

Opening New Doors to Our Knowledge of Blessed Father Chaminade by Tom Redmond, SM

[*Editor's Note:* Brother Tom delivered the following presentation to Marianist scholastics in Nairobi, Kenya, on January 20, 2024.]

Let us begin with this insight from the Gospel of Mark:

“ . . . no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” (Mk 2:22)

Part 1: Opening New Doors

Sometimes, we come to a point in life when we realize that we know more about a subject than we first thought, such as our knowledge of Father Chaminade and our Marianist charism. Each of us has been connected with Marianist life for some years now. The first stirrings of an interest in religious life led to our initial contact with the Society of Mary; we then responded to a “come and see” program that led us to be a “live-in,” which led us to be an aspirant, which led us to be a novice, which now has led us—as professed religious Marianists—to be in this scholastic community in our professional studies.

There may be a specific time in Father Chaminade’s life that has held your attention, or maybe a specific element of our Marianist charism has been your focus over these years.

A period in the Founder’s life that has held my attention for quite some time now is his three-year exile in Saragossa. Developing and leading the Spirit of Saragossa Retreat has been a deep grace for me, not only in my study of this period in the Founder’s life but also in seeing how the grace of this retreat has touched the lives of many others.

But now, gradually, another point of focus in the Founder’s life is dawning upon me. A new door has opened for me in my study of the Founder’s life through the words of Father Chaminade, as stated by Father Lalanne. Lalanne has placed these words in the Founder’s mouth in May of 1817:

This is what I have been awaiting for such a long time.
Blessed be God! God has manifested his will, and the
moment has come to carry out the plan I have been
seeking since God inspired me thirty years ago.¹

Marianist scholars over the years have questioned Lalanne’s accuracy, not only in this line but also in several of his other writings; Lalanne frequently made mistakes in dates, names, and places.² You are quite possibly familiar with this debate. If Father Lalanne is correct, thirty years before 1817 is 1787, when Father Chaminade was still at the Collège of Mussidan. However, several

¹ Eduardo Benlloch, SM, *Chaminade's Message Today* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2001), 12.

² Benlloch, 13. See also, Vincent Vasey, SM, *Another Portrait* (Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission, 1987), 88.

Marianist scholars and historians have changed Lalanne's "thirty years ago" to "twenty years ago," which is 1797, when Father Chaminade was in Saragossa! This emphasis on twenty years ago, 1797, adds credence to the inspiration received in Saragossa. Father Vincent Vasey, in his scholarly *Another Portrait*, writes:

Lalanne says that Father Chaminade said thirty years. This figure "thirty" created problems for those who trace Father Chaminade's vocation of founder to Saragossa. He was in Saragossa twenty years before, not thirty years. Father Lebon, in his history of the Society, *Our First Century*, simply changes thirty to twenty, thinking perhaps rightly that Lalanne, inaccurate as to times and dates on occasion, slipped here and wrote thirty for twenty.³

Father Eduardo Benlloch adds more credibility to the inspiration Chaminade received while in Saragossa through this insightful comment:

From the time he returned to France in 1800 at the age of 39, we see William Joseph Chaminade changed. He is not the same person who went into exile. He is decisive and knows where he is going. He has a personal missionary project and becomes extraordinarily creative. His life is not the same as it was before going into exile; something had happened in Saragossa.⁴

But what if both "thirty years ago" and "twenty years ago" are correct? We know of Father Chaminade's interest in religious life while still at the Collège of Mussidan, so Lalanne's statement of "thirty years ago" does carry some weight. During his exile, Father Chaminade visited several religious communities, stirring the embers in his heart of a desire for religious life. This possibility of both "thirty years ago" and "twenty years ago" as being correct invites us to consider the continued attentiveness of the Founder to the workings of Providence in his life. "Nothing was more Chaminadean than to await Providence and the signs of God's will."⁵

After the Revolution, the social structure—along with the practice of faith and religion in France—had changed, so the *how* of religious witness and the *what* of religious ministry in France also needed to change. As Father Benlloch stated, Saragossa was a decisive turning point in the Founder's life. "Something happened in Saragossa" that gave Father Chaminade an insight into a new form of an apostolic mission in post-Revolutionary France; his requesting the title "Missionary Apostolic" speaks volumes of his new vision for mission!⁶ New times demand new ways of meeting the needs of society. As the Founder

³ Vasey, 147.

⁴ Benlloch, 18.

⁵ Vasey, 147.

⁶ Joseph Simler. *William Joseph Chaminade, Founder of the Marianists* (Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission, 1986), 94, 119. Vasey, 142.

stated on more than one occasion, “God has inspired me with this work.”⁷
According to Father Vasey:

Father Chaminade’s attitude towards adaptation repeats what the great founders of religious institutions tried to do in various periods of Church history. They all wanted to meet the needs of their world, to remedy contemporary problems. . . . The Church lives in the world and shares its problems.⁸

We come to see an eclectic nature in Father Chaminade with his continued awareness of the workings of grace in his life and his facing the needs before him. He took what he needed from a variety of sources to help him respond to the needs and the situations before him.

Part 2: Chaminade’s Teachings in Support of a Deep, Rich Prayer Life

Whether it was in 1801, 1816/1817, or now in our current year, the core of our Marianist identity has not changed. We enter Marianist life for two reasons.⁹ First, Marianist life offers us a support in living a holy, meaningful, and intimate relationship with God, who is the core of our life. We give expression to this through living in a prayerful community. Second, we enter Marianist life for the salvation of others. These two essential points are reflected well in article 34 of our Rule of Life.

The Marianist community aims to be an image of the first community of Jesus’ disciples, united with Mary and filled with the Holy Spirit. We give ourselves to community life to bear witness to God’s love, to attain holiness, and to fulfill our apostolic mission.¹⁰

As several Marianist authors have stated,¹¹ our essential characteristic elements are Mary and faith. Sometimes, their language may seem dated, so allow me to paraphrase. Our devotion to Mary is relational; it is affective, and our love for Mary naturally leads us into action. At the Annunciation, Mary received the Word of God, pondered it, nurtured it both in her heart and womb, and gave it birth, giving flesh to the Word of God for the salvation of the world.

Through our prayer life, both personal and communal, we ponder and nurture the Word of God in our hearts. In and through our very being and our own unique personalities, we bring the richness and depth of the Word of God into the world. We continue the Incarnation through our very being. Father Joe Lackner reflects on this in a unique way in his *Virtues for Mission*.

⁷ Vasey, 135.

⁸ Vasey, 148.

⁹ Simler, 82.

¹⁰ The material is taken from the Rule of Life of the Society of Mary, from the thirty-third General Chapter, held in 2006.

¹¹ Among them, John Harrington, SM, *The Teachings of Father Chaminade on Mental Prayer* (Dayton, OH: Marianist Press, 1961), 155. See also, Simler, 278-79.

Because of the way Father Chaminade read Scripture and tradition, he believed the Incarnation was to be an ongoing experience in every age. God intended for the Word to become flesh in every generation, and Mary was to play a pivotal role in each successive incarnation, just as she had in the first one. This continuing incarnation configures all the elements of Marianist spirituality.¹²

Just as Mary nurtured and supported the growth of the young Jesus, she was also present with the early Church, supporting its growth in faith and its response through ministry. This image of the first Christian community in Jerusalem is a very good model for us. As Mary was with the apostles and the growing community of believers, she is with us, nurturing and supporting all our growing efforts. As Jesus involved Mary in all the mysteries in his life, we Marianists involve Mary in all the mysteries in our lives. Our awareness of her presence and intercession in every aspect of our lives and ministries can be very powerful.

We are not alone on our journey of faith. Mary's presence at the wedding feast at Cana is another excellent example of her ongoing presence. At this celebration of love, we see Mary aware of and responsive to a need at the banquet; let us rely on her presence, her awareness, and her intercession in the needs in our lives and in our ministries. Through her intercession, she directs us to do what Jesus tells us; this is a direct invitation into prayer as a foundation for our ministry. Again, from our Rule of Life, article 56 calls us to integrate our prayer into all aspects of our lives.

Contemplation of the Lord and his loving plan for the world moves us to share in his saving mission. Meditation helps us become aware of God's presence in our activities, in the events of each day, and especially in our neighbor. Our apostolic work, in turn, is an occasion of growth in virtue, a means of purification, and a stimulus to prayer.¹³

Let us now turn our attention to the second essential characteristic element of our Marianist charism: faith. Father Chaminade strongly encourages us to use the Creed as a source for prayer, and the Founder's perspective holds a lot of wisdom for us. "I believe" that God is very near and present and involved in the goings on in the world and involved in the goings on in my life. "I believe. . . ." I know of God's loving presence. Things do not always go the way we plan, but as Father Bill Behringer often shared, "It's all in God's hands." This posture is not an attitude of giving up; it is a witness to hope that reflects that we are not alone on our journey—there is something else going on in our lives, the action of God's grace, and our response to grace is a testament to our faith.

Father Chaminade often stated that God had inspired him in the establishment of the Marianist Family; this means God continues to inspire the growth and development of our vocations. As we grow in our faith life, we grow

¹² Joseph Lackner, SM, *Virtues for Mission* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2003), 3.

¹³ Rule of Life of the Society of Mary, § 56.

in our love for what we believe. This growing in love aligns with the insights of Father John Harrington, who writes that our faith is not only an intellectual conviction¹⁴ but also leads us into a response of love: our love for God, our love for Mary, and our love lived out through charity to others.

Let us conclude with this final thought. As we continue to live and grow in our Marianist vocation, we come to realize that something new is before us, both personally and collectively. Let us pray for an openness in mind and heart to receive this new wine that God continues to pour into our lives as a holy and abundant grace. And let us grow in trusting Mary's presence and intercession in all that is before us and, in turn, in sharing with her all the mysteries in our lives to grow ever more fully into the image of Jesus, her firstborn. Amen.

¹⁴ Harrington, 155.