

## *Inspiration*

Adapted talk given by Carol Ramey at a *Food for the Soul* program at the University of Dayton.

Today we are going to reflect on the topic of “inspiration.” Several pathways are available to pursue this topic—parts of life that people often connect with inspiration—such as art, nature, contemplation, etc.. We are choosing to revisit Blessed William Joseph Chaminade’s inspiration at Our Lady of the Pillar as a way to focus our thoughts and questions, hoping this will be an interesting avenue to walk down, either as an individual or as a community.

Inspiration is something that moves the intellect or emotions toward an experience of newfound clarity, ideas, or invention. It is often described as an exhilarating experience. A few definitions I’ve read are these:

- Inspiration is “an infusion of an impulse of illumination.”
- Inspiration is “divine guidance or influence exerted directly on the mind and soul.”
- Inspiration is “the “in-breathing of creative power.”

Ever feel like you’ve experienced any of those descriptions? For most, inspiration comes as a surprise. Inspiration can come around small matters—like how to get your young child to bed at night—or as life-altering concerns—as when we realize we have a vocation to a particular state in life.

As Christians, we often identify the Holy Spirit as the source of inspiration that has stimulated us to see more clearly into our life of grace, our faith, and our practices that flow from the grace and faith. The Holy Spirit often calls upon Mary, the Mother of God, to be a collaborator—the Spirit leads us to Mary—Mary leads us to the Spirit.

For Father Chaminade, the Spirit definitely led him to Mary for inspiration. He often advised his followers to look to Mary and her inspiration as a guide for their own decisions and actions. Remember the famous line from his Letter of 1839 to the Retreat Masters? He wrote, “Mary is a complete reason for us to have hope—our Mother, our refuge, our help, our strength, and our life.”

Several Marianist authors have remarked that this passage demonstrates that even though Chaminade had a special devotion to Mary from his youth, his time at Saragossa stayed with him—very deeply—for the rest of his life. It was a powerful illumination, influence, and “in-breathing of creative power.”

The biographies tell us that after he had been forced to leave Bordeaux, France, Father Chaminade arrived in Saragossa, Spain, on the eve of the feast of Our Lady of the Pillar. Usually, the feast day was a festival, with processions and lights in the plaza

around the Basilica where the statue resides. This must have been a wonderful and welcome experience after so many years of the Church's suppression by the revolutionaries back home.

We also know that Chaminade returns to the Basilica regularly to pray to Mary—looking to her to open him to the Spirit, in the same way she opened herself when the angel came to ask her to be the Mother of God. Father Eduardo Benlloch, one of Chaminade's biographers, writes, "Mary moves toward an undefined and uncertain future, abandons human security, and goes out of herself to enter fully into the action of God. Father Chaminade asks the Spirit for the same bold and binding faith of Mary. (CMT p. 130)

Father Chaminade reflects on all that has happened, particularly how the French Revolution ended most of what he thought he had been called to do. Like Mary, he ponders things in his heart—he thinks of the way Mary trusted God through the horror of her Son's passion and death. Within his experience of violent chaos and exile, he asks to be able to embrace the mystery of God, just as Mary did in her darkest moments.

He realizes how Mary was able to both quiet herself and pray, but also go out to others in need—like her cousin Elizabeth, or the young couple at Cana, or the grief-stricken John into whose care she is given at the Foot of the Cross.

He then comes to a new understanding of Mary. The Spirit inspires Chaminade to look at her in a totally new way. He will still honor her and practice traditional devotion to her. But he sees that *through her* Christ will be brought back into France and beyond. It will be *through her* that we are brothers and sisters of Christ, with Mary, our Mother. It is through this *sense of family* that the church will be revitalized.

He leaves Saragossa and returns to France to found lay communities and the vowed religious communities, both in service to a new way to be Church! These communities in permanent mission will welcome all people, all states of life—one great Family under Mary's protection—the Marianist Family—this Family then will go out into the world in whatever ways are needed, always bringing Christ with them.

Father Benlloch writes that Chaminade takes a "turn" after his time in Saragossa. He could have gone back to France to resume duties as a teacher or a pastor—or even to respond to opportunities to enter the hierarchy. But, he does not do the expected. He has a new vision, a new mission, new energy—he has been inspired!!!!

So we, too, as Chaminade did, can sit with Mary reflecting on the circumstances of our lives and what lies ahead. We can recall her faith, her goodness, and her bold actions, and ask the Spirit to instill that faith, that goodness, that courage for bold action in us—to be inspired to live Christ's life, even if this means a "turn" from what we expect or from what is "expected of us" by others.

Isn't it comforting to know that we can sit with Mary to listen for any initiative the Spirit may have in mind for us? Isn't it a source of confidence to know that once we receive an illumination or in-breaking we can respond with whatever is required to move beyond the exhilaration into action, with Mary's trust and courage?

Sometimes, I imagine myself sitting on a bench, with the young Mary—the betrothed virgin—asking her to give me her sense of trust despite the ambiguity of the message brought by the angel and the courage to say “yes” despite the obvious dangers inherent in her agreement. Sometimes I sit with the older Mary—the wise Mary—the practical Mary. I ask that she help me reopen myself to the stirrings of the Spirit—to overcome my hesitations that are bred by years of accumulated disillusionments or failures. I pray for inspiration that will fill me with new or renewed vision, new or renewed mission, and new or renewed energy and creativity. I am inspired by Mary's “yes” and her perseverance.

I remind myself of Father Chaminade's inspiration and how he persevered despite obstacles and even failures. I imagine how tempted he must have been to disillusionment! I am inspired by how he was able to recollect God's unconditional love, the Spirit's beckoning, and Mary's companionship throughout his life.

Inspiration—can we dare to hope for this experience? How about we walk down an imaginary avenue with Mary and Blessed Chaminade and “talk over” our openness to an “in-breaking?” And remember, be careful what you pray for—you might get it!