

Chaminade's Vision of the Church

by Hugh Bihl, SM

One afternoon, during a conversation on Marianist foundations, the NACMS staff asked me to write up my thoughts on Father William Joseph Chaminade's vision of the Church. What follows is the result.

The Church may be understood as either "the local Church" or "the universal Church." As the "local Church," it is the community/assembly of Christians gathered in one place. As the "universal Church," it is the union of all the local Churches poised to give public witness to the world. In the New Testament it is mostly the local Church that is meant.

You Are the Body of Christ

In the twelfth chapter of the First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks of the various gifts that distinguish the local Church as the Body of Christ. You can tell the validity of these gifts by their fruits, because it is the same Spirit who is working in all of them for a common purpose: the building up of the one Body. This Body, Paul says, is not to be identified with any of its parts.

If the foot were to say, "I am not a hand so I do not belong to the body," would that mean that it stopped being part of the body? If the ear were to say, "I am not an eye so I do not belong to the body," would that mean that it was not part of the body? If your whole body were just one eye, how would you hear anything? If it were just one ear, how would you smell anything? . . . If all the parts were the same, how could it be a body? As it is, the parts are many, but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor can the head say to the feet, "I have no need of you."

The gifts of each part of the Body are to be cultivated because they are given by God that the Body may be full. Some of the parts need more cultivation than others, so Paul gives special importance to them. He states that the parts that seem to be the weakest are the indispensable ones, and it is the least honorable parts of the body that we clothe with greatest care. So our more improper parts get decorated in a way that our more proper parts do not need . . . more dignity is given to the parts which are without it . . . so that there may not be disagreements inside the body but that each part may be equally concerned for all the others" (1 Cor 12:22-25).

This exhortation suggests that the honor assigned to the individual gifts, as well as the quality of the union, does not equate with contemporary tastes. It is not distinctions of intelligence or good looks that matter most, not business acumen or professional sophistication, not achievement or a "competitive edge." Because of their more obvious need of God and of human attentiveness, it is "the poor, the blind, and the lame" who are on top in the Christian community. So the standards of the Church differ markedly from those of "the world." That is why the Church can be a witness and a goad and in perpetual mission.

Local Church, Bishop, and Parish

Another characteristic of the local Church is the centrality of the Eucharist. Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council stated, "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is

directed; at the same time, it is the fountain from which all her power flows.”¹ And the Eucharist is intimately connected with the bishop—a linkage expressed by orthodox theologian John Zizioulas in his examination of the foundational Christian times.

According to Zizioulas, it was the bishop who presided at the Eucharist, and there was only one Eucharist and one bishop in each city. Christians came together with their bishop to partake in the Eucharistic Body of Christ. This was the primal expression of the local Church, according to Zizioulas, who takes issue with the conventional wisdom that sees “early Catholicism” as a later development. Zizioulas believes that the parish arose when an increased number of Christians made it impossible for all of them to gather in one assembly for one celebration of the Eucharist under the presidency of the bishop. Now presbyters were ordained to preside, and various ministries developed around a new entity, the parish. But the link with the bishop was carefully maintained, especially by the practice of sending the acolytes (whose office had been created for this purpose) with a portion of the Eucharist from the bishop’s celebration to those assemblies whose Eucharist was celebrated by presbyters (parishes). The presbyters could mix the episcopal Eucharist with the parish’s and signify the unity of the one Church in the one Eucharist.

This detail is important because of the significance that the parish has had and continues to have for the local Church. Indeed it is probable that a great many Christians simply equate the parish with the local Church, but this is not the case. On theological grounds, the parish is an important expression of the local Church, but it is not identical with it. The parish is really a concession to pragmatic necessity. But this suggests that there can be other such concessions when needs warrant it, which brings us to Father Chaminade’s activities and convictions about the local Church.

Chaminade and the Local Church

The story of Father Chaminade’s activities in Bordeaux after his return from exile has been told over and over. Repeated retellings have made it so familiar as to seem unremarkable and inevitable. But, in fact, ordinary common sense would have seemed to dictate quite a different course. It was extraordinary that both Father Chaminade and his bishop—Archbishop d’Aviau—thought, “the best thing I [Chaminade] could do was to found Sodalties.” Considering the diminished state of the Church in France—where so many parishes had no priest at all—it is amazing that this priest of the Archdiocese of Bordeaux, with the full encouragement of his bishop, was determined to devote all his energies to the development of Sodalties of young men and young women and later to the “Fathers of Families” and the “Ladies of the Retreat” (Sodalties for older men and women).

A way of understanding these developments is to see the Bordeaux Sodalties as “expressions of the local Church” that were adapted to new times and that required new methods. The initial Bordeaux Sodality had an amazing array of activities that drew upon and helped to foster many different gifts of the Spirit, as well as some that aimed to promote the union of all in the one Body of Christ. Among the latter were, of course, the Sunday Eucharist, monthly general meetings, an annual retreat, and celebrations of different feast days. Then there were the “Public Reunions,” which were held on Sunday evenings for the Young Men’s Sodality and included entertainment for the whole Sodality—singing and lectures/dialogues on different subjects that were given by the sodalists themselves. These events were characterized by a lively camaraderie, and Father Chaminade used them as an opportunity for inviting and welcoming new members. Then there

¹ *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 1, § 10.

were the more missionary activities, such as teaching catechism, the setting-up and maintaining of different kinds of “clubs” for the young people of Bordeaux (the chimney sweeps, et al.), helping people find work, visiting hospitals, assisting poor children, etc.

A particularly distinguishing characteristic of Father Chaminade’s “local Church” was the extent to which it gave responsibility to lay leaders. In fact, Chaminadean creativity always was at work initiating new offices and more responsibility; thus, the sodalists would have a stake in all the outcomes, and the Sodality would more and more become “theirs.” The most important of these endeavors was the office of prefect that, along with a council, oversaw all the activities and works of the Sodality. Then there were several leadership roles concerned with integrating new people into full Sodality membership through a careful, graduated process. In addition, there were the leaders of the different “sections”—subgroupings within the Sodality that were the principal connecting-link for much of the membership.

Complexity and the Chaminadean Mission

Father Chaminade made use of several important structural principles to enable the complexity and depth of his “local Church,” such as the interplay between smaller groupings (e.g., the sections) and the “one great Family” that was the whole community. The former fostered intimacy, an “at-home” quality that encouraged personal sharing; the latter promoted “the contagion of good example,” which consisted of a very diverse group that was “on the march.” Through his wise counsel “from the sidelines,” Father Chaminade was able to inject a note of maturity into the leadership’s efforts and to keep all the groupings going. He also was able to prevent things from spinning out of control. Thus he could promote the cultivation of both the individual gifts and the union of all in one Christ, which the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians sees as constituting the Body. Thus Father Chaminade could instill the principle that the Sodality always was ready to grow in depth and numbers and that recruitment always was to be its principal apostolate.

Before concluding this article, a word needs to be said about the sections.

In the Young Men’s Sodality there were six sections: merchants, tradesmen, clerks, students, foremen, and simple workers. These groupings presented an opportunity for young men of the same age and condition of life to gather and exchange minds and hearts. The section meetings provided opportunities for spiritual reflection, an account of happenings in the lives of the members and others, announcements about upcoming events and other matters from the leaders of the Sodality, and a reporting/discussion about apostolic initiatives of the members. The section leader kept in close personal touch with all the members concerning the meetings and other activities. For many of the members, the sectional arrangements were the principal point of identification with the Sodality and encouraged a close-in spirit attitude. Of course, not unexpectedly, some of the pastors of Bordeaux complained that the Sodality was running unwholesome competition with the parishes. In responding to this criticism, Father Chaminade pointed out that the Sodality encouraged the sodalists to contribute to parish life; through its promotion of Christian family values, the Sodality assisted the parishes. He also explained how the Sodality attracted a number of young people who were weak in their faith and who would have been ill at ease in a parish, if indeed they ever went to any. He thus showed the need for flexibility and adaptability in building up the local Church.

Father Chaminade’s influence as the Sodality Director was crucial in sustaining its élan and bringing greater depth to everything. He was the wise counselor whose door was open at all hours. Many people came to talk with him about anything and everything, but they especially

came to talk about spiritual growth. He met regularly with the leaders of all the offices and gave sound advice about how to deal with the many matters that came up. He maintained a quiet presence in the midst of everything and gave advice when needed.

Conclusion

These few remarks give a good idea of Father Chaminade's vision of the local Church. The only thing that has been left out is the centrality of Mary as the inspiration of all. I have not attempted to speak of the significance of these things for today. This would be a most difficult task, which I will happily leave to others. I think it is significant, though, that our modern "Marianist Lay Communities" seem to take it for granted that they are in continuity with the foundational Sodalities in Bordeaux. Such a continuity would raise many issues, such as the public character of the community's life, its connection with the bishop, the need for a great diversity of membership, the desire to continue to grow always numerically and otherwise, the value put on intimacy over all other values in present-day lay communities (being able to fit the whole community in someone's living room), etc., etc. Of course, these issues are very complex and not easily resolved. But wrestling with them could be a boon.