Chaminade was inspired with the mission of reestablishing the Catholic Christian faith when he would return to France. (This conclusion has been based on the writings of Blessed

Chaminade after 1800 where he referred to his time in Saragossa even though he never mentioned exactly what occurred during his prayer before Our Lady of the Pillar).

So, the fruits of Blessed Chaminade's prayers before Our Lady of the Pillar can be seen today in the Family of Mary: the Marianist Lay Communities, the Visitation State Community, the Marianist Affiliates, the Society of Mary, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and other collaborators who are seeking to continue the mission of bringing Jesus into our world as Mary did. And just as Father Chaminade spent time before Our Lady of the Pillar at a moment where he felt the need for guidance, we, in our moments of discouragement, disappointment, and anger, are being called as Marianists to seek Mary's assistance and guidance as Our Lady of the Pillar.

Reference:

Lawrence Cada, SM and Carol Ramey, Basic Handbook of Marianist Studies, North American Center of Marianist Studies, Dayton, OH, 2016.