

Father Chaminade and the Church

by Eduardo Benlloch, SM

I have spent some time in Rome doing research in the General Archives of the Society of Mary. There, I thought about searching for documents regarding the vision that Father Chaminade had of the Church. What I write today is not at all the result of research. It is only some aspects, which surprised me by the clarity and even at times by the relevance of ideas and the experience that Father Chaminade had of the Church.

Some Images of the Church

Father Chaminade speaks about the Church on many occasions. He presents her to his sodalists, to the women of the Miséricorde, and to his men and women religious. He does it by employing figures or images. Some are classical, taken from the Bible (often times they are mere suggestions). Other times, he develops them somewhat, with curious and original nuances. I like his way of holding them up for consideration because they almost always point to the Church as a mystery. It is not merely a human reality created by men and women; above all, it is a mystery of our Catholic faith that one must believe. Some examples include the following:

- The Church is *Noah's Ark*. He says that Noah significantly prefigures Jesus Christ, and his ark is the Church, in which people are saved.
- Several times he states the Church is *the heavenly holy city of Jerusalem*. Once, he literally explains, "In the middle of the square of the holy city of Jerusalem, in the middle of the Church, to indicate how easy it is for everyone to come to gather fruits from the tree of life; that is, the fruits of grace coming from the Church."
- He also talks about the Church as a field where true treasures can be found.
- It is typical of our Founder to consider the Church, *born from the side of the crucified Christ*, pierced by the soldier's spear. He presents her in this way to his sodalists, the women of the Miséricorde, and the Daughters of Mary. I already had the opportunity to present this image in a previous article [*"María, nueva Eva,"* in *Vida Marianista*, no. 56, p. 3], and to see there how he opened up broad perspectives for our contemplation.
- Other times he also uses the image of a *building* or of *the Temple*.
- Father Chaminade very much likes to present the Church as *the spouse of Christ*. Here, we find a passage that caught my attention: "Jesus Christ is most assuredly the spouse of the Church and of our souls; the marriages among people are a figure of the marriage of Christ and the Church, 'it is a great mystery.'" He even says, "On the cross, Jesus Christ abandons father and mother to be united to the Church and therefore to each soul" (see *The Chaminade Legacy*, vol. 3, p. 65, doc. 28).

But Above All It Is the Mystical Body

Father Chaminade has a great number of notes and outlines of conferences on the mystical body. Thomas Stanley, a North American Marianist priest, published his doctoral thesis in 1952 on *The Mystical Body of Christ According to the Writings of Father William Joseph Chaminade*. He did not lack materials from which to work. It is noteworthy that at that time, Father Chaminade considered the Church as the mystical body of Christ. If we join this to all the images he used, we can congratulate ourselves that he perceived the Church above all as a mystery of our faith, much more than as an association or a society. But we run into a double difficulty: 1) All these writings were not done for publication; nor were they published in a logical manner. They were occasional notes to be used in his missionary activity. 2) Father Chaminade was not a theologian. Therefore, it is difficult to find in him a theological definition of the mystical body. The Founder wants us to *live out* the mystical body of Christ. This is his intention and his perspective. For this reason, the author of the book mentioned above added a very evocative subtitle to his work: *A Study of His Spiritual Doctrine*.

He wants us to feel and experience the Church as the mystical body of Christ, through an intimate and close relationship with Christ and with all other people. Even in the extreme case of love for one's enemies, Father Chaminade has a very profound text:

But how is it possible to love one's enemies? . . . By the Spirit of Jesus Christ diffused throughout the Church, a bond more pleasing and closer than that of flesh and blood. . . . The Church is not purely a political body like other societies which are bonded only by a moral union and by external ties—that is to say, by the same laws and the same government. The Mystical Body, whose members are interiorly and truly united by the same Spirit, forms in them a love among, and a penchant for, one another (AGMAR 9.13.1. Reproduced in *The Chaminade Legacy*, vol. 4, p. 21).

Mary and the Mystical Body

In my opinion, Father Chaminade's privileged contemplation of the mystical body of Christ becomes combined with his charismatic vision of the figure of Mary in the eternal plan of God. For this reason, there are a number of parallelisms, which are certainly original in the history of spirituality; at first, they are written in his notes. Later in his life, they are stated in a more decisive way.

There is a first parallelism that could be summarized thus: the natural body of Jesus Christ when he became incarnate and the mystical body of Jesus Christ when the Church was founded. What is Mary's mission in this first parallelism? She is the *natural mother* of the body of Christ, but not in a blind fashion; rather, as a conscious and willing agent of that incarnation; she is the *spiritual mother* of all people who, united to Jesus Christ, form his mystical body or Church. And she lives this in a mystery of love regarding these children.

Among a mother's functions is being a formator or educator. Father Chaminade constantly stated that Mary is our mother and therefore *our educator* in the faith. And on our part, we must *let ourselves be formed in the faith by Mary*.

At this point, I cannot resist a text from the famous *Notebook "D,"* which expresses a very personal reflection of the Founder:

Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of the august Mary by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ was brought forth from the virginal womb of Mary. "Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary."

Baptism and faith bring about the life of Jesus Christ in us, and thus we are, so to speak, conceived by the Holy Spirit. But we should, like the Savior, be born of the Virgin Mary.

It is in the virginal womb of Mary that Jesus Christ willed to form himself to our likeness; and it is there similarly that we should form ourselves to his likeness, regulate our activity according to his, our inclinations according to his inclinations, and our life according to his life (reproduced in *Marianist Origins*, p. 182).

The inevitable consequence he deduces from this reflection is that our basic attitude toward Mary is a *filial attitude*. This helps to fully understand the following text, from *Meditation no. 18, of the Retreat of 1821*:

When the Israelites were facing any danger, they cried "Lord, Lord!" because they put their hope in Him. Jesus Christ has taught us that, when we need something, we only have to say "Our Father who art in heaven." The sons of Mary cry: "Our mother, our mother!" And their hope will not be in vain because they have placed their trust in her, who has been given great power.

To finish, I want to stress the plural and communitarian dimension of our attitude. Just as we say *Our Father*, we should say *Our Mother*.

Eduardo Benlloch, SM

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