

**CHAMINADE'S LETTER  
TO THE RETREAT  
MASTERS OF 1839**



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## Contents

Foreword	iv
Salutation of the Letter	1
What we have in common with other religious orders	2
What distinguishes the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary from other religious orders	4
What the two orders of Mary possess as special and uniquely their own in works they have in common with other religious orders	9
Closing of the Letter	11

## Foreword

Dear Brothers,

In another of his letters Father Chaminade counsels: “The greater the amount of work, the number of occupations, or the bulk of business of every kind, the greater the need of prudence, patience, meditation, and recollection” (September 9, 1823). It is out of this wisdom that along with you we look forward to the Annual Retreats of 1989.

And given the providential theme of these retreats which focus on the Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839, we offer this new translation for your meditation. The design of the booklet is such that it will be convenient to use during the retreat and other times for making notes, underlining, or other ways to make the spirit of this document your own. We do this out of our call to “refocus and rekindle our missionary spirit” (V&J 3) in the service of Mary for our world.

Let us keep each member of the province in prayer during these retreats that we might be open to the action of the Holy Spirit as was Mary. She was called in the midst of uncertainty to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to her world in her flesh . . . so are we. And this letter of Chaminade will echo in our lives what we said *fiat* to with our profession.

May the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be glorified through the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

Fraternal affection,

Your brothers of the Provincial  
Administration

## Chaminade's Letter to The Retreat Masters of 1839

(Georges Caillet, Jean Baptiste Fontaine, and Jules César Perrodin)

Bordeaux  
August 24, 1839

My dear son,

In my circular of this past July 22, I said the following to all my children in both orders: “In the Pontifical Decree, you will see that the desire of His Holiness, his very will, in fact, is that you be instilled with the spirit of our works, all of which are works of charity, while you are assured that you perform useful services for the Church if you persevere.”

A splendid opportunity is being given you, my dear son, to carry out to the best of your ability the directives of the Vicar of our Lord Jesus Christ. An ideal occasion has come for you to instill the spirit of our Constitutions and works, which have pleased his pontifical heart so highly. I am referring to the retreat you are going to preach. Imbued with Saint Paul's dictum, *The letters kills, but the spirit quickens* (2 Cor 3:6), you shall do everything in your power to cause the excellence and special character of our divine mission to be appreciated.

To this end, you shall first develop what we have in common with all other religious orders; then you shall explain what distinguishes us from them; and, finally, you shall strive to describe precisely the family character which marks us even in works we share with others.

## 1) What we have in common with other religious orders.

The three great vows which constitute the essence of religious life are professed in the Society of Mary and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary. In accordance with their objectives, both orders aim at raising their respective members to the summit of Christian perfection, which is the most perfect possible resemblance to Jesus Christ, the Divine Model. The orders invite their members to follow the Savior, who was poor, chaste, and obedient, even unto His death on the cross, and to do so by obliging themselves with the exalted holiness of vows to poverty, virginal chastity, and evangelical obedience. As you know, my dear son, these three great vows place us among all the other orders in the great family of men and women religious, which, from the very first centuries of the Church, has peopled earth and heaven with its countless children.

By applying the great Apostle's dictum, *The letter kills, but the spirit quickens*, to these constitutive obligations of the religious state, it will be easy for you to show, in the vow of poverty, for example, the effects of the *letter* and those of the *spirit*.

Slaves of the *letter*, who stop with the externals of their vow and are careful not to plumb its deep spiritual meaning, begin by distinguishing material obligations, so to speak, from the perfection of duty. They then try to draw sharp lines of demarcation to separate what is strictly *necessary* from what is *fitting* and what is *permitted*.

In a short time, however, according to the Apostle's inspired word, "the letter kills them." They will, of course, want to keep wearing the habit, but a habit adjusted to the would-be requirements of their positions. Consequently—always within the so-called limits of their vow—whenever they find something of better quality, they get it. They will claim being indifferent to form, so long as it follows their liking. They will search for just the right color and fabric, and do so in the name of poverty and being economical. Besides, they will tell you that they are far above such petty things—before which they nevertheless grovel—and that they are not seeking anything but the honor of their state and the conversion of certain souls who would find a more neglected appearance

repulsive. Their sole purpose is to observe the social conventions required by responsibilities they have been given, by the active and passive visiting they must do, and, finally, by their advanced age and their families. Who can even imagine all the illusions that they, in their vanity, regard as imperative reasons? And notice that they do not stop with the habit. With the *letter* as their guide, they tell us they have measured the full extent of their duty. They have acquainted themselves with just what is permitted without fear of transgressing the vow—gravely, at least—and they have figured out its precise limits in such a way that they apply their principles to everything in their use. In their admirable calculations, they find the secret of being rich in the midst of a life essentially poor, or of possessing things and acting as owners after having given up the very right ever to own anything. And so it is that they commit robbery in a sacrifice offered to the Lord by taking back continually, with clever perfidy, the things they have renounced forever. Therefore, terrible harm hangs over their heads, and the censure of Saul awaits them if they continue in their blindness.

But those who strive with all their hearts to practice the spirit of their vow act in a way altogether different. For them, it is always the cheapest, always what others have thrown away. The strictly necessary is enough for them; they have a horror of all that smacks of vanity or studied refinement and superfluity, because they strive constantly to become more poor, more like true disciples of Jesus Christ, and more like Jesus Christ himself, who declared poverty blessed and who even made it divine in his adorable person. Oh, how happy they are, my dear son! “I tell you solemnly, everyone who has left all for the sake of the Lord will be repaid a hundred times over, and also inherit eternal life” (Mt 19:29).

Made divine in a certain manner here below by the livery of Jesus Christ’s poverty with which they are clothed, they experience in the midst of privations an incredible peace and happiness. That is why they relish so much the inspired word of the Prophet, “The rich have wanted and have suffered hunger, but those who seek the Lord shall not be deprived of any good” (Ps 34:11). The poverty of Jesus Christ is indeed a treasure, and the richest, most precious of treasures. Thieves do not know how to lay their greedy hands on it, and rust does not corrode it

You will find it easy, my dear son, to apply to the other two vows the dictum we have quoted several times; and, after that, there will be no lack of powerful motivations with which to instill their divine spirit.

## **2) What distinguishes the Society of Mary and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary from other religious orders.**

You know, my dear son, that in the great assembly of religious orders we bear a family character which distinguishes us essentially from all the others. Let us describe this characteristic feature and state precisely, to the best of our ability, what makes up its *letter* and what makes up its *spirit*.

All periods of the Church's history are marked with the struggles and glorious triumphs of the august Mary. Ever since the Lord put enmity between her and the serpent (Gn 3:15), she has constantly overcome the world and hell. All heresies, the Church tells us, have recoiled before the Blessed Virgin; and, bit by bit, she has reduced them to the silence of oblivion.

In our day the great prevailing heresy is religious indifference, which grows by numbing souls in the stupor of selfishness and the mire of passion. The depths of the infernal abyss belch forth huge clouds of black and pestilential smoke (Rv 9:2) that threaten to engulf the whole earth in a dark night, devoid of every good, fraught with every evil, and impenetrable so to speak to the life-giving rays of the Sun of Justice. Consequently, the divine torch of faith is growing dim and flickering out in the very heartland of Christendom; virtue is steadily becoming more rare and disappearing, while vice is unleashed with frightful fury. We seem to be reaching that prophesied time of general defection and all but universal apostasy.

This picture of our times, so sadly accurate, is, nevertheless, far from discouraging to us. Mary's power stands undiminished. We firmly believe that she will overcome this heresy as she has overcome all others, because she is today, as she always has been, the incomparable Woman,



the promised Woman who is to crush the serpent's head; and Jesus Christ, by never addressing her except with this great name, teaches us that she is the hope, joy, and life of the Church and the terror of hell. To her, therefore, is reserved a mighty victory in our day. Hers will be the glory of saving the faith from the shipwreck with which it is threatened among us.

Now, we have understood this design of Heaven, my dear son, and have been quick to offer Mary our feeble services in order to work under her direction and combat at her side. We have enlisted under her banner as her soldiers and ministers, and we have committed ourselves by a special vow, the *vow of stability*, to help her with all our strength up to the end of our lives in her noble struggle against hell. And in the same way that a justly renowned order has taken the name and standard of Jesus Christ, so we have taken the name and standard of Mary and are ready to go quickly wherever she calls us, in order to spread devotedness to her, and, thereby, extend the Kingdom of God in souls.

This, my dear son, is certainly the distinguishing feature and family character of both our orders. We are, in a special manner, the auxiliaries and instruments of the Blessed Virgin in the great work of moral reform, of support and spread of the faith, and, by that fact, of the sanctification of our neighbor. She entrusts us with the ingenuity and inventiveness of her almost boundless charity, and we make a vow to serve her faithfully until the end of our days and to carry out promptly everything she tells us. We are glad we can thus spend a lifetime in her service and give her the powers we have pledged to her.

We are, moreover, so entirely convinced that this is the most perfect thing we can do, that we explicitly renounce by our vow the right ever to choose and embrace another Rule.

Furthermore, my dear son, by the *vow of stability* we intend to oblige ourselves in justice to cooperate as well as we can until the end of our lives in the work undertaken.

Our Constitutions, which the Holy See has so liberally praised and approved after careful study, establish this obligation in a way too precise to allow any doubt. I shall thus merely recall in passing articles

19, 20, and 21 for the Society and articles 69 and 175 for the Institute; and I ask if the scandal of religious apostasy does not wound honor, delicacy, and justice as well as religion and the heart of Mary.

From the 1839 Constitutions of the Society of Mary:

19. By the vow of stability the member intends constituting himself permanently and irrevocably in the state of servant of Mary. This vow is in reality a devotedness to the Blessed Virgin with the filial design of spreading her knowledge and perpetuating her love and her cult as much as possible, by one's self and by others, in whatever circumstances of life he may be.

20. Moreover, the vow of stability is made with the intention

of never depriving the Society one's cooperation in the work that has been undertaken. Dispensation from this vow can give rise to grave injustice to the Society. The Apostolic Letters require that those concerned in a vow take the steps necessary for a dispensation from it.

21. Whether it be expressed or not, the vow of stability is supposed in all orders. The Society of Mary deliberately makes it a special vow, which has the same consequences it includes everywhere else.

From the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary:

69. The vow of cloister imposes the obligation of not leaving the monastery on one's own.

175. The obligation of cloister extends to desires of the

heart, and a religious should resist any desire which would cause her to leave or have contacts with the outside. Happy to have left this land of perdition once and for all, she should turn her eyes heavenward and long only for eternity's delights.

Here we meet a difficulty; and, although it is merely apparent, permit me to resolve it with you.

Every religious order, it might be objected, has honored Mary in a special manner and prided itself on belonging to her.

I shall reply by saying that we are far from claiming devotion to the Blessed Virgin as our exclusive possession. That, indeed, would be a most foolish pretention; for, who has ever been able to love the Son without loving his Mother, and who has ever dared to strive toward evangelical perfection while excluding special devotion to Mary from his

or her consecration. to Jesus? But what I consider as being the specifying characteristic of our orders and what appears to me as being without precedent among known foundations is, I repeat, that we embrace religious life in Mary's name and for her glory. We devote ourselves to her, in all that we are and have, to make her known, loved, and served, totally convinced that we shall not lead people back to Jesus except through his most Blessed Mother, because we believe with the holy Doctors that she is a complete reason for us to have hope, *Tota ratio spei nostrae*, our Mother, our refuge, our help, our strength, and our life.

I shall reply further, my dear son, that if other orders have this characteristic in common with us, we ought to congratulate them, bless them, and invite them to join us in a rivalry of zeal and love to proclaim everywhere Mary's august name and its indescribable blessings.

This, then, my dear son, is our doctrine on the *vow of stability*. This is our rallying sign and our distinctive mark.

How easy it is to see that those who limit themselves to the *letter* are sadly out of place in the beautiful Family of Mary. Endlessly undecided, always unsettled, tedium eats away at their hearts which drift about on wings of doubt looking for a way to satisfy a secret urge to be unfaithful to the most Blessed Virgin under the pretext of searching for something more ideal. Their title, their condition of servant and minister of Mary is nothing in their eyes; their profession is not perfect enough; they need something more, as if there were something more noble and perfect than being devoted to the service of God's Mother and putting oneself in her maternal care, as Jesus Christ Himself did. Further, they wish no longer to belong to her in a special way because, they say, their sins need a more stringent reparation; and, as a result, they end by breaking with their own hands the sweet chains that bind them to the Queen of heaven and earth.

You know the rest of the story; in their hearts, they are no longer children of Mary, and soon or later they perish.

Woe, my dear son, to the child who unnaturally renounces Mary and deserts her family! Blessed, on the contrary, a thousand times blessed, is the one who is faithful! You will not neglect urging your

Brothers and dear Sisters to feel these sentiments. The Holy Father himself will join his voice to yours to persuade them “that they have only to advance day by day with ardor in the life they have begun under the auspices of the Blessed Virgin, with the full assurance that they are in their way giving the Church useful services.” And, to motivate them forcefully to perseverance, tell them the full extent to which they are Mary’s children.

All men and women are indeed the adopted children of the Mother of God, but the faithful members of the Society and the Institute are so in a manner still more perfect by reason of special claims very dear to her heart.

Like all religious, by the very fact of their vows which attach them to the cross of the Savior, they are but one with Him. Closely united to Him by the strongest love, they are in Him as He is in them; they are His disciples, images of Him, other Christs. And so, ever since the happy days of their professions, He, from the height of His cross, presents them to Mary as other Johns, saying, “Woman, behold your son” (Jn 19:24). He means: “They resemble Me and are one with Me. Adopt them, therefore, in Me; and be a mother to them as you are to Me.”

But I maintain that we are united to Mary by our vow of *stability* in a more special manner than other religious; we have an additional claim, and a remarkably strong one, to her preference. She adopts us, then, with more privileges; she delights in receiving our special promise to be forever faithful and devoted to her; then she enrolls us in her militia and consecrates us as her apostles. Oh, my dear son, how sacred this contract is! How rich it is with blessings for us! After all this, can you make any sense out of the cowardly desertions we suffer? . . . Can you understand how some have such apathetic indifference? . . . Finally, can you understand why some religious never make a sacrifice for Mary, who so much wants to give us such a high rank in her great human family?

### **3) What the two orders of Mary possess as special and uniquely their own in works they have in common with other religious orders.**

Let us admire, my dear son, the working of Divine Providence in the foundation of religious orders. Their spirit, while always adapted to the various needs of succeeding ages, can, however, be summarized in this inspired word of the Savior, *Mandavit unicuique de proximo suo*. “God gave us each one a commandment concerning our neighbor” (Si 17:12). The only mission of some was to give the world the ravishing example of total renouncement and Christian mortification. The first of these developed in the deserts of Thebaid; and from there, as from their cradle, they spread little by little through the whole world. You know all the heroes of poverty and penance that they have offered to the admiration of heaven and earth. Other orders came later on and multiplied workers of all kinds in the field of the Master of the House, workers destined to tear out the cockle sown by the enemy and at the same time to continue to a certain extent the work of self-denial and the cross. And among these numerous congregations established in every century and clime, some were called to this particular work and others to that.

Now we, the last of all, who believe that we have been called by Mary herself to help her with all our strength in her struggle against the great heresy of our times, have taken as our motto, as we affirm in our Constitutions, the words addressed by the Blessed Virgin to the servants at Cana, “Do whatever He tells you” (Jn 2:5). We are convinced that despite our weakness, our special mission is to perform all the works of zeal and mercy for our neighbor. Consequently, under the general title of teaching the Christian way of life, we accept all possible means of preserving or curing our neighbor from the infection of evil, and, in this spirit, make it the object of *a special vow*.

Thus, even though the vow of teaching that we make is something we have in common with other orders, this vow is far more comprehensive in the Society and the Institute than anywhere else. Its

object is to carry out Mary's words, "Do whatever He tells you," and, therefore, extends to all classes, both sexes, and all ages, but to the young and poor especially, so that it really sets us apart from all other societies that make the same vow.

This, then, my dear son, is the spirit and scope of our vow of teaching. This is the distinctive characteristic that bestows upon the children of the Society and the Institute a family likeness uniquely theirs among religious orders.

Ours is a great work, a magnificent work. If it is universal, it is because we are missionaries of Mary, who has said to us, "Do whatever He tells you." Yes, all of us are missionaries; each one of us has received from the Blessed Virgin a commission to work at the salvation of our brothers and sisters in the world.

That is why the Holy Father "in his joy could not but thank the Lord for having inspired us with such a purpose," as His Eminence Cardinal Giustiniani tells us in the name of His Holiness. "The work pleased him greatly." He considered it worthy of all praise and commendation; and he desired that its spirit be instilled in all the members, "so as to stimulate them to constant progress." He even goes so far as to assure them that, far from being useless to the Church, "They will indeed be doing important services for her" if they persevere. As you see, I am merely citing for you the very words of His Holiness.

It is for you, then, my dear son, to carry out as well as you can the commission that I entrust to you in the name of the Sovereign Pontiff; it is for you "to instill in the hearts of my dear children" during the retreat which is about to open "the spirit of our works, all of which have been inspired by charity." It is for you to impress on the teachers what a great mistake they would be making if they were to limit their endeavors to instruction in human learning, if they were to put all their care and pride into making scholars and not into making Christians, or into gaining a worldly reputation. They would be forgetting that they are Mary's missionaries and would descend from the high estate of apostles in order to degrade themselves to the base level of workers in the educational factories of our times. It is for you, finally, to explain the spirit and secret of their divine mission to those employed with internal

services in our houses or in the arts and crafts. We included this in our holy Rule when we laid down the way they cooperate in the general work of education. We showed them how powerfully they aid by their labors, zeal, and prayers the spread of the reign of Jesus and Mary in souls. Their part is really so beautiful! New Josephs, they are charged with assisting and sustaining the children of the holy family in their arduous ministry.

I must stop now, my dear son. I wanted to explain to you fully my conception of our works, and I did so at too great a length, no doubt; but that will not surprise you, for you know very well that a subject so dear to our hearts cannot be exhausted. In the important mission that I give you, or rather, that Mary herself imposes on you, I rely confidently on your zeal. Penetrated as you are with the spirit of your state, you will find it easy to instill that spirit in my children in both orders.

You know that the pontifical decree grants us the privileges of a plenary indulgence at the renewal as well as at the first profession of perpetual vows. Do not fail to draw attention to this good news.

May the august Mary, our Mother and Queen, bless your journey and your efforts, and may she bless you personally and all our dear children!

Accept this expression of the wishes of my heart, my dear son, and may my paternal blessings be the pledge of their fulfillment! This is what I confidently hope for.

W. Joseph Chaminade