

*Sharing Our Marianist Stories* Ep. 21 Transcript

We Are All Missionaries: Chaminade's Letter of 1839 (with Gabby Bibeau and Patti Gehred)

**00:00 – Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

There's many other Marian spiritualities that emphasize Mary's obedience, Mary's humility, Mary's docility. What I think is so important about Father Chaminade is that his Mary is a very strong, active, dynamic Mary. She is *the* woman, the promised woman that defeats evil. Any treatment of Mary in the Marianist tradition that doesn't have that component is missing something really crucial.

**00:47 – Patti Gehred**

Welcome to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. I'm Patti Gehred.

**00:51 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

And I'm Sr. Gabby Bibeau.

**00:54 - Patti Gehred**

Today we're going to discuss the *Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839*. When Sr. Gabby and I first talked about reviewing letters from the Founders, this was one of the first letters Sr. Gabby wanted to discuss. So, can you tell us why?

**01:10 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

Yeah, I picked this letter for Father Chaminade because this is far and away the most important letter that exists in the Marianist family. This is the letter where Father Chaminade lays out, "This is who we are. This is what we're about. This is what makes us unique." So, I was like, "We have to discuss at least part of this letter." It's longer than the *Letter of Adèle's* that we discussed last time. So, we're not going to read the whole thing, but it's just totally foundational to who we are as Marianists. So, it's like we have to do this letter.

**01:56 - Patti Gehred**

Okay, at this point, do you want to read the portions you selected, Sr. Gabby?

**02:01 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

Yes, I can do that. So, like I said, it's not an extremely long letter. It's probably about five pages, but it's longer than what we want to read on our podcast. So, I picked out some of the paragraphs that I think are most important. So, I'm going to skip to - and we will put in the description of the podcast a link to the whole letter, the entire letter if you want to read the whole thing. But I'm going to go ahead and skip really the first whole section and get right into the heart of the letter.

**02:46 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

So Father Chaminade writes: "All periods of the Church's history are marked with the struggles and glorious triumphs of the august Mary. All heresies, the Church tells us, have recoiled before the Blessed Virgin. In our day, the great prevailing heresy is religious indifference, which grows by numbing souls and the stupor of selfishness and the mire of passion. The depths of the

infernal abyss belch forth huge clouds of black and pestilential smoke that threatened to engulf the whole earth in a dark night devoid of every good, fraught with every evil, and impenetrable to the life-giving rays of the sun of justice.”

**03:41 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

“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.”

**04:28 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

"But what I consider as being the specifying characteristic of our orders is that we embrace religious life in Mary's name and for her glory. We, 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 the words addressed by the Blessed Virgin to the servants at Cana, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ We are convinced that despite our weakness, our special mission is to perform all the works of zeal and mercy for our neighbor. Consequently, we accept all possible means of preserving or curing our neighbor from the infection of evil. 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. Its object is to carry out Mary's words, ‘Do whatever he tells you,’ and therefore, it 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.”

**06:01 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

“For ours is our 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.”

**06:37 - Patti Gehred**

Thank you, Gabby. Hearing this, it just feels like when people say, “What is *Marianist*?” what is a better answer? What is a better response than this letter?

**06:52 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

Yes. And there's so much more than that. Those, I think, are the most important pieces, but yeah. I mean, if someone says, “Okay, what does it mean to be *Marianist*?” You can hand them this letter and it's pretty much all there. Now of course, this was written in 1839, so some of the language sounds a little bit foreign to our 21st century ears. But if you look beyond the language, or if you read to the heart of what he's saying, it's such a beautiful explanation of our mission, our purpose for existing, our relationship with Mary. Yeah, it's all there.

**07:46 - Patti Gehred**

And even in that first paragraph, when... there's some dramatic language, I think that's cultural as well as a sign of the times. "The depths of the infernal abyss belch forth huge clouds of black [and pestilential smoke] that threatened to engulf the whole earth..." But, you know, I've read that several times, but it feels kind of fitting for where we are right now. You know, it feels like at times with social unrest and everything going in social justice and having COVID-19 throughout the world, I mean, it doesn't even sound all that dramatic at the moment to me.

**08:31 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

I think that's a great point, Patti, and it is the first time I read this letter and I read that line. I kind of chuckled to myself because I was like, "Wow, he does not mince words," like... he saw with open eyes the sin of his time and the social unrest. And I think there are sometimes - You know, I've talked with different people who really don't like that portion of the letter because they think it's very negative. But what I think is number one, you have to understand what Father Chaminade experienced in his life. This is a man who was a priest that lived through the French Revolution.

**9:20 - Patti Gehred**

Exactly, yes.

**9:22 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

You know, yeah. And his mentor and close friend, Fr. [Simon] Langoiran, was killed by a violent mob in Bordeaux. And legend has it that Father Chaminade received his blood-soaked breviary as a memento for him. You know, he was in exile. He saw horrible things, and so he was really clear eyed about all the evil that was in society at that time. So that's number one. But number two is that you'll also have to look at the very next paragraph, which begins as "this picture of our times, so sadly accurate is nevertheless far from discouraging to us. Mary's power stands undiminished."

**10:16 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

So, he was clear-eyed about the evil. But he was hopeful. And I think going back to your point, Patti, about... this great cloud of black and pestilential smoke. There's a lot there for us today. But that we can look at that clear eyed, like Father Chaminade, and still be hopeful and can still say Mary's power stands undiminished. So, I think that's a great and powerful component of this letter.

**10:53 - Patti Gehred**

I really agree. And it's something I so admire about Father Chaminade. And in fact, I don't think there's a lot - at least you've done more reading than I - but I don't see a lot of the negativity or darkness that is shared in that first paragraph a lot. It's usually about, "Let's get to work." So, in a way... it's kind of interesting to see, "No, he felt that. He saw that. He witnessed it, and he made the choice." And he uses his faith and his looking to Mary and God and Jesus, that there's hope.

**11:32 - Patti Gehred**

What about the line - I know people talk about this a lot - about “the incomparable woman, the promised woman who is to crush the serpent's head.” What do you hear when you read that?

**11:44 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

Yes. So, for those of you who are unfamiliar with this concept of Mary crushing the head of the serpent, this actually goes back to a reading of the Book of Genesis. So, after Adam and Eve have eaten of the fruit, and God comes to them and says that because of what they've done, they can no longer stay in the garden, He then turns to the serpent and says, “Because, you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures. Upon your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.” Most importantly, God says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will strike your head and you will strike his heel.”

**12:45 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

So, Father Chaminade, the version of the Bible that he had was the Vulgate, which was the Latin translation of the Bible. And that is a slightly mistranslated [version]. The Vulgate slightly mistranslates this to suggest that it's the woman who strikes off the head of the serpent. In traditional Catholic theology, we see this as a foreshadowing of Jesus and Mary in salvation history... If you look at, “He will strike your head,” so how we understand it from the translation now, Jesus will be the one who strikes his head. But traditionally, because of this translation, it was Mary who strikes the head of the serpent. So, we can really think about them striking the head of the serpent together.

**13:44 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

And so, for Father Chaminade, Mary is the woman who through her “Yes,” through her cooperation in God's plan of salvation, she is the woman who defeats evil, the woman who crushes the head of the serpent, the woman who defeats evil. And I just want to say that this is so important because there's many other Marian spiritualities that emphasize Mary's obedience, Mary's humility, Mary's docility, and in the Marianist tradition, we emphasize those certainly.

**14:23 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

What I think is so important about Father Chaminade is that his Mary is a very strong, active, dynamic Mary. She is *the* woman, the promised woman, the incomparable woman that defeats evil. That is so huge in our understanding of Mary, that any treatment of Mary in the Marianist tradition that doesn't have that component is missing something really crucial. So that's what he's getting at here. And so, our task as Marianists is to cooperate in this mission of Mary to crush the serpent's head, to defeat evil. How we might put it in our day, to be people who work against injustice, to be people who work against anything that goes against God's Kingdom.

**15:27 - Patti Gehred**

And I think that's even more explored in the next paragraph. “We who believe that we've been called by Mary herself to help her with all our strength in her struggle against the great heresies

of our times.” And I would like to also stress that this is for FMI, the SM, and the Lay - we think all branches of the Marianist family can read this and is being called to be missionaries of Mary.

### **15:58 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

Absolutely yes, this was the context of this letter. He's writing this letter to the retreat masters, so the several priests in the Society of Mary who will be giving retreats to members of the Daughters of Mary and the Society of Mary. And these are aspects of who we are that he wants them to make sure that they emphasize in their retreats.

### **16:34 – Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

So, he talks a lot about our orders. In the first part of the letter, he talks about what we have in common with other religious orders and he talks about the vows. And then the parts that are most interesting are the parts where he talks about what is unique to us. And so, he's talking more specifically about the religious, but this is really an explanation of our charism. And this is a charism that is shared with religious priests and laypeople. And so, this is the same call and the same mission lived differently.

### **17:22 – Gabby Bibeau**

So absolutely, I really think everyone in the Marianists family, lay and religious, should at some point read this letter because it's just a treasure. This tone of this letter is very grand. It is. It's written for everyone. And the reason that he writes this letter, he's in such a mood... I guess grand, and just a very grand mood is because he had written to the Pope [Gregory XVI] to ask for approval of the religious orders. And in fact, he did not receive approval of the two religious orders because the Pope wasn't approving any new religious orders at that time. But the Pope instead wrote a decree of praise to Father Chaminade to say, “What you're doing is great. What these religious orders are all about, I think it's wonderful.” And so, Father Chaminade feels very emboldened by that. And it's in response to that that he writes to the Retreat Masters to have them to tell all of their religious, “The Pope basically approves of what we're doing and isn't that wonderful. And don't forget this is who we are.”

### **18:59 - Patti Gehred**

And you think you know the Sisters were officially formed in 1816, right, and the SM, 1817, and this is 1839. This is something he had thought about, obviously. And he's putting it into words. And I think I like your term “grand.” I'm thinking almost a little celebratory. Like he's worked for so long and it's being affirmed. And now he gets to share this with the people that have joined in this mission. So, it really is - other than our first paragraph that we read - pretty celebratory.

### **19:40 - Patti Gehred**

You could feel it. It's got a lot of punch. The other part that just makes me want to sort of stand and cheer is that - it's another paragraph down - to carry out Mary's words, “Do whatever he tells you.” Extend to all classes, both sexes, and all ages, but to the young and poor especially. I just feel like for its time, that's incredible, [relevant to] what was happening and why the French

Revolution happened. I've always admired how he made these changes from French society, making sure everyone is included. And just to see it written, again, I think it's timely.

**20:20 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

Yeah, I think so too, Patti. Yeah, it was very important for me to include that part because... we talk about with the Marianist pillars, one of the pillars that we refer to - we sometimes use different names for it - but *inclusivity* is one name we use, *discipleship of equals* is one name, *family spirit* is another name. It gets at this idea that that universality of our mission, and the universality of our identity, that we are not just for the middle class. We're not just for the rich. We're not just for Westerners. You know what I mean? I think there's so much in our society now as we grow in understanding of racism, of sexism, of classism, of heterosexism that there's in the Marianist Family a call to remember that universality and to be a people who are in mission and community with all different kinds of people. And the young and poor, especially, I think that is still the case. You can see where we are as Marianists around the world, and that's who we're present to you in many places is the young and the poor.

**21:54 - Patti Gehred**

And then, the final paragraph that you chose... When I was talking to Bro. Larry [Cada], he told me that Fr. [Joseph] Simler's secretary, Fr. [Charles] Klobb, felt this paragraph should be painted in gold in every Marianist community in the world. "For ours is a great work, a magnificent work. If it is universal, it is because we are missionaries of Mary who said to us, 'Do whatever he tells you.'" And when I asked Larry did he think we should still paint it in gold, he teasingly said. "Well, that's expensive." But he does feel like every community should know this letter, exactly what you said, Gabby.

**22:37 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

Yeah. I agree with Larry. Maybe not in gold, but for sure somebody could graffiti this on the side of our house and I'd be like, "Yeah, let's leave it because that's exactly who we are." And I love how often, "Do whatever he tells you," comes up in this letter. That's really our mission statement as Marianists and it's a great shorthand.

**23:06 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

Because it's about Jesus, but it's the words of Mary. The phrase "Do whatever he tells you," these are the words of Mary at the wedding feast of Cana, when Mary realizes that there's no wine. They've run out of wine at this wedding. And she basically invites Jesus to perform his first miracle to solve that problem, make more wine. So, what Mary does is she turns to the servants at the wedding and says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." And that's when Jesus tells them to fill up the casks with water and he turns them into wine.

**23:47 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

So that's the context for that line. That's John, Chapter 2. It does get to that missionary sense. We were missionaries of Mary. I know when I first read this letter, I think I was a novice and I read this last paragraph about how, "We're missionaries and Mary. Ours is a great work, a magnificent

work,” and I was like, “Oh my gosh, that's amazing. Yes, this is so exciting. It's just very inspiring. It's very motivating. Yeah, it's moving. It's deeply, deeply moving and aspirational.”

**24:25 - Patti Gehred**

Well, thank you, Sr. Gabby. I want to continue doing letters, so we'll have to find something from Marie Thérèse or go back to Adèle and Father Chaminade. I'm really enjoying this. I'm learning a lot. So, thank you very much.

**24:37 - Sr. Gabby Bibeau**

You're welcome. Well, we I hope you enjoyed this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories* where we talked about Father Chaminade's *Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839*. This is just a portion of the letter, so if you'd like to read the whole thing - and I encourage you to do so - we will be posting a link in the show notes of the podcast - also on our website - and you can find a PDF that's a free download with an introduction by none other than Bro. Larry Cada of happy memory.

**25:14 - Patti Gehred**

And you can find that letter and our podcast and other information at our web page [www.nacms.org](http://www.nacms.org). And again, I thank you for listening, too.