

Story of the Beginnings of the Sodality of the Madeleine, the MLC of 1800

by Timothy Phillips, SM

Father Chaminade was a very practical, pastoral, and mission-centered person. From being a teacher and bursar at a small but good junior seminary at Mussidan in the French countryside, he found himself in a country, France, and a Church that needed serious help religiously and spiritually. He ministered in a hidden way during the French Revolution, but he knew that that was not enough to have a vibrant, enthusiastic, living Church. In exile in Saragossa, Spain, he had conversations with other exiled French priests about what to do when they returned to France to rebuild the Church, and he prayed about it, too.

Chaminade returned to France and Bordeaux in November of 1800. Within a month, he, with a couple young men, started the beginnings of the Sodality, or what today we call the MLC or Marianist Lay Community.

Later, in 1814, he wrote to Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon about it:

Fourteen years ago I returned to France as Missionary Apostolic throughout our unhappy land, subject, however to the approval of various Ordinaries. There seemed to me no better way of exercising these functions than by establishing a sodality like the one now existing. Each sodalist, of whatever sex, age or condition in life is required to become an active member of the mission.¹

How did he do it? He opened an oratory so he would have a center and soon met a couple of young men who were interested in the kind of lay community he proposed, under the patronage of Mary. By December 8, 1800, they had begun to organize.

He had them bring others—and he probably brought some, too—and some of the first members were people Father Chaminade had known from his ministry during the Revolution. They spent some time preparing, and then 12 of them made a formal commitment or act of consecration on February 2, 1801.

From there, within a year a group of young women was formed under the leadership of Marie Thérèse de Lamourous on March 25, 1801. By April 1801 the young men reached 100 members. Then Father Chaminade added a group of married men (Fathers of the Family) and also married women (Ladies of the Retreat). Finally, in 1804 the section of the Sodality made up of priests was formed.

Father Chaminade's idea was to include all classes and professions in the one Sodality. So within the major groups there were smaller sections set up, the artisans, students, teachers, workers, etc. These sections met for prayers and for religious conferences, as well as to study matters of interest to the entire Sodality. The section met once a week to conduct its affairs and to care for absent or sick members. On Sundays and feast days, afternoons were given over to recreational activities, like the walks to Chaminade's farm, Villa St. Lawrence, in the countryside outside Bordeaux. There were many ways they kept in contact with one another. There also were the public meetings of the young men's group every Sunday evening at the Madeleine Chapel. It usually included some talk or debate—something lively designed to keep up interest.

¹ Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 52, to Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, Oct. 8, 1814; vol. 1, p. 132.

Everyone was welcome, and the dynamic provided a contagion of good example through which everyone grew in Christian faith. The method was to multiply Christians; it was a program to be reproduced, drawing more and more people into it, inspiring them to become good or better Christians.

Decline and *Re-formation* the Sodality

The Sodality(ies) continued after the foundation of the religious communities, the Daughters of Mary and the Society of Mary. In fact the members of the Society of Mary were all enrolled in the Sodality of Bordeaux until 1826. However, after 1830, the political climate was not at all favorable for groups, particularly religious groups, about which there were certain suspicions of anti-government activity. A bit later the Society of Mary entered into education, especially primary education, in a serious way. This tended to reduce the number of other ministries, particularly more adult ministries. There were some attempts at continuing spiritual groups like the Sodality in the primary or secondary schools, but a real mission-oriented Sodality was and continues to be more of an adult activity.

After 1900 and the research and efforts of Fathers Joseph Simler and Charles Klobb, there was a renewed awareness of the extent of Father Chaminade's apostolic vision, which had been lost sight of in the midst of the disagreements of Father Chaminade's last years and the Marianist emphasis on and involvement in schools. For a number of years after the death of Father Chaminade, until the generalate of Father Simler, the Daughters of Mary were not in close contact with the Society of Mary as well. There were a few Marianists who continued to do research and to look toward the apostolic vision of Father Chaminade: Fathers Henri Lebon, William Ferree, Joseph Verrier, and Jean Baptiste Armbruster; and Brother John Totten, among others.

In the 1930s and 1940s some of these people, bearing Marianist documents, began inspiring others who a bit later—in the 1950s and 1960s—began inspiring others and *re-formed* Sodality groups outside of schools with adults and young adults. Brother José Antonio Romeo and CEMI (Congregación-Estado de María Inmaculada, Sodality State of Mary Immaculate) in Spain is an example. The State with Brother Hugh Bihl and the Long Island Sodality in the United States are others. As time went on, other groups were formed in Spain, the USA, and other countries, e.g., France. Father Quentin Hakenewerth, head of Religious Life for the Society of Mary during Father Salaverri's General Administration, constructed some descriptive notions of what these groups were: Marianist Apostolic Faith Communities.

It did not take long for the name of Marianist Lay Community, MLC, to develop and to stick. The Daughters of Mary (Marianist Sisters), of course, also were involved.

The first international meeting of Marianist Lay Communities happened in Santiago, Chile, in 1993. That meeting resulted in a document on the identity of Marianist Lay Communities and in the formation of an international organization of MLC, with a president and councilors responsible for North America (and English-speaking Africa and Asia), South America, and Europe (and French-speaking Africa). In 2005 at the meeting in Bordeaux a new area was created for Africa, both Francophone and Anglophone. Every four years an international meeting has been held to elect new leadership and to develop another of the basic documents of MLC identity: 1993 Santiago Chile; 1997 Liria (Valencia), Spain; 2001 Philadelphia, USA; 2005 Bordeaux, France; 2009 Nairobi, Kenya; 2014 Lima, Peru.

The international organization took up the challenge of gaining approval of the MLC from the Pontifical Council for the Laity in Rome. This was achieved in 2000, with definitive approval in 2006.

1st. The confirmation of the recognition of the Marianist Lay Communities as an international private association of the faithful constituted as a juridical person, according to Canons 298-311 and 321-329 of the Code of Canon Law.

2nd. The definitive approval of the Statutes of the Marianist Lay Communities, in the new version which original text is in the archives of the Dicastery.

Given at Vatican City, on the twenty-second of February of the year two thousand and six, Solemnity of the Chair of Saint Peter, Apostle.