

The
Christocentric

Chaminade

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The Christocentrism of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade

Remember the story? A dog saw the rabbit and started in chase. Other dogs soon joined in, but after a short time they stopped. The first dog kept chasing the rabbit. Why? His eyes remained focused on the prize. What an apt description of the spiritual journey!

God so loved the world that He sent His Son into the world to be its salvation. Jesus is the prize to which all creation moves. Jesus is the center of life. As Vatican II has expressed it, Jesus, the perfect man, fully explains man to himself. There is no one in heaven who has not been conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ. The Father's voice is heard still: *This is My beloved Son, listen to Him.*

To be Christocentric, then, is not merely a beautiful idea; rather, it is a fundamental truth of Catholic faith. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and anyone who desires to be saved must, *in some mysterious way*, be united with Jesus. Everyone is called to be Christocentric.

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade was no exception to this rule. If we reflect on some highlights of his life, we begin to appreciate how much Jesus and Christian values were important to him.

Whether we consider the pilgrimage he made to the shrine of Our Lady of Verdelaix after his foot had been seriously injured in the stone quarry, or his profession of private vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, or his growth in prayer, there is evidently a heightened sense of God in his life.

When he was 21, Chaminade decided on the diocesan priesthood and went to the Collège de Lisieux outside Paris to study in preparation. Formation years are very important times of grace. One learns new aspects of the faith, has the opportunity to pray, and generally deepens oneself. This Collège was closely associated with St. Sulpice in Paris, which was devoted to the spiritual formation of the clergy.

After ordination (Chaminade is now 25-26) he joined his brothers, Jean and Louis, at the Collège of St. Charles in Mussidan. It was a preparatory seminary of sorts and the priest-teachers were joined together as the Congregation of Priests of St. Charles. They held to a Rule of Life that made them devoted to growing in the spiritual life themselves, as well as inculcating a desire for virtue in the hearts of their students. These were good years for William Joseph, years of calm and growth. The Collège formed a happy community, and the three Chaminade brothers were considered by the townspeople as the "saints of Mussidan."

The French Revolution

Chaminade was twenty-eight when the storm of the Revolution broke. The Assembly of the Estates General was called. William was a delegate to this Assembly as a member of the Clergy. The Nobles and the Common People composed the other two Estates. We do not know how he voted; however, he always seemed to favor the monarchy. We do know that many clergy voted in favor of the rights of the Common People. The Nobles and some Clergy, however, feared losing their privileges. No one really suspected it would get so out of hand. But it did and with it came the French Revolution.

This was a frightening period in Chaminade's life. There was the daily threat of death by the guillotine. Yet, Chaminade stayed. Why? Why was it important for him to stay behind to care for the people? He evidently had read the signs of the times, for he prepared ahead of time for the possible dangers of the Revolution. He had bought a house at St. Laurent and placed it in the care of a trusted housekeeper. He also hired a gardener favorable to the Revolution to dispel any suspicions.

When priests were asked to sign the Oath of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, an act which pledged allegiance to a French Church and not to Rome, all three Chaminade brothers refused. Exile was the option, but William went into hiding. Chaminade by temperament was usually cautious, deliberate, and prudent. If he decided to risk his life, we must try to discover what motivated him.

Exile

Six years later, through an unavoidable series of circumstances, Chaminade was caught and forced into exile. Where did he choose to go? To Saragossa, Spain, to the shrine of Our Lady of the Pillar! It was Our Lady of the Pillar, according to the legend, who sustained the faith of St. James as he encountered failures and setbacks in proclaiming the Gospel. At Saragossa Blessed Chaminade received interior insights that were to guide his future decisions.

In all of these events we see that Jesus is at the heart of Chaminade's life. He is consecrated to the Lord, even to the point of being willing to risk his life for Jesus. His prayer and suffering in exile prepare him for the ministry Mary desires of him. His spiritual focus is exemplified even further, when we consider his activity in returning to France.

The Sodality of Bordeaux

He was almost 40 when he returned from Saragossa. Chaminade immediately began developing the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception in Bordeaux. Why did he insist so much on the religious education of his sodalists? He was faced with countrymen who had been deprived of the sacraments, of all religious education, and who had experienced efforts to destroy even their Christian culture. The religious instruction was centered on Christ. He introduced them into

prayer, gradually encouraging them to union with all of Christ's mysteries. He stressed faith in Jesus, encouraging them to grow in love and service of the Lord. His goal was that the prayer of faith might lead them to *adherence*, a French term suggesting complete identification with Jesus brought about by one's docility to the Holy Spirit. Chaminade's efforts were effective. In time the Cardinal Archbishop of Bordeaux stated: "If I examine any good work being done in Bordeaux, I find the name of Chaminade (and the Sodality of Bordeaux) behind it." In time two religious orders emerged from the Sodality of Bordeaux. Chaminade stated their purpose: *the most exact conformity possible with Jesus Christ, Son of God become Son of Mary, for the salvation of humankind.*

Mary

It is for this reason that sodalists and religious consecrated themselves to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Yet even Chaminade's devotedness to Mary was totally Christocentric. If we dedicate ourselves to Mary, it is only because Jesus chose to be born of Mary. We entrust ourselves to her in order to help her in her mission. What is this mission? Mary is called to bring Jesus to the world and to bring the world to Jesus. This is a mission that is also given to every baptized person—evangelization.

Baptism

Chaminade's devotion to Baptism certainly flowed from his awareness of our union with Jesus Christ in this Sacrament. By our Baptism Jesus lives in us and acts through us. We are united with His Mysteries, which we relive throughout the liturgical year. We possess the seeds of all his virtues and dispositions. We are enabled to draw upon Christ's grace for our daily lives.

The Three Offices

Sodalists and novices were trained to experience firsthand what union with Jesus meant in their busy, daily lives. First they were taught about Jesus praying, teaching, and working. They were to make their own the concerns of Jesus in these areas. Chaminade used these actions of Jesus as the basis for his administrative structure. He established the Offices of Zeal (praying), Instruction (teaching), and Temporalities (working). However, the emphasis was not on administrative efficiency, but rather on assuring that the concerns of Jesus would be realized in all major decisions. Was the contemplated action good news? Was it for the common good? How were people going to know that it was Christ's message? And was this offered up to glorify God through prayer? Those in training were involved in each Office for a period of time to learn how to integrate the concerns of Jesus with one's individual and community life.

Just as one cannot understand St. Pius X unless one appreciates his desire "to bring together all things in Christ" (Cf. Decrees on Frequent Communion; on Catechetical developments; on Liturgical Reform; on Canon Law; against Modernism), so too, Chaminade cannot be

appreciated, nor shall we ever grasp the inner coherence of his words and deeds, if we forget or eliminate this thread—union and identification with Jesus Christ.

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