

A Sociologist Considers the Contributions of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous by Laura M. Leming, FMI

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Marie Thérèse de Lamourous!

Where has this woman been all my Marianist life? The Marianist world is not immune to the penchant that many historians have had, until recently, to overlook the contributions of women. As with so many other women in history, we are only lately recovering and reconsidering the contributions of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, a woman who may hold an important key to how we live Marianist life in the future.

Marie Thérèse de Lamourous (1754-1836) was a contemporary of William Joseph Chaminade (1761-1850) and a collaborator in devising ways to rebuild the Church in Bordeaux. Her name was one of the first listed in the women's section of the Bordeaux Sodality. But Marie Thérèse had her own ministerial interests apart from Chaminade and pursued them along with the various ways she assisted in the founding days of the Marianist Family. The legacy for which she was revered and remembered in Bordeaux was her leadership of the Miséricorde, a home and rehabilitation center for women who had resorted to prostitution in the chaotic post-revolutionary period.

Recently our community of Marianist Sisters reread her life story to prepare for sharing on how she inspires us. I realized that my view of Marie Thérèse is greatly influenced by the work and study I do as a sociologist. With every page I found myself thinking how amazing it was to find parallels with the urgent needs and "best practices" in doing social ministry that we confront today. Let me elaborate a bit by highlighting some aspects of Marie Thérèse's "method" that I think have bearing on our call to practice social justice in all of our ministries.

Responding to Critical Human Need

The work of the Miséricorde was Marie Therese's "*cher projet*" in the second half of her life and the basis for the reflections that follow. If she had never taken this up, or if she had died young like Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, the other woman in the triumvirate of Marianist Founders, her life still would have been amazing. The leadership skills and wisdom she acquired as a leader and effectively a pastor of the underground Church in Bordeaux during the

Revolution gave her the resources for which she became known. Her virtue and ministerial love led the locals to call her “the saint of Bordeaux.”

Marie Thérèse is a model for us in following one’s call wherever it leads, especially beyond one’s comfort zone. Asked to take up work with women at the bottom of Bordeaux’s social milieu, Marie Thérèse’s initial inclination was aversion. But she revisited that decision using a principle of good discernment. Following her example, we can explore our own aversions for signs of grace and call. Tentative, after wrestling with this difficult decision even in her nightmares and consulting with spiritual companions, Marie Thérèse visited the Miséricorde and, on the spot, decided to take up residence there.

Then, like today, political, economic, and even ecclesial turmoil put women at risk for living in poverty and turning to (sometimes being forced into) the sex trade in order to survive. Even some women who had been turned out of convents fell victim to these circumstances. The Miséricorde was a voluntary program for women who wanted to leave prostitution. Almost nothing in Marie Thérèse upbringing could have predicted that at the age of 46, this well-respected woman would choose to live in a community with women who had a past as sex workers. Marie Thérèse read the signs of the times and recognized her own capacity to respond on a local level to this critical human need—a need which continues in our own day.

Negotiating Changing Environments

Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, of the three Marianist Founders, was perhaps the most experienced and shrewd at negotiating the difficulties of shifting political, economic, and ecclesial circumstances. As a lay woman in the underground Church, she had more freedom in the public realm than Chaminade, who needed to disguise himself. Later, she had the financial acumen to serve as his representative in property negotiations. The Miséricorde was a unique ministry and civil entity in France, and it took compromise to establish its legal standing to receive contributions and to create small business enterprises to generate operating funds. In fact, the mix of business and pastoral sense that Marie Thérèse developed is a legacy for the Marianist Family. All over the Marianist world, we are exploring new means of addressing the needs we meet as we walk with populations that may be new to us: AIDS orphans in Africa, street children in India, and migrant workers or people on death row in the United States.

Whether consciously or not, Marie Thérèse left all of us a “method” of social ministry in a similar vein as Father Chaminade left us methods of spiritual growth (the System of Virtues) and community development (the Office system). The practices Marie Thérèse employed in her social ministry rest on four principles: cultivating human freedom and dignity, recognizing and drawing out leadership, creating access to a living wage, and linking local situations to global realities.

1) Freedom and Dignity

The Miséricorde, unlike most rehabilitation programs, was a community where each member was a willing participant. If young women were referred by their families, Marie Thérèse insisted on interviewing them alone. Then they would return home with family members; if it were a woman’s free choice, she would come back to the Miséricorde on her own. Today we recognize that having this sense of freedom is an important component of empowerment and commitment.

The women (some of them really girls, as records show some as young as 15) would only be invested in the community life and work of the Miséricorde if they had chosen it freely. Moreover, Marie Thérèse believed that people who once occupied statuses demeaned by society can and should be welcomed to make a viable contribution and provided the means to do so.

2) Developing Leadership

Recognizing the leadership potential of the residents of the Miséricorde was important for two reasons: 1) smooth administration of the growing enterprise required shared responsibility, and 2) the women needed to build confidence in their own potential and giftedness. The latter is of prime importance for people (then and now) who are accustomed to living on the margins of society where their voices do not matter and their gifts are often overlooked. Marie Thérèse recognized that her “daughters” needed the small successes within the community to strengthen their capacity to move beyond the Miséricorde and to become contributing members of society. She encouraged independence even while creating a safe space where some of the women made their home for life. Marie Thérèse extended the gift of community, which the Marianist Family cherishes as a special charism, to those most in need of it. This point deserves our scrutiny today, especially where Marianists are living in the overdeveloped world. How are we called to extend this gift that we have received to those who most need community in our own time?

3) Access to a Living Wage

One of challenges Marianists face in confronting the legacy of Marie Thérèse is her practical recognition that, for many, sharing our spiritual resources is simply not enough. People need to have access to honest and dignified ways of being part of an increasingly globalized economy. In her day and time, Marie Thérèse was able to read the economic needs and capitalize on them, not for personal profit but for the livelihood of her “daughters.” She created concrete opportunities for women through what today we would call work-training, job-readiness programs, especially in the area of microenterprise. She set up workrooms within the Miséricorde where women performed a variety of services like sewing and laundry work. When the opportunity arose to create a small business doing contract work for the government, the Miséricorde became known as a producer of fine cigars! Microenterprise is a way of creating pathways into the economy for people who have few skills and legal avenues to gain access to financial opportunity. As inequality grows in the overdeveloped countries, such as the United States, creating these pathways for people at lower socioeconomic levels is becoming an ever more critical need.

4) Linking Local and Global Concerns

Part of Marie Thérèse’s success in social ministry was keeping a balanced perspective between the “personal troubles” at hand and “global issues.” Her immediate concern was the pressing situation of women in poverty. But Marie Thérèse’s ties to other groups with far-reaching aspirations seem to have contributed to a sense of hope and vision—a connection to a wider world. The women of the Miséricorde had opportunities in the community to meet and interact with people who had broad visions and a sense of mission. The Bordeaux Sodality, founded at about the same time that Marie Thérèse undertook this ministry, had direct ties with the Miséricorde. Its members provided service there and welcomed Miséricorde residents as socialists. Marie Thérèse also had links to the Foreign Mission Society of Paris, whose members frequented the Miséricorde and shared their experiences in Asia. Keeping the links between

immediate concerns and global realities allows communities to not only be grounded but also to have a vision and a sense of connection to something larger than themselves.

Unifying Faith

Undergirding all of these elements of Marie Thérèse's "method" is her strong faith in God's Providence and her reliance on that in her day-to-day life. According to a story told about her, when there was almost no food at the Miséricorde, Marie Thérèse would knock on the tabernacle door and tell God that her daughters needed something to eat.

Living our Legacy

Marie Thérèse was eulogized as a woman who walked in God's presence "with an undivided heart." Her pragmatic action in response to urgent human need was nourished and sustained by her attention to and trust in Providence. We can well remember this today, as we build communities that strive to maintain a deep spiritual source and that attend to the critical needs we see in neighborhoods and the world around us.

Living the legacy of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous calls us to appreciate even more deeply the focus on lay empowerment that was part of the original inspiration of Chaminade and Adèle. Their insight—collaboration between men and women and lay and religious—was for people in mission who continued to confront dehumanizing poverty in the twenty-first century. She leaves us a set of practices for social ministry that can inform the action and reflection of our communities today. Marie Thérèse combined immense spiritual resources with practical resourcefulness in negotiating the political and economic realities of her day.

As heirs to her legacy, we are called to do no less.