

Chaminade's Letter to Pope Gregory XVI, Rome

One of the crowning achievements of the Founder's life was completing the Marianist Constitutions and securing a Decree of Praise from the Holy See in 1839. Here we present the first letter written as part of this process.

The first, dated September 16, 1838, is the Founder's presentation of the Institute (both the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary) to Pope Gregory XVI. The title of this letter clearly reflects its nature: "Short Sketch of the Plan which the Author of the Constitutions of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary and of those of the Society of Mary had in Founding the Two Orders." It is a very solemn summary of a lifetime of ministry and a definitive statement of the Founder's mentality. [Source: letter no. 1074; translation from *Marianist Origins*.]

Bordeaux, September 16, 1838

Most Holy Father,

If I had been able to come in person to place myself humbly at the feet of Your Holiness, I would have revealed to you the most intimate sentiments of my heart. I would have said, with an entirely filial simplicity, how great has been my sorrow for such a long time at the sight of the incredible efforts of impiety, and of modern rationalism and Protestantism, sworn to the ruin of the beautiful edifice of revelation. To erect a powerful barrier to hold back the torrent of evil, Heaven has inspired me to solicit from the Holy See at the beginning of this century letters conferring on me the title of Missionary Apostolic, so as to revive or to rekindle everywhere the divine torch of faith while presenting on all sides to an astonished world imposing masses of Catholic Christians of every age, gender, and condition, who, united in special associations, practice our holy religion without vanity or human respect, in all the purity of its dogmas and morals. Filled with this thought and likewise urged by worthy prelates, I poured out my entire soul in a humble supplication at the feet of our Holy Father Pius VII, who, deigning to listen favorably to my request, accorded me most ample powers by a Decree of March 28, 1801. From that time, Most Holy Father, fervent Sodalties--some of men and others of women--were organized in several cities of France. Religion had the happiness of counting a large number of adherents in a relatively short time, and a great deal of good was accomplished.

But, Most Holy Father, this means, as excellent as it may be when it is wisely used, is not sufficient. Philosophism and Protestantism, favored in France by ruling power, have taken hold of public opinion and of the schools, attempting to spread in all minds, especially during childhood and youth, this libertinism of thought, more harmful even than that of the heart, from which it is inseparable. Moreover, who could even conceive of all the resulting evils?

I have believed before God, Most Holy Father, that it was necessary to found two new orders, the one of virgins and the other of young men, who would prove to the world by the fact of their good example that Christianity is not an outmoded institution. They would show that the Gospel is as practicable today as it was eighteen hundred years ago; they would challenge the propaganda hidden under a thousand and one disguises; and they would take over the battleground of the schools by opening classes of all levels and subjects, especially for those classes of people most numerous and most abandoned.

Here you have, Most Holy Father, the design with which Divine Providence has inspired me, in the foundation of the Society of Mary and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary more than twenty years ago.

The Society of Mary began under the auspices of the holy Archbishop of Bordeaux, Archbishop d'Avia in the capital city of his diocese. Until the death of this venerable prelate, it was the work of his heart. It includes three classes: (1) that of the educated laymen, whose principal mission is the spread of the knowledge, love, and practice of our holy religion by the means of teaching; (2) that of the members devoted to manual labor, which has for its object the opening of schools of arts and crafts for young men of the ordinary classes, to protect or to turn them away from the contagion of the world and to teach them to sanctify their labor by practice of the Christian virtues; and (3) that of the priests, which is the soul and the salt of the other two. When this last class will be sufficiently numerous, it will devote itself outside to the exercise of all the functions of the holy ministry. It is charged with the direction of the Society of Mary and of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary.

The Order of Virgins, Most Holy Father, which has taken the name of Institute of the Daughters of Mary, was founded in 1816 in the city of Agen under the protection of the venerable bishop of that diocese, who is kind enough today to beg Your Holiness to grant it canonical recognition. With the means at its command, it works toward the same ends as the Society of Mary. Consequently, it occupies itself with the work of teaching, with works proper to women, with Sodalties, and with works of charity. Thanks to the cooperation of His Eminence, Cardinal d'Isoard, it can henceforth render the greatest services to religion.

The Constitutions of the Society of Mary, Most Holy Father, and those of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary develop the ends, the means, what pertains to persons, and the government of the two orders according to the spirit of Saint Benedict, adapted as much as possible to the immense needs of the present century.

These two orders have taken as their distinctive name that of the august Mary. May they make it known, loved, and cherished throughout the whole world! For I am intimately convinced that Our Lord has reserved to His Holy Mother the glory of being the particular support of the Church in these latter times.

Do not consider, Most Holy Father, the personal unworthiness of the one who has dared to take from Your Holiness, in his own favor, some precious moments in order to stammer at your feet a few words about the works of which he is but the unworthy instrument. However, Most Holy Father, consider the holy Name of Mary under the auspices of which he presents himself before your throne and which constitutes all his glory and all his strength!

William Joseph Chaminade
Superior General of the Society of Mary