

## **Blessed William Joseph Chaminade**

### His Vision and the Role of Schools

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade (1761-1850) lived during the years of the French Revolution. In his ministry following the upheavals of the revolution, he encountered an ignorance of religious faith, indifference, abandonment of Christian life, and the structural ruin of the Church. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit he realized that new institutions and new methods were necessary to revive the religious spirit of his native France.

Blessed Chaminade always sought inspiration in Mary, at whose sanctuary of Our Lady of the Pillar in Saragossa, Spain, he prayed while in exile during the Revolution. He saw Mary as the one who received the word of the Lord and pondered it in her heart, the woman who gave Christ to the world, the Mother who cooperates with the Holy Spirit in the formation of believers. Mary embodied all the attitudes of the Gospel. Chaminade committed himself to assisting Mary in the mission of bringing persons to become more like her son Jesus. With this vision of Mary's role, he sought to re-Christianize France.

. . . the development of community life in the spirit of the Gospel

Central to Chaminade's means was the development of community life in the spirit of the Gospel and the practice of the early Church. Such a community could be a witness of a people of saints, showing that the Gospel still could be lived in all times and places. A Christian community could attract others to follow Christ. Thus, Chaminade founded communities of lay men and women as a means of re-Christianizing France.

Eventually, within these lay Christian communities, some expressed the desire to follow Christ as vowed religious. In 1816, Blessed Chaminade, in collaboration with Adele de Batz de Trenquellion, founded the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (Marianist Sisters). In 1817, he founded the Society of Mary (Marianist Brothers and Priests). He saw in these two religious orders the means to maintain, inspire, and extend the network of communities and works founded through his inspiration.

Blessed Chaminade continued the work of developing lay Christian communities. Simultaneously, he directed the Marianist religious into schools that they might become Christian communities of learning. During his lifetime, he founded over forty schools, including three teacher-training institutions. Chaminade perceived these schools as having the mission of enculturation of an essentially religious worldview.

The essential purpose of his schools was to form persons in religious faith. The teacher worked toward the moral development of the student when teaching. In contrast to the "teaching practitioner" of his time, Chaminade desired educators in the Marianist tradition to give a "Christian lesson by every word, by every gesture, by every look." He counseled teachers to form the heart and not reject as bad what is not absolutely good in a student. It sufficed for every person to be as God wills him or her to be.

From these origins in France, Marianist education spread to Switzerland (1839), Austria (1857), and Italy (1888). In 1849, a year before Blessed Chaminade's death, Marianists came to the United States. Today, the Society of Mary serves in thirty countries on five continents. They minister in over 100 schools in the world, including twenty-four secondary and middle schools and three universities (the University of Dayton, St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, and Chaminade University in Honolulu, Hawaii) in the United States. Marianists also conduct parishes, retreat centers, and works in developing nations.

As with the first ministry of Blessed Chaminade, lay Christian communities, Marianists assist in animating approximately three hundred lay groups with over 10,000 lay Marianists throughout the world. In all of these works, Marianists continue the vision of Blessed Chaminade by carrying out Mary's mission of bringing persons to Christ, her son.

For a good summary of Blessed Chaminade's life and mission, you can read CHAMINADE: PRAGMATIST WITH A VISION, Joseph Stefanelli, S.M., and North American Center for Marianist Studies, Dayton, Ohio. [nacms@notes.udayton.edu](mailto:nacms@notes.udayton.edu)

From a talk given by Father Joe Lackner, SM to the school administrators in 1994.