

NOVEMBER 2011
**With William Joseph CHAMINADE,
 FORMING A NATION OF SAINTS**



I. "ALL HIS LIFE LONG HE HAD ONLY ONE GOAL. TO LOVE GOD AND TO HAVE HIM LOVED."

Such is the statement of Emile Faur, SM (1865-1937), after, as he tells us, "having heard all that the disciples of the Good Father tell us about him, after having read the history of his life and the numerous letters which he wrote." (*Positio*, p. 444). That is why the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, after a profound study of the subject, declared, on 18 October 1973:

It is abundantly clear that the Servant of God, William Joseph Chaminade, practiced to a heroic degree the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, toward God and toward his neighbor, as well as the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude.

The holiness of Father Chaminade was obvious during his entire life. While still a youngster, a pupil at Mussidan, he was noted for the long

periods he spent in prayer. He joined the Congregation of Saint Charles, where the members proposed to themselves "complete conversion and the sincere desire to refuse God nothing," and to "to acquire the knowledge, the imitation, the love, and unity with Our Lord, Jesus Christ." (*The Chaminade Legacy*, NACMS, 2006, vol. 1, doc. 1, [2]) He remained faithful to this ideal and, in 1839, the Constitutions of the Society of Mary declared (art. 4): "The Christian perfection, which the Society of Mary proposes for itself as object, consists essentially in the **most exact conformity possible with Jesus Christ, God made man to serve as a model for men.**" The Rule of Life of 1983 (art. 2) echoes the same thought: "In calling us to be Marianists, God asks us to follow in a special way Jesus Christ, Son of God, become Son of Mary for the salvation of all. **Our goal is to be transformed into his likeness and to work for the coming of his kingdom.**" This orientation is valid for all forms of holiness within the Marianist Family; they are all a carrying out of the baptismal life.

For Father Chaminade, this imitation would certainly culminate in his patience and tenacity in the face of the growing opposition of his former collaborators, now his superiors as a result of his resignation from the position of Superior General in 1841 and of the General Chapter of 1845. Justin Dumontet wrote: "Yes, our founder was steeped in bitter sorrows in his last days by his own children" (Vasey, *The Last Years*, p. 144.) That is why, toward the end of 1844, Father Chaminade could write: "Blessed, blessed be the name of Mary ... if the struggle is becoming humiliating for me, I would have gained, I hope, something for heaven and for the expiation of my sins. What happiness to die humiliated and annihilated in the eyes of men, out of love of the Divine Crucified." (*Positio*, p. 336). And, again: "How will the Society of Mary survive if I do not die completely to myself, if I am not deeply humiliated and discarded as absolutely useless

and even harmful? May the name of the Lord be glorified! May the name of his august Mother be spread everywhere!" (letter no. 1413, 23 Nov. 1845.)

II. CONTAGIOUS HOLINESS

A number of members of the Marian sodalities of Bordeaux testify: "Father Chaminade, in our sodality meetings, spoke with a such conviction of the Christian virtues that **we were on fire for our own good and for the salvation of others.** Consequently, at the end of these meetings we were disposed to do anything for God." (*Positio*, p. 437.)

Or, another : "When Father Chaminade spoke of the Most Blessed Virgin, he transported us with such enthusiasm that I remember the naïve exclamation of one of us: 'Father! It is so good to belong to Mary; can we not make vows that are more than perpetual!' While praying at his side, I myself sensed how ardent was his devotion to Mary, how communicative! Some times I was present for one of the feasts of the lay sodality at the Madeleine ... What behavior, what devotion, among those men! Who had inspired in them such love for Mary if not the venerable old man situated in their midst?" (Charles Demangeon, *Positio*, p. 423.)

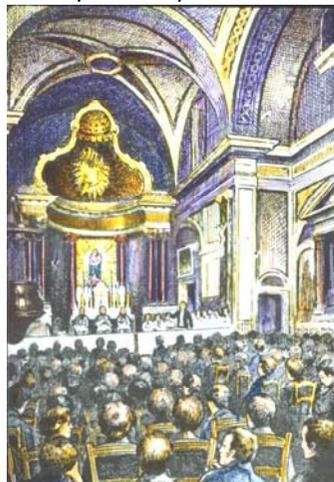


His devotion, his zeal, shows forth in his writings: "My dear son, courage! Work with all your strength and without respite. ... Ah! let us work! As you know, my ambition is to enkindle the fire of divine love throughout France. The Lord has deigned to make choice of you to help me with your means and your forces in the part of the fatherland you inhabit. Well, then, work to enkindle this fire all around you,

breathe upon it as you find it in the hearts of the young people that surround you. What a service you will be rendering them! In warming them with these heavenly flames, you will be saving them, these poor young people whom the Lord has purchased with his blood, whom our Mother has acquired for herself in sacrificing her own Son for them on the cross, the object of all her love and of all her affection. Yes, breathe upon this divine fire in season and out of season." (Letter no. 382, to Fr Larrieu, 5 Dec. 1825.)

III. THE WITNESS OF AN ENTIRE PEOPLE

It is a fundamental conviction of Father Chaminade that we are to witness together to the power of the gospel in our day. He explains this a number of times. "Even if there is no assembly of people professing the same religion, the same virtue, and the same morality, a few men may indeed be religious and upright. But separated and isolated they will provide a very weak example compared to the needs of the generality



of young men who are, so to say, surrounded by a massive collection of dangers." (CL, vol. 1, doc. 1, [32-33].)

It is of little value for a single person to appear virtuous. Usually, it will be said of him that he is beyond imitation. He is presumed to have a special heart, a different body, another temperament from ours. His virtue will be termed an exceptional phenomenon and not a fruit that can normally be gathered in human society. ... Let Christians gather in sodalities. From their midst will come forth a kind of light

which will make them the object of a general attention ... If the gathering is large and numerous, it will attract all the more attention. It will open more doors to those who are asking what religion is all about. (CL, vol. 1, doc. 43, [34-36])
What is a sodality?

Answer: It is a society of fervent Christians ... **in imitation of the Christians of the early Church** they hope, by means of frequent meetings, to have only one heart and one soul [see Ac/Acts 4:32]. They also hope to form only one body, not only as children of God, brothers of Jesus Christ, and members of his Mystical Body, but also as children of Mary. This they do by a special consecration to her cult and a public profession of the privilege of her Immaculate Conception. (CL, vol. 1, doc. 58, [1].)

This conviction of the importance of a collective witnessing is also at the source of a true solidarity and of a mutual emulation among the members, including between generations. The Extract of the general rules of the Fathers of Families specifies: "Considering how much this work so beneficial for young men, so valuable for society, and so advantageous to morals and religion, should be dear to the Fathers of Families ... We have declared that the growth and improvement of the Sodality of Young Men, established and directed at Bordeaux by our Rev. Director, has from this moment become the work of our heart. Therefore, nothing that might be of interest to the young men of this Sodality remains foreign to us. ... We shall work at their growth in piety and be their support in civil society. That is a duty most dear to our hearts." (CL, vol. 1, doc. 15, [1].)

The religious congregation will be based on the same intuition and will be inspired by the model of the community of Jerusalem

"The main spirit of the Society ... is to **present to the world the spectacle of a people of**

saints, and to prove by the fact that today, as in the primitive church, the gospel can be practiced in all the rigor of the spirit and of the letter." (letter no. 388, to Fr Noailles, Feb. 2, 1826.)



IV. TO SANTIFY ONE'S WHOLE LIFE

To the lay members, Father Chaminade insisted: "The nourishment of a soul which is advancing toward perfection consists of: (1) reading sacred scripture; (2) reading pious books; (3) [regular attendance at instructions; (4)] frequentation of the sacraments; (5) various exercises of piety; (6) the practice of works of Christian charity." (CL, vol. 1, doc. 43 [2-3].)

He therefore set up the **Three Offices**, which cover all aspects of life and mission: Zeal (spiritual life and mission); Instruction (formation and educative activity); Work (administration of material goods). This is not just an organizational form, but also an integration of all the dimensions of our life in the service of the mission and in view of sanctification. Speaking of the Assistants of Zeal, Instruction, and Work, he wrote: "Each one of them is going to be provided with the necessary instructions, so that all the members of the Society may make rapid progress in the spirit of the holy state they have embraced." (letter no. 716, 4 Dec. 1833.)

A man of much experience and a realist, Father Chaminade certainly did not envisage a purely spiritual holiness, but rather of one's entire life, including all our being and touching all aspects of our existence: the spiritual, the intellectual, the material, the social.

Dates to celebrate: 1, All Saints; 6, Marianist martyrs of Madrid; 12, 1804, the date Chaminade was named administrator of the Madeleine.