

December 2011

## LIKE CHAMINADE, PROPHETS WITH MARY FOR A NEW WORLD

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade was a fervent reader of Saint Paul and had a thorough knowledge of the **Epistle to the Hebrews**. He would undoubtedly have approved our recourse to this letter for a better understanding of the term "prophet," which shines like a beacon at the heart of this month's theme: "Like Chaminade, **prophets with Mary for a new world.**"

### From faith to prophetic "vision"

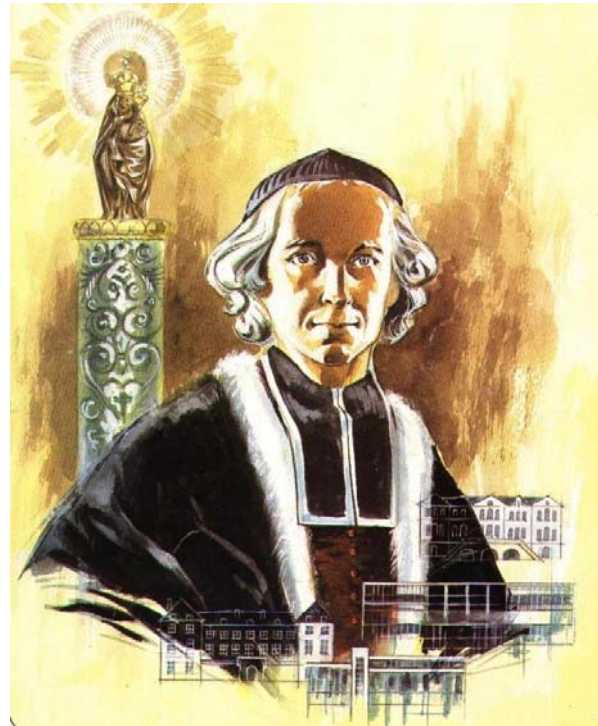
The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). We know how important faith was for Chaminade: "All is possible for those of real faith," (43)<sup>1</sup> he affirmed. Or again: "The spirit of faith is none other than the Holy Spirit" (263). The "things hoped for," (Heb 11:1) are "things not seen" at first glance, which are not perceived until, at last, one looks upon the world with the eyes of faith and of the hope which is the gift of God. Only then does one truly see..., and does the believer become a *visionary*, in the way in which Chaminade describes *vision*: "To live in faith is to consider all natural and supernatural objects which we come across **with the knowledge that God has of them**" (533) – because "true prophecy is born of God," as it is written in *Vita Consecrata* no. 84. Chaminade added: "What happiness for us if for the rest of our lives we can walk along the beautiful paths of faith" (164). Somewhat like the prophets.

<sup>1</sup> The references are to: WJ CHAMINADE *Writings on Faith*.

### Prophetic behavior

Prophets are those who keep *their eyes and ears wide open* to the surprising and new invitations/incitements that the Lord never ceases to address to them. "*Nova bella elegit Dominus*"; Chaminade repeated. The Lord is constantly choosing new ways of doing battle.

Prophets are those who refuse to let



themselves be hemmed in by the past, by routine or by timidity. Prophets live in the spirit of the Exodus, in the image of their Lord himself, the "God on the move," who precedes his people along paths that are always a surprise. As for Chaminade, he entered resolutely into the world of his time, basing the entire edifice of his spiritual Family, in a remarkable way, on the laity, commandeering the positive elements of the French Revolution,

introducing methods of apostolate that would anticipate those of Catholic Action. His religious would enjoy equality among themselves, whether priests or brothers, would be called "*monsieur*" and would not wear any distinctive dress.

Prophets are those who, if they wish to follow their Teacher and Lord, will not hesitate to come out *into the open spaces of the world* (even if it means becoming a community in the diaspora), to go *outside the walls*, into the world as it is, to profess their faith there within the full mix of human life. The Spirit blows where it will, and thus also in other cultures and in other ways of thinking than theirs. With the Fathers of Vatican Council II, they know that "*nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in [the] hearts [of the disciples of Christ]*" (GS 1.1) and that "[this] world ... [was] created and [is] sustained by its Maker's love" (GS 2.2). Chaminade thought that "*our mission [is to] introduce everywhere [in the world] the spirit of faith and [thus] to multiply Christians*" (182).

Prophets are those who will have *the courage to experiment, to live provisionally*. They will certainly need to relearn how to live in a tent like our ancestors in the faith, to be a people always on the march toward new horizons. In the midst of the women and men of their time, who will then perhaps understand their witness, if it rests not only on appeal to authority but upon the life they share with them, with all that this means in realism and in reasoning. Chaminade, throughout his life, went from tent to tent: Mussidan, Bordeaux and its precarious hiding places during the Revolution, Saragossa, Bordeaux again, not in the security of a parish but under the tent of the provisional, from chapel to chapel, from foundation to foundation. He became an exile with the exiled, young with the young, poor with the poor. Did he not say: "*We are the*

missionaries of Mary who has told us: Do whatever he tells you (Jn 2:5)" (295)? That presupposes a beautiful availability, and a real "roaming."

### **Prophets with Mary, the first modern woman**



"All things are done through Mary," Chaminade taught, "and every good gift comes to us through her" (464). Thus he proposed to make with her a "true covenant" (a covenant which the first disciples contracted to on December 8, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception). A covenant with Mary, the woman of action: "She is today, as she was formerly, the incomparable Woman," he wrote, "the promised Woman who is to crush the serpent's head: and Jesus Christ, in never addressing her except by this sublime name, teaches us that she is the hope, the joy, and the life of the Church" (Letter of August 24, 1839). In short, Chaminade proposes to us to be prophets with Mary, the first "modern" woman, a woman for our times.

From the Annunciation onwards, after having questioned, challenged the angel, she knew how to *freely* choose her own destiny, in complete *fidelity* to the vocation of her people but also in total *independence*. Her *audacity* was quickly manifested while visiting her cousin Elizabeth in 'Ain Karim where she "dared" to recite the Magnificat. Her *courage* she demonstrated unceasingly, from the journey to Bethlehem to her standing at the foot of the cross. On two occasions it is said that she

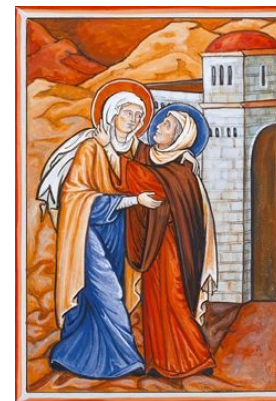
"treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart." Because she was *reflective*, she knew how to conduct herself as a *responsible* woman in the face of events, whatever they might be. As *capable of initiative*, she would exercise it throughout her life: think of Cana and "They have no more wine." *Attentive and open to others*, she was so at the Visitation, at Cana, and even into the first days of the young Church. The first on the road, she was by definition a woman *on the move*, from the beginning to the end of her life, and a *dynamic* woman, capable, as the true *Daughter of Zion*, of taking on the mission of her people.... Those words will suffice to establish the "modernity" of Mary: free, faithful, independent, audacious, courageous, responsible because reflective, attentive, open to others and capable of initiative. Dynamic, in short.

A dynamism *totally conformed* to the will of the Father, in love. Which makes what has been called her *obedience* and her *humility* the gauge, the best guarantee, of all her other qualities.

According to Chaminade, she is the Woman of whom "we are the very special auxiliaries and instruments," "in order to assist her with all our might" in bringing about a "new world."

### **Prophets for a new world**

The prophet is called to be sent: there is no call without a sending. Called to leave home, to abandon the realm of safety, of well-being. Invited to enter fully into the world of his time, to pitch his tent among men, to take the risks of experimentation and the provisional. The prophet is mandated for the establishment, in the heart of the old world, of a new world: the world, according to the word of the Apostle, of the "Joy which is to come." Joy which is Christ, this Christ to receive whose coming we prepare during this time of Advent.



"To each one of us," said Chaminade, "the Virgin has confided a mandate to work at the salvation of our brethren in the world."

Let us not forget that we are living the Advent of the "civilization of love" of which John Paul II spoke, who put in the first rank of his concerns the care of the poorest and the youngest, the service of justice and of peace.

Chaminade proclaimed loud and strong the readiness of his disciples to serve "the young and the poor above all." His religious who made the "vow of teaching" knew, as Bernard Vial, SM, wrote, that "true education is love, not just a profession or a technique." So also the lay members of the Sodality knew that justice cannot be established without action: so they put themselves at the service of the young chimney-sweeps or, with Thérèse de Lamourous, of repentant prostitutes.... Without justice, there is no peace. Saint Augustine (whom Father Chaminade read and meditated upon so much) had already said: "Once justice is set aside, [empires become] no more than armed robbery." The struggle for peace, therefore, goes through the struggle for justice.

Only then will the hearts of the poor open up to the message of the love of the God-Child, that absolute newness of Christmas night. The only newness capable of renewing the face of the Earth.

**Day of the month to celebrate: 8:** Immaculate Conception (Patronal Feast MLC & FMI); in 1800, he gathers the first members of the "Congregation of the Immaculate"

**Roger Bichelberger, CLM**