

Option for the Poor¹

A “preferential option for the poor” has become a current phrase in Catholic vocabulary in the past few years. But the reality is an integral part of the Christian tradition, beginning with the Lord Jesus and coming to us through Luke, Paul, James and their spiritual descendants throughout the following centuries.

It is not surprising, therefore, that such a concern for the most needy members of society should hold priority among the various lay and religious institutes that mushroomed in France during and after the Napoleonic era. The Revolution, guided or misguided by its ideals, had destroyed most of the organized works of charity of the Church—schools, hospitals, orphanages, asylums, “refuges”—as well as much of the lay outreach to the poorest members of society. Even before the worst of the Revolution was over, individuals and groups, moved by Christian ideals and love, tried to provide what they could for the most neglected segments of their world.

The Marianist tradition, at its origins, was certainly steeped in these concerns. The Sodality of Bordeaux and Adele’s Association, while devoted to the spiritual growth of their own members, also embraced a “catholic” variety of outreach to the poor—the spiritually poor, but especially the spiritually poor who were also materially poor. Adele’s mother had devoted much of her wealth and time to caring for the needy; Adele followed in her footsteps and so did her many Associates. Among the sodalists at Bordeaux, feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoners and the hospitalized, caring for the sick, providing wholesome recreation for the poorest children—all these and many other efforts reflected the practicality of their faith.

After the foundation of the religious institutes, the same concern for the poor, and option in their favor, continued. Besides the Sodality, the very first work undertaken by the Daughters of Mary was free classes for poor girls, classes where they were taught not only the rudiments of reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion, but also how to sew and weave and cook and care for a household. When the Daughters opened their boarding school at Condom for girls of the middle class, they insisted on also opening day classes for the poor—free classes for those who could not afford any education at all.

The concern of the Sisters went beyond the education of the youngest. They also instructed young women and older women, preparing them for First Communion and Confirmation, and opened their hearts and their limited food supplies to the beggars and prostitutes of Agen.

¹ See *Spirit of Our Foundation*, vol. 3, paragraphs 19-27; 186-88; chapter 3, esp. paragraphs 287-88; Chaminade letter no. 1132; Stefanelli, *Adele*, esp. chapters 9, 15.

Though the first “work” of the new Society of Mary (after the Sodality) was a secondary boarding school in Bordeaux, Chaminade did not hesitate long in directing the efforts of the nascent Society toward primary education (some thirty such schools were founded between 1820 and 1850). Though some of the primary schools were for paying pupils, it was Chaminade’s intent “to reach all ranks of society, with a special predilection, however, for the poor.”² In the draft of the Constitutions of 1829, he wrote:

The free primary schools are destined for the Christian education of the poor. Of all other activities, it is the one most dear to the Society, since it is most precious in the eyes of the Savior who desired that this religious education of the poor might be one of the marks of his divine mission (art. 247).

He expressed the hope that the civil authorities “will allow all the children whose parents are unable to conveniently pay a contribution, to attend the primary schools gratuitously, and even to guard against a too rigid inquiry into their condition which might be too humiliating to them” (Letter no. 1132). When applying for royal authorization of his work, in 1825, he insisted that “the Society purposes to give education free to all those who cannot obtain it otherwise” (art. 2).

The first primary school, the one at Agen, was a remarkable success and its record is worth re-reading (See *Spirit*, vol. 3, pp. 350-72). Pupils who, on entering the school, had been unable to distinguish one letter of the alphabet from another were soon reading the *Imitation of Christ*. Some who could not make a straight stroke developed a clear, legible hand. Some who could not write half a dozen numbers correctly made amazing progress in arithmetic.

Students at the Agen school were required to present Certificates of Indigence, a move not only to identify the real poor but to prevent the better-off from taking advantage of the opportunities for an education. The system did not work very well, for several of the pastors granted such Certificates to the less materially needy on the grounds that spiritual indigence was even more important than the material kind!

An interesting development in the primary schools was the “unclassified grade,” to which were admitted all those children who, for one cause or another, were not able to pursue the regular courses.

The Society believes it would fail in its duty if it closed its doors to children from the rural districts whose homes are so distant that they cannot attend regularly every morning and afternoon, nor still less to those who cannot attend every day. It does not refuse admission to the children of working men living in the city, if family needs oblige them sometimes to remain at home. It does not wish to forsake such as have been endowed

² *Spirit*, vol. 3, paragraph 23.

with less intelligence, or have not been able to keep pace with their more fortunate

companions, and whose advance might have been arrested or at least retarded by their presence in the same class with others more talented.

It does not even abandon intractable characters before it has exhausted all means of reformation. It also reserves to itself the right of cooperating with parents who are satisfied with a very limited education for their children. Finally, it wishes to provide for excluded children, unless the dismissal was deemed absolutely necessary.

To instruct children of such difference in intelligence, age and character requires great tact and a devotedness almost heroic, and no worthier task, no one more replete with interest, could present itself to a zealous teacher. The unclassified grade is taught by an able and experienced teacher, who finds the greatest spur in the fact of being able to promote his pupils to one or the other of the regular classes.³

³ See *Spirit*, vol. 3, paragraph 288 note.