

Chaminade and Mary

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1. Even Mariology is subject to change. A recent style speaks of a “Marian principle.” This expression comes to us from the pen of two famous theologians, very different from each other, but animated with the same preoccupation of opening the immense treasure of our spiritual patrimony to the mind and heart of our present-day world. They are Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Rahner desired a more human Church, less institutionalized; Balthasar adopted the same idea, but gave it a Marian character.

2. William Joseph Chaminade did not use the expression “Marian principle,” because he did not know of it. But he did know its substance. The Marianist *Rule of Life* says explicitly that the spirit of the Society of Mary is the spirit of Mary (art. 114). This was a conviction close to the heart of the Founder of the “Brothers of Mary,” as the early Marianists were known.

3. When we say “brother,” we speak of a genetic similarity and psychological affinity. So, if we are “brothers of Mary,” she must be our sister. That image, “Mary, our sister,” is often used in feminist theology today, but the title of “sister” for Mary is very old in the Church. It was used by Cyril, by Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Augustine, limiting ourselves to the patristic period. The Carmelites, for example, have always considered themselves to be “brothers of the Blessed Mary,” their sister in religion. In Pope Paul VI we have a recent and illustrious advocate of such terminology. Mary belongs to the human family; she is our sister in Christ and in the common faith of Abraham; she is our sister in the midst of the Church. Eminent member of the Church, she remains a full-fledged member, for she too is consecrated by the Spirit.

4. Chaminade, in keeping with the theological language of his day, that of the French School of Spirituality, speaks of her in terms of glory and triumph. For him, she was the strong Woman crushing the head of the serpent; the august Mary; the Woman of the Apocalypse. From his earliest years, he loved and venerated Mary. During his years of formation and of teaching at Mussidan, he devoted himself to promoting the cult of the Immaculate Virgin. At Saragossa he developed in himself faith in the maternal mission of Mary in the Church, which led him to seek a closer alliance with Mary. As soon as he returned from exile, he restored the Marian Sodality of Bordeaux. By means of it, he offered to Mary a family, and to the Church a new Marian dynamism. Out of that sodality would be born two religious congregations, the Daughters of Mary (Marianist Sisters) in 1816; the Society of Mary (Marianist Brothers) in 1817.

5. Father Chaminade's Marian program may be summarized in these words: "What I consider especially characteristic of our orders, which does not have an equivalent in other known institutions, is, and I repeat this, that we embrace the religious life in her name and for her glory, in order to dedicate ourselves to her with all that we are and have, in order to make her known, loved, and served, convinced that we will not call others back to Jesus except through his most holy mother. We believe, indeed, with the holy doctors, that she is all our hope, *tota ratio spei nostrae*. She is our Mother, our refuge, our help, our strength, and our life!" (letter of 24 August 1839).

6. What shines from this text is a very strong Marian identity, typical of his time. Commitment to service to Mary is a consecration of one's whole being in her name and for her glory. As mother, she is not for us only a refuge, but life and sole font of hope. Today we are not accustomed to such language, sometimes considered sectarian or triumphalist. We must understand that there is question of a battle cry which seeks to enlist all those who are aware of the gravity of the situation. That situation he describes in 1839 in these words: "The great heresy today is religious indifference, which casts minds into the torpor of egoism and into unrestrained moral licentiousness." A book on religious sociology might express our present situation in similar words. But Chaminade was more than a moralist; he was a prophet who proclaimed courageously the victory of Christ, whose most beautiful work is the Virgin Mary. Indeed, his thought is definitely more Christological and ecclesial than Marian. The "Marian principle" in Chaminade takes on a tone of apostolic dynamism and of a personal task whose

purpose is to make “Mary known, loved, and served.” It is in this way that he intends to promote the spirit of Mary; that is, the possibility of reawakening the world to an appreciation of divine things. Obviously Chaminade’s Marian thought evolves with the passing generations.

7. Today we discover in our Marian thought two central foci: the maternal vocation of Mary, and her apostolic mission. It is around these two foci that the Marian reflection of Marianists gravitates. On the one hand, to reveal better the multiple aspects of Mary’s maternity: as Mother of Jesus and as mother beloved by her children (“filial piety”); as Mother of humans and Mother of the Church; in particular, as spiritual Mother of a multitude of brothers and sisters of Jesus. On the other hand, to enter more deeply into Mary’s role in salvation history, which is not simply a grandiose design which God has formed in our regard, in which “tradition” is written in capital letters. It is also in our daily life, in the ups and downs of each of us, of all our world. Faithful companion of her Son, Mary is present in our lives and in our history. If we wish to form a first principle of Marianist Mariology, it must encase both these aspects: the maternal vocation of Mary in view of her role in the mission of salvation.

8. The Marian tradition inaugurated with Chaminade, our “Marian principle,” has marked the philosophy of life of Marianists and of the entire Marianist Family. These are its characteristic traits:

A. *Our spirit is a spirit of mediation*, which urges us to build bridges and to fill in the lacunae, rather than to be pioneers of an intellectual advance guard. We seek dialog; we work for peace and reconciliation. We share the typically Catholic obsession for the “not: 'either/ or,' but 'both / and.’” That is, we seek to unite faith and reason, heart and intellect, body and spirit, Church and world.

B. *The Marianist spirit has a specific tendency toward what is concrete*. We are, generally, the kind of person whom the Americans call “people persons,” (common and practical people) rather than intellectuals. We like discussions, but with a meal, our feet under the table. We prefer hospitality to confrontation. Our natural and collective inclination leads us to confront real problems and to seek concrete solutions. Our tradition is marked by a constant interest in social issues, often tied in with teaching. And we know instinctively, as well as by practical experience, that every truth is concrete or it does not exist at all.

C. The third characteristic is *our eschatological option*, that is, our orientation to ultimate ends and the ultimate meaning of our existence. This eschatological option is a principle both of contradiction and of affirmation. In his days, our Founder took a position against the philosophism of the Enlightened and the unilateral exaltation of human reason. With him we share the conviction that only reason united with faith can change the world. With him, we are also convinced that our existence has two dimensions: that of “here below,” and that, more definitive, of “up above”—and that the latter must inspire the behavior of the former. That is how we put into practice a spiritual pragmatism and why we work at promoting or restoring the dimension of faith where it may be lacking. We hold that it is a privilege to be able to work at achieving a more profound impact of religious faith in our society.

D. And finally, *our charism distinguishes itself by its educative orientation*. This is a matter of promotion, of growth, of patience, of perseverance. Education is a humble service for the betterment of life and of the human person in its totality. God promises to work within the interior of the heart. It is this special grace which permits the educator and the “midwives of faith” to bear fruit. To facilitate the birth of faith, to accompany a “pilgrim of eternity,” to respect the obligatory stages, and to seek the springs of living water—these are the attitudes required of those who devote themselves to formation in faith.

9. Such, then, is the “Marian principle” inspired by Chaminade and proposed to all those who wish to be his disciples. Such a principle transforms its adherents into “fanatics” of the Incarnation and of incarnations. They are always seeking signs of God in the world, always hunting for those glimmers of grace which illumine human nights, always avid and ready to reconcile God and humans.

10. But these marks of incarnation must be complemented by those of eschatology. If Mary is the constant reminder that the Christian God is an incarnate God, concrete, present in our midst, she also represents for us the tendency toward the God of the “beyond,” a tendency inherent in every Christian vocation. Such a tendency originates in the giftedness of our life and of our Christian and religious calling. Gift of God, all our being is drawn toward him in a ceaseless dialectic between divine gratuity and human freedom, the call from God and our human response. The *significance of the incarnation and the significance of eschatology* are two pillars on which the heritage of Chaminade rests.