

Filial Devotion or Alliance with Mary?

by Eduardo Benlloch, SM

I confess that I have great admiration for Father Joseph Simler, fourth General Superior of the Society of Mary. And this is for many reasons, which someday I will explain in writing, because I have already strongly expressed them many times in my oral expositions.

Furthermore, as I deepen my knowledge of the person and the work of Father Simler, I can joyfully declare that my admiration is greater every day. This does not stop me from posing a question, because, without a doubt, he was the one who coined the expression *filial devotion*. This expression had its shining moment in our spiritual tradition, but today it is problematic.

Filial Devotion

Let us remember the famous phrase in article 293 of Chapter XXX, Book I of the Constitutions of the Society of Mary of 1891, due to the personal wording of Father Simler:

A totally filial devotion toward the Blessed Virgin Mary is like the gift of God to the Society of Mary, it is what makes up its features, and its hallmark.

Some may ask, what is the problem? First of all, the expression *filial devotion*, as such, is not found in Father Chaminade. Second, from Father Simler on, there is a rereading of the most original thought of Father Chaminade that can lead to courses full of risks.

I continue to acknowledge that Chapter XXX of the Constitutions of 1891 awakened a great enthusiasm in the Society of Mary. But the exposition of our spirituality, focused on *filial devotion*, continued to develop with increasing exaggeration. Father Simler only talked about *filial devotion* as our gift from God. Then, one more step is taken, of no small significance, because it ends up talking of the vow of stability as our gift from God. The book of Father Emile Neubert, SM, *Notre don de Dieu* [Our Gift from God] (Mame, 1954), is proof of this movement. The clearest and most circulated exposition of this position is another book by Father Emile Neubert, *My Ideal, Jesus Son of Mary*. What are the objections to this explanation of our Marianist spirituality?

- This exposition tends to make of the vow of stability, professed by Marianist men and women religious, a personal and direct consecration to the Blessed Virgin, and this would be our gift from God. Even the most radical defenders of this theory were able to see the canonical and theological difficulties involved. Thus, they went repeatedly to consult with the Holy See. The Vatican emphatically and constantly denied this interpretation of our vow of stability. Our vow of stability is a vow of permanence and fidelity in the *Society of Mary*. It is an indirect and communal consecration to Mary, because it is the Society of Mary; that is, a *Society belonging to Mary*.

- The insistence on personal consecration forgets the essentially communitarian character of Marianist spirituality. Besides, this consecration involving a personal attitude may lead to an excessive weight of sentimentality.
- In this interpretation of Marianist spirituality, the missionary dimension of our consecration is obscured. So much so, its supporters, being conscious of this, have to give an adjective to *filial devotion* and call it *apostolic filial devotion*. This adjective and the expression *apostolic mission* of Mary have little theological rigor. Without a doubt, Mary enters in God's design for salvation with a very clear task, but the mission of the apostles also has a very clear sense that should not be confused. Mary does not properly have either the condition or the mission of "apostle." She is the mother of Jesus and the mother of the Church, but she is not one of the twelve apostles.

Restoration of Father Chaminade's Thought

Starting in the 1950s, a movement to restore the original thought of Father Chaminade begins, gathering increasing strength and, at the same time, *filial devotion* starts to decline and become forgotten. Several factors contributed to this, some of which I remember:

- The attempts for theological and canonical justification of *filial devotion* and of the vow of stability as direct consecration to the Blessed Virgin always ended up in failure.
- The very writings of Father Chaminade himself began to be published, circulated, and studied. Several seminarians wrote their doctoral theses on the thought and doctrine of Father Chaminade. Father Joseph Verrier, through his teaching, leads to a direct knowledge of the Founder, who is now more easily accessible.
- It is evident that Father Chaminade has a clear exposition of the *alliance with Mary*, inspired in biblical spirituality. We need only to remember the fifth meditation of the Retreat of 1817 and the twelfth meditation of the Retreat of 1819.
- I think the clearest indicator of this restored tradition is the 1983 Rule of Life of the Society of Mary. (See especially *Our Origins*, articles 5, 6, 7, 8, 14, 15, and chapter V.)

Alliance with Mary

In my estimation, presenting our consecration to Mary by way of an alliance has many advantages:

- It places us always at the root of the divine design of salvation, to discover the role of Mary in God's plans. This assumes a serious and rigorous theological basis and a very encouraging biblical inspiration. Mary is the Virgin full of faith, the Mother of Jesus and our Mother, and the Woman associated through Jesus to the work of our salvation, as the new Eve, beside the New Adam.
- The Family of Mary is a very broad community of communities who want to belong to Mary. Two very important consequences arise from this: first, it is very easy to apply the alliance with Mary to the whole Marianist Family (and not as a vow of stability which

may only be considered for religious men and women); and second, it strongly emphasizes the community character of our spirituality. We carry out the alliance with Mary by bonding to a group that is inspired by Mary and that wants to extend her action among the people of our day.

- The alliance with Mary accentuates the essentially missionary dimension that is always part of the foundational charism of Father Chaminade. It is an alliance with her to continue “incarnating” Christ among people and to fight against evil in all its manifestations. Mary is the mother that establishes Jesus into humanity, and the first person freed from sin and death: immaculate and assumed into heaven.

Filial Love for Mary

Jesus undoubtedly loved Mary, his Mother, with an intense love. Therefore, it is very attractive and stimulating to contemplate that ideal of filial love toward Mary. I am convinced the expression *filial love* is much richer and more authentic than the expression *filial devotion*. When we talk about *filial love* we eliminate the imprecision of the content and the risks involved in the spiritual current of *filial devotion*. Furthermore, we can enrich with a sublime motive our alliance with Mary. We do it moved by this filial love of Jesus for his Mother, as the present Rule of Life of the Society of Mary states in article 6: “Impelled by the love of Jesus for his Mother, we give ourselves to Her.”

I sincerely believe we must basically live our spirituality as an alliance with Mary, because it binds us much more to our foundational charism, but inspired by a great filial love for Mary, which tends to imitate Jesus in this aspect. In this way, we also will be able to find many positive aspects in the thought of Father Simler that can lead to a greater fulfillment of our personal experience.