

# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of January 31, 2015,  
Feast of Saint John Bosco

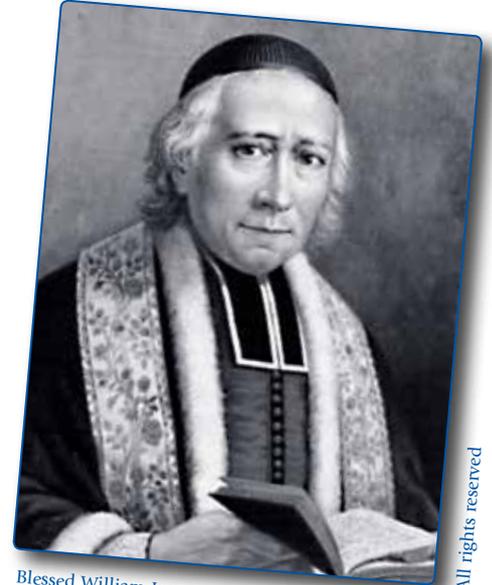
**Dear Friends,**

**O**N September 3, 2000, Saint John Paul II beatified William Joseph Chaminade, the founder of the Marianists. In his homily, the Pope explained, "This beatification during the Jubilee Year of William Joseph Chaminade, founder of the Marianists, reminds the faithful that it is their task to continually find new ways of bearing witness to the faith, especially in order to reach those who are far from the Church and who do not have the usual means of knowing Christ." The Blessed was, in fact, already busy evangelizing those at the "peripheries", as Pope Francis urges us.

The thirteenth child of parents living in modest comfort (his father was a glazier and draper), William Chaminade was born in Perigueux, France in 1761. As soon as he was able to, he accompanied his mother to the nearby cathedral, where he prayed fervently. At the age of ten, as he was receiving the sacrament of Confirmation, he decided to add to his baptismal name that of Joseph, the man who, after JESUS, was closest to MARY. William Joseph left to study at the minor seminary of Saint Charles in Mussidan, where his two brothers, already priests, were stationed. Around this time, he suffered a serious foot injury. After two months of ineffective treatment, he made a vow that, if he was healed, he would make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Verdelaix, a sanctuary near Bordeaux. Soon William Joseph was sufficiently healed to make this 80-kilometer trip on foot (today the sanctuary of Verdelaix is staffed by the Marianists, his spiritual sons). After he concluded his studies, William Joseph spent two years in Bordeaux. Seeking his vocation, he visited about a dozen monasteries, but in none of them did he find the recollection he desired. At the time, many religious were lax and contaminated by the skeptical spirit of the Age of Enlightenment. He went to Paris to the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. Ordained to the priesthood in 1785 with a doctorate in theology, he returned joyfully to the minor seminary of Saint Charles, run by his two brothers Jean-Baptiste and Louis. There, devotion to the Blessed Virgin MARY, specially honored under the title of the Immaculate Conception, held central importance.

**"Run quickly!"**

**I**n July 1790, the National Assembly in Paris passed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which placed the Church in France in a state of schism. The following year, Louis and William Chaminade refused to take the oath of loyalty to this Civil Constitution that was required by law (their brother, Jean-Baptiste, had



Blessed William Joseph Chaminade

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died from illness in January 1790). Confiscated and laicized, the school in Mussidan quickly lost teachers and students. So William went to Bordeaux to conduct a discreet apostolate as a non-juror priest (meaning one who had refused to take the schismatic oath). There he purchased a property, called Saint Laurent, outside the city. In 1792, non-juror priests were exiled from France. William nevertheless continued his activities, at the risk of being arrested and sentenced to death. At the height of the Reign of Terror (1793-1794), he moved about in the city, disguised as a tinsmith or boiler maker and carrying the tools of the trade. He celebrated Mass in secret, in private homes. One day, armed patriots called out to him: "Citizen! Have you seen that rascal priest Chaminade pass this way? Someone has denounced him to us. He can't be far!"—"Indeed," he replied, with a completely calm expression, "run, run quickly to catch him!"

In 1795, after the fall of Robespierre, a lull in the persecution allowed non-juror priests to come out of hiding. William Joseph opened an oratory on rue Sainte-Eulalie. As Penitentiary for the dioceses of Bordeaux and Bazas, he was assigned to receive and absolve repentant priests who had taken the oath. Over two years, he reconciled about fifty priests. But soon the government of the Directoire put back into force the laws against non-juror priests, and Father Chaminade had to resume his secret ministry. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of Fructidor, Year V, (September 1797), a coup d'état in Paris gave power to the most uncompromising revolutionaries. William

Joseph emigrated to Saragossa, Spain. There, he learned of the plan of a former student at Saint Charles, Bernard Daries, who had taken refuge in Toledo. This layman dreamed of founding, under the name the “Society of MARY,” a congregation dedicated to making the Mother of God known and loved, in order to win back to Christ, through His Mother, many souls who had abandoned Him. Members would be required to consecrate themselves to the Immaculate Virgin. Father Chaminade took a keen interest in this project conceived by Bernard Daries, who died in 1799. Before the altar of Our Lady of the Pillar, in Saragossa, he promised MARY to do everything he could to begin this work.

In November, Bonaparte seized power and began a policy of conciliation towards the Church. A consular decree soon allowed priests living in exile to return to France. Father Chaminade returned to Bordeaux, where he rented a house and opened an improvised chapel in the largest room. On December 8, 1800, he founded with several men, both priests and laymen, the Sodality of Our Lady, whose members promised to honor the Blessed Virgin under the title of the Immaculate Conception. When the Concordat between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII was signed in July 1801, the sodality already had about a hundred members. They moved into bigger facilities, still remaining discreet, to avoid arousing the suspicions of the police.

In these difficult times when all religious life in France was in need of reconstruction, Father Chaminade wished to unite all the social classes within a single sodality, in order to increase its apostolic efficacy. Within it, homogenous groups were established: young men, young women, men of mature years, various professions. Organizers were appointed—some to oversee sacred music, others the sacristy, business operations, etc. In March 1801, the women’s branch of the sodality was formed around Marie-Thérèse de Lamourous, an unmarried woman. The consecration required of each member was a “contract” with the Virgin MARY, to render MARY the devotion due her, in accordance with the methods prescribed by the rules of the sodality. The member was to recite the Little Office of the Immaculate Conception, and strive to honor Our Lady in all the activities of life, knowing that in return the Virgin would provide her maternal assistance in every circumstance. This is a solemn recognition of MARY’s motherhood over every Christian. But William Chaminade never separated MARY from JESUS—the Mother of God leads us to her divine Son.

### “To reach the peripheries”

On his return to France, Father Chaminade had requested and obtained from the Pope the title of Apostolic Missionary. He considered himself an apostle entrusted with winning to Christ those who were furthest from Him. As “candidates”, young men without Christian formation followed a sort of catechumenate

that prepared them to go to confession and receive Communion, after which they could become members of the sodality.

As Blessed Chaminade did in his time, Pope Francis has often stressed the urgency for the Church to proclaim the Gospel in the “peripheries,” that is in the social settings furthest from the Church. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of November 24, 2013, he writes, “Evangelization takes place in obedience to the missionary mandate of JESUS: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you* (Mt. 28:19-20)... Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey His call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel... Each particular Church, as a portion of the Catholic Church under the leadership of its bishop, is likewise called to missionary conversion. ... Its joy in communicating JESUS Christ is expressed both by a concern to preach Him to areas in greater need and in constantly going forth to the outskirts of its own territory or towards new sociocultural settings. Wherever the need for the light and the life of the Risen Christ is greatest, it will want to be there” (nos. 19, 20, and 30).

### Governed by the faith

Newly appointed Archbishop d’Aviau of Bordeaux was pleased to find the already-flourishing Sodality of Our Lady, to which he entrusted the Chapel of the Madeleine, in the heart of the city, where the founder lived. At the age of forty-one (in 1804), he was already considered by all a saint. Gracious, simple, speaking in a style perhaps awkward but rich in doctrine, he was the example of a man entirely devoted to the things of God. He brought all things back to the teachings of the faith, his favorite virtue: thoughts, resolutions, advice, actions—all of one’s life must be governed by the faith, in keeping with Saint Paul’s words: *The just shall live by faith* (Rom. 1:17).

The years 1806 to 1809 were fruitful—Father Chaminade helped the Christian Brothers return to Bordeaux, and sent them a number of vocations. Many young women in the sodality entered religious life. Nevertheless, there was no shortage of trials: the premature death of William Joseph’s brother Louis-Xavier, health problems of the founder himself, financial difficulties resulting from the war Napoleon was waging in Europe, consequences of the conflict between the emperor and the Pope... The founder, falsely accused of being part of a “royalist plot”, had his quarters searched by the police in November 1809. Banned on November 24, the sodality nevertheless continued its activities with the greatest discretion. Young women in the sodality took private vows and wore a religious habit under their secular clothes. In 1814, with Napoleon’s

defeat and abdication the sodality regained its freedom, but its founder would be arrested and imprisoned in 1815 during the Hundred Days, Napoleon's short-lived return to power.

### The salt of the earth

After his release, one of Father Chaminade's first concerns was to found in Agen, in 1816, a convent that several young women brought together by Adèle de Trenquelléon had ardently desired since 1809. The postulants did not make religious vows, nor were they considered religious, or required to wear a religious habit. The bishop of Agen, who wanted to use them for external apostolates, was satisfied with this compromise. But Father Chaminade was convinced of the irreplaceable value of the religious state in the Church, and of the necessity of public vows, which manifest total consecration to God. "Religious life," he explained, "is to Christianity what Christianity is to humanity. Without religious, the Gospel would not be completely applied anywhere in human society." In 1817, he convinced the bishop, who then authorized the "Daughters of MARY" to discreetly take vows.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Saint John Paul II wrote, "What would become of the world if there were no religious?" [Saint Teresa of Avila, *Life of Saint Teresa of JESUS*, ch. 32]. Beyond all superficial assessments of its usefulness, the consecrated life is important precisely in its being unbounded generosity and love, and this all the more so in a world which risks being suffocated in the whirlpool of the ephemeral. Without this concrete sign there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the 'salt' of faith would lose its savor in a world undergoing secularization. The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to God and to others for the love of God" (*Vita Consecrata*, March 25, 1996, no. 105).

In 1817, a twenty-one-year-old member, Jean-Baptiste Lalanne, confided to the founder his intention to enter religious life. Father Chaminade cautiously gave his approval: "Let us then form a religious association through the three vows of religion, but without a name, without distinctive dress, without a civil existence. And let us place it all under the protection of MARY Immaculate, to whom her divine Son has reserved the final victory over hell." On October 2, 1817, five young men made their temporary vows in his hands. On that day, the Society of MARY was born—it was simply called the "Little Society". The new religious moved into a house adjacent to the Chapel of the Madeleine.

Among the initiatives of the sodality in Bordeaux at this time, that of the "Good Books", begun in 1820, must be mentioned. It was an effort to respond to the invasion of anti-religious and licentious libels typical of the era, by widely distributing Catholic books via mobile

lending libraries. In 1826, 800,000 books were distributed by these means. The sodalists also visited prisoners, and provided spiritual and financial assistance to the child chimney sweeps of Auvergne, exploited children whose virtue was threatened. The sodality, which spread broadly beyond Bordeaux, flexibly adapted to a wide range of tasks of evangelization and education.

### Like the Cross

There was no shortage of criticism of Father Chaminade's work. Some were shocked by his religious order, in which priests and lay people were on equal footing. The founder based himself on the Rule of Saint Benedict, which does not grant priests special precedence over the other monks, as the authority for this policy. In October 1821, the first novitiate of the Society of MARY, intended for workers and farmers, was opened in Saint-Laurent, in great material poverty. Two other novitiates soon opened in Bordeaux, one for students and the other for nuns. Father Chaminade transmitted his missionary enthusiasm to the novices, and insisted that the postulants have the necessary interior predispositions. They might have great faults, but the essential thing was "the formation of the will through faith and charity... A religious who is not spiritual is a mere phantom, a chimera." He laid particular stress on self-renunciation: "The religious state is a cross that resembles the cross of JESUS CHRIST, also made from two pieces as hard as wood: of penance, which is the aim of the vows of poverty and chastity, and of obedience, which is the aim of the third vow."

The founder understood that the education of youth was a priority. Free schools for boys and girls were opened. They were an immediate success, and in high demand. Most of the teachers at the schools for boys were brothers who were not priests. In 1821, the sodality spread into eastern France, to Saint-Remy, in the Franche-Comté region. There, the religious welcomed lay teachers from the countryside for two-week retreats. Soon a middle school and a teachers' college were opened, followed by vocational schools. The brothers' and nuns' involvement in teaching, which at that time was a State monopoly, led the founder to request legal approval of his institutes. No religious institute, except for a few small societies of male teaching brothers, had yet been approved since the Revolution. In 1825, with the more favorable environment of the Restoration, the founder obtained the approval. Across its diverse efforts, the institute would have no other ultimate goal than "To teach all mankind the science of salvation." The Daughters of MARY would be legally recognized two months later.

At a time when circles hostile to Christianity dreamed of raising up a generation without God, Father Chaminade strove to create teachers' colleges everywhere—the formation of good Christian schoolteachers was for him an absolute priority. The 1992 *Catechism of*

*the Catholic Church* reaffirmed parents' natural right to choose their children's school: "As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise" (CCC, no. 2229).

July 1830: An uprising in Paris had just overthrown King Charles X. This political revolution was accompanied by anticlerical violence. William Joseph Chaminade calmly waited out the events: "I have no other politics than that of having daily recourse to the Blessed Virgin." In February 1831, rioters tried to force the doors of the Madeleine house with iron bars. Another band threw rocks at the novitiate in Saint-Laurent. Threatened, the founder of the Marianists had to don civilian clothes again as in 1793, and take refuge in Agen, where he would remain five years. He transferred the novitiates of his two institutes to this town, which was less agitated than Bordeaux.

In the interest of secularizing education, Louis-Philippe's regime withdrew the subsidies granted to Catholic schools, thereby threatening their very existence. More serious still were the internal difficulties that arose in the Society of MARY. Father Chaminade was accused of incompetence and of imprudence in his financial management. The constitutions he had developed for the Society were rejected from the outset by some of his collaborators, particularly Father Lalanne, the superior of Saint-Remy in Haute-Saône, an intelligent but individualistic and unstable man. Members of the Society renounced their vows. Even the archbishop of Bordeaux and the bishop of Agen were not favorably disposed towards the founder—in 1832, the latter even forbade him from entering his nuns' convent.

Father Chaminade liked to say, "What a powerful means we have to arrive at resembling JESUS—taking His Mother for our own!" Following his example, let us consecrate ourselves unreservedly to MARY, that she might obtain for us the grace to do all that her Son inspires us to do.

## A painful rejection

In 1834, with peace restored, Father Chaminade began again to write the Constitutions of the Society of MARY. In 1839, he received a "Decree of Praise" from the Pope for the institutes of men and women. As he entered his eighties, he thought about who would succeed him in leading the Society. But the long-standing intrigues of an ambitious young religious set the three assistants against the founder. A report sent to the Holy See resulted in the founder's removal from office in 1845, and his successor prohibited him from taking part in any activities within the institute. William Joseph Chaminade's last years were marked by the pain of having been rejected by the Society that he had founded. On January 6, 1850, a stroke left him unable to speak. In the days that followed, he used gestures to show his forgiveness for the insults he had suffered, and his obedience to his superior. On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, crucifix in hand, William Joseph Chaminade joined in Heaven the God to whom he had never refused anything. Twenty years later, the religious of the Society of MARY, soon to be called the "Marianists" (not to be confused with the Marists, members of an institute founded in 1816 by Father Jean-Claude Colin), would number more than a thousand, spread out over four continents.

Saint John Paul II summarized the message of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade in his homily for the beatification: "William Joseph Chaminade invites each Christian to be rooted in his Baptism, which conforms him to the Lord JESUS and communicates the Holy Spirit to him. ... His filial attachment to MARY maintained his inner peace on all occasions, helping him to do Christ's will. His concern for human, moral and religious education calls the entire Church to renew her attention to young people, who need both teachers and witnesses in order to turn to the Lord and take their part in the Church's mission."

Dom Antoine Parie  
O.S.B.

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