

The Letters of Father Chaminade

Electronic Edition

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Introduction, Original French Printed Edition

The letters of Father Chaminade have been little known until now, and that only through extracts included in his biography and The Spirit of Our Foundation. How many religious of the Society of Mary have been able to take consistent notice of them in the few copies of the incomplete collection which had been made of them, to say nothing of the original texts? The number of these religious is very small. As for me, only in 1923 did I have the occasion to read them in their chronological order and in their entirety.¹ What a revelation this direct and personal contact with Father Chaminade was for me because in the midst of his active life, so filled with work, he seemed to reveal himself even without wishing to do so and to show me more vividly and more truly his character, which I had thought I knew! Hence the deep-seated desire which quietly arose within me to see these letters, whose reading had seemed to me so interesting and profitable, made generally available to the religious of the Society of Mary and of the Daughters of Mary, as well as to the Ladies of the Miséricorde.

The ever-increasing movement of filial piety, which leads souls toward Father Chaminade and has as its immediate purpose to obtain his glorification, could only strengthen my desire. The funds gathered on the occasion of the "Chaminade Days" supplied the means for putting this into execution. With great joy, therefore, I present this first volume of Father Chaminade's letters today by way of a first realization of this desire.

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The collection of Father Chaminade's letters, like The Spirit of Our Foundation, had been prepared by Father Klobb, the active and devoted secretary of Good Father Simler, under whose inspiration he had formed the plan and gathered the material. The former work, retouched and completed, constitutes the present publication.

Here, briefly stated, are the principles and the method followed.

The letters are arranged in chronological order, with occasional exceptions for the purpose of grouping letters which discuss the same topic. All the letters of Father Chaminade known at present are included, except a few which are no longer of interest. A few important passages excepted,² they are fully reproduced with only the addition, modification, or rearrangement of certain words to give greater clarity to the text. These minor changes, however, have been carefully indicated.

The origin and the nature of the manuscripts are indicated for each of the letters. Some of them are really autographs—that is, written by Father Chaminade himself. A greater number were dictated and signed by him; their original text has been preserved. Of others, only the rough draft or a transcript remains. A certain number of letters, although signed by Father Chaminade, were not dictated by him but were composed by Bro. David Monier. These may be easily recognized by their style, which is less clear and more complicated. They are only an exception in this vast correspondence.

Supplementary notes, without pretending to retrace the entire life and activity of Father Chaminade, will help to understand better the sequence and drift of the letters. Either in the text itself or at the bottom of the pages, certain references which seemed interesting and useful have been inserted. These are indicated in The Spirit of Our Foundation and special detailed studies in L'Apôtre de Marie. They include especially short notices, which are due in part to the patient research of Fr. [Jérôme] Rebsomen; these include the most outstanding correspondents of Father Chaminade, particularly those of his first followers who played a more important role in the Society of Mary or who left a more profound impression upon it.

¹Fr. Sorret believed he had at hand the complete collection of the letters of Fr. Chaminade. It is evident from the number of inserts in the present edition, as compared with the original French edition, that this was not the case.

²This does not apply to letters no. 1-100 of the present English edition, in which nothing has been omitted, either entire letters or portions of them.

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The publication of the letters of Father Chaminade fulfills a wish often expressed by the religious of the Society of Mary. It will be a happy supplement to previous studies about his person, his works, and his teachings.

His biography retraced the circumstances of his life and the development of his works. The Spirit of Our Foundation gave a synthesis of his doctrine. In his letters, he shows himself as he was in life; he is seen, heard, followed from day to day in the midst of overwhelming occupations, attentive to things as a whole as well as to their details and always filled with God, whose will and glory are his only concern, and completely devoted to the august person of Mary, whose reign he desires to advance by combating at her side and under her command.

In light of the facts as revealed in his letters, Father Chaminade's doctrine becomes clear; his personality appears in all the simplicity of reality and in all the splendor of truth. These are definitely not the letters of a person who wishes to speak of himself, who considers himself to be living and acting in the presence of an onlooker. He does not have time to pose in this manner for himself and his correspondent; he is beset by endless work, which makes demands upon him from all sides, often forcing him to interrupt what he is doing and to postpone even the completion of a letter; he writes and he dictates in haste. To gain time, often he unexpectedly breaks off his line of thought or interrupts his sentence, leaving it to his correspondent to complete the thought; he does not always reread what he has written and cares very little about literary defects. Moreover, his letters are always business letters in the broadest sense of the word. In them he provides all sorts of practical details, guidance, organization, and execution; he does not have the slightest idea of slipping in a useless word or any reflection concerning himself. Least of all does he believe what he writes and dictates may one day be published.

In these letters, then, he reveals himself without affectation, just as he is. Without realizing it, he permits the reader to contemplate at leisure and to study as in life and from every angle his admirable personality, so kind and sympathetic.

His humanity appears, with its rich qualities of goodness, righteousness, and sincerity, set off by an exquisite politeness or the most delicate "honnêteté," to use the current expression of his day; his thoughtful, balanced, and observant mind, enriched with an extensive culture and endowed with a wealth of practical sense and sound judgment, permitted him to enter securely into even the least details. We are struck by his calmness, that fruitful source of wisdom and prudence, which does not in any way exclude boldness in views and projects. No less striking are first, his unalterable serenity in the midst of matters and afflictions, shown by his peaceful self-possession; second, the strength of soul and courageous energy with which he undertakes, develops, and sustains his works; and finally, the prudence with which he foresees, consults, and reflects before making up his mind and acting.

These altogether human qualities with which he is so well endowed blend harmoniously with the incomparably richer dispositions which transform and sanctify them. In Father Chaminade it is the man of God, above all and always, who appears; he is also recognized by certain traits, more forcibly emphasized in his letters.

First of all there is his strong, profound, and unshakable faith, the fruit of prayer; this faith inspires all his actions, guides all his steps, and leads him to seek only the will of God and the extension of God's reign. It shows itself in his complete confidence in and filial abandonment to Providence in difficulties, contradictions, and failures; in the enduring patience which he recommends to his sons and daughters by word and example; in his benevolent, merciful, and indulgent goodness toward all, particularly toward those who cause him pain; and finally, in his unfailing respect for all authority, ecclesiastical as well as civil. The spirit of faith, the foundation of all religious life, is revealed in the letters of Father Chaminade by another dominant trait of his character, zeal for the salvation of souls. To what prodigious activity does this not bear witness! In spite of age, fatigue, and infirmities, we see Father Chaminade at one and the same time directing the most varied enterprises—Sodalities of the Immaculate Conception, religious Institutes, schools, seminaries, retreats for teachers, and still other works. He is

always besieged by work, as he himself admits; yet he is always ready to accept more when it seems to him according to the divine will. His zeal is so ardent that he is ready to go to the end of the world if God calls him there. And these multiple activities have only one end, the glory of God through the multiplication of Christians and the salvation of souls.

Finally, one trait completes the picture of Father Chaminade's character and gives him a very distinctive appearance among the servants of God. This is his enlightened, profound, robust, and total filial devotedness to the Immaculate Virgin Mary. In his own words, Father Chaminade breathes only to propagate devotion to Mary. Of course he never forgets that he is a minister of Jesus Christ. He is indeed his minister, as zealous as he is pious, but he loves and serves Jesus in the august person of the Virgin Mary because he is convinced that the best way to bring back souls to Jesus is to win them for his most holy Mother. He is therefore an apostle, an outstanding apostle of Mary. Full of confidence in the woman whose missionary he is and from whom he does not separate her glorious spouse, Saint Joseph, full of zeal to make her known and served, from the very start he tries hard to make of his disciples pious and devoted apostles of Mary because he has determined to constitute them permanently and irrevocably by a special vow, that of stability, in the state of servants of Mary with the mission of propagating her knowledge and her cult.

Here in broad outline we have the characteristics of Father Chaminade's letters. We will find them in this collection not condensed, as in this introduction, but in the form of scattered elements.

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As we have said, the letters of Father Chaminade are generally business letters discussing practical, precise, and highly varied questions concerning the actual life of people and works, descending at times to the least details yet going straight to their objective without any digression from their ultimate purpose. Despite all this, the personality of the author reveals itself in them through the outstanding qualities which distinguish it, and this manifestation is even more charming because it is the most spontaneous, the most discreet, and the least intended.

On the other hand, these letters give little information regarding the history of the eventful epoch in which his long life was passed; they barely allude to certain great persons or to some events of considerable importance. Father Chaminade is completely taken up with his mission of combating the great heresy of his time, religious indifference, and he leaves his contemporaries to their particular roles, illustrious in politics, in literature, and in the arts and sciences. His correspondence would therefore be of little interest to the general public.

But it will interest his sons and daughters in the spiritual order. The humble beginnings and the providential development of the works confided to their devotedness will not fail to impress them. The grandeur of the mission accomplished by Father Chaminade in such difficult times, with such limited means and imperfect instruments, will appear amazing to them. In reading these letters, above all they will experience a twofold sentiment: pious admiration for their Founder and complete confidence in the work he has bequeathed to them.

Nivelles, April 12, 1930

*Feast of the Interior Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary,
The Anniversary of the Decree of Praise of the Society of Mary.
Ernest-Joseph Sorret, Superior General*

Introductory Note to Volume 1 of the English Printed Edition

This volume of the English edition includes the work done by Fr. Joseph Bruder, SM, on the first 100 letters of Father Chaminade. Father Bruder revised and augmented the translation of Bro. Thomas Poitras, SM, by adding letters which had not been published in the original French edition and by restoring all the passages which had been deleted from the original edition.

The first fascicle of Father Bruder's revision was published in 1963 and included letters 1 to 50. By 1973 he had completed the manuscript for a second fascicle, which included letters 51 to 100, but this was never published. The entirety of Father Bruder's revision is published in this volume, including corrections and improvements he made in the first fascicle.

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Methodology of the Electronic Edition

In this electronic version, material from the supplements and new acquisitions have been inserted in chronological order; this returns the letters to their original form. They are also still present in appendix three in the files of volume 8, part 1 and part 2 and of volume 9, and the original table of contents.

For references from this edition, the use of [E.] will indicate the electronic edition.

Abbreviations

Apostle	<i>The Apostle of Mary</i>
L'Apôtre	<i>L'Apôtre de Marie</i>
Arch.	Archives
Arch. FMI	Archives of the Daughters of Mary
Arch. FSC	Archives of the Brothers of the Christian Schools
Agmar	Archives of the Society of Mary
Spirit	<i>The Spirit of Our Foundation</i>

