

## **History of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate author unknown**

[*Editor's Note:* The material below, which appeared in French in a typed-manuscript format, was located in the former archives of the Society of Mary's Province of Cincinnati, and it was translated in 2015 by Father Joseph Stefanelli, SM.]

Father Chaminade, when founding the Institute of the Daughters of Mary with the cooperation of Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon at Agen (Lot-et-Garonne) in 1816, based himself on the foundation of all the former orders: the vow of chastity, the vow of poverty, and that of obedience. But he added several “novelties” with respect to the end which he proposed to himself: “zeal for the salvation of souls,” exercised through works which were to extend the action of religious women to all ages and in all circumstances.

He wanted what the Church today asks of all congregations (P.C. no. 1):<sup>1</sup> that works be enriched by fervent union with Christ, alimented by mental prayer. The Daughters of Mary should cultivate with care the spirit of faith or of mental prayer, and “apply themselves to remaining in the hidden life in God.”

Finally, in order to reconcile the search for God alone with “the apostolic love which seeks to associate itself with the Redemption and to extent its Kingdom” (P.C. no. 5), he added a fourth vow: the vow of enclosure.

“Enclosure” was required by the legislation of those times for all women religious with perpetual vows. Father Chaminade, not wishing to renounce either the active apostolate or perpetual vows, lessened the importance of the vow of enclosure by distinguishing it from the three ordinary simple vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, by giving the superiors the right of permitting exits according to the needs of the works. It was a “semi-enclosure.” The bishop of Agen, Mgr. Jacoupy, interpreted the enclosure with more strictness; after that, it was his interpretation which prevailed in the Congregation until 1866.

The Daughters of Mary were to distinguish themselves from other women religious by their conquering zeal:

As to what should distinguish you from other orders, it is zeal for the salvation of souls; the principles of religion and of virtue are to be made known; we must multiply Christians.... Your community will be composed completely of “missionary religious.” (Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 57 to Mlle de Trenquelléon, Oct. 3, 1815; vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 141).

---

<sup>1</sup> {The reference is not identified—probably encyclical *Perfectae caritas*.}

Father Chaminade institutionalized this apostolic purpose, this work of the Church, by a fifth vow: “the vow of teaching the Catholic faith and Christian morals,” subordinated to obedience like that of enclosure.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **The Name: Daughters of Mary**

It symbolizes the final characteristic that the Founder wished to give to the Institute: Its belonging to Mary. Not only does it preserve among them the special devotion to the Mother of God of which Adèle and her companions had inaugurated the practice in the association of sodalists, but also it fully indicated the object of the new institution.

The Daughters of Mary should continue to be united to her “whose life is a rule of conduct for all” (P.C. no. 25).

They were to propagate her cult: “it is in her name and for her glory that we embrace the religious state...to make her known, loved, and served, quite convinced that we shall not bring people back to Jesus except through his most holy Mother.”

The study of the interventions of Mary throughout history had convinced him deeply that “Our Lord has reserved to his holy Mother the glory of being in a special way the support of the Church in these last days...Mary’s power has not been diminished...to her is reserved a great victory in our days...to her belong the saving of the faith from the shipwreck with which it is threatened among us.” (Chaminade, *Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839*.)

The Daughters of Mary must be ready to rush wherever the holy Virgin calls them as her missionaries to spread the Good News of Christ.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Chaminade’s System of Government**

Monasteries of women remained independent of one another. That was not the thought of the Founder who always sought to come as close as possible to the organization and the governance of the Church. “The more we distance ourselves from that plan,” he wrote, “the less there will be of solidity and stability in the Institute” (Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 557 to Clouzet, Nov. 6, 1830; vol. 2, pt. 2. P. 414). “In order to work with all our strength at supporting and propagating the faith, we need to have the same intent, the same interest...to remain always united” (letter to the Count of Courtefontaine). “We must manifest in ourselves the union of the Father with the Son, or the union of the Father with the Son and of the Son with the Father” (retreat of 1822).

That is why Father Chaminade determined that the Institute would be governed by a Mother General subject to reelection. Her authority would not be limited to the motherhouse at Agen; all the other convents would be subject to her. They would form a single society with her. That was a “novelty.”

Through this centralization, the Founder intended to give the Daughters of Mary one of its essential characteristics: family spirit. That was a logical consequence of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ with which he was very familiar; by that cohesion, he placed them in the most favorable conditions for a greater expansion of their works.

The members of the institute would be divided into two classes, closely bound by charity, after the example of the primitive Church in which “the multitude of the faithful had but one heart and one soul” (see Acts 4:32): the same intent, the same spirit, the same apostolic end. In the first class was the choir Sisters destined for teaching and other works of zeal; in the second, the companion Sisters or Coadjutors for the works inside the community. The latter would neither take the vow of enclosure nor the vow of the teaching of faith, but the vow of stability in the institute insofar as it is “Mary’s property.”

In order to second the Mother General, the Founder placed at her side three Assistants, to whom he attributed the Offices of Zeal, Instruction, and Temporalities. Those offices became the subject of distinct responsibilities, though always placed under the general direction of the superior.

To the Office of Zeal is attached whatever in the institute, and in its different sectors of apostolate, is meant to favor the spirit of faith, the essential foundation of the Christian and religious spirit.

To the Office of Instruction depend religious or profane studies, methods of teaching, education.

To the Office of Temporalities belong the care of the administration of the temporal, including the supervision of works or workshops.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **The Spiritual Superior**

Father Chaminade anticipated that the Institute thus centralized and called to go beyond the boundaries of its original diocese would be exposed to various, unavoidable events which would introduce into its rules the particular interference of each of the bishops. He foresaw the nomination of a “spiritual superior” whose charge it would be to have the regulations observed and to maintain the spirit of the congregation wherever it might have establishments. That would be, of course, without prejudice to the jurisdiction of the episcopate which would be completely exercised over the convents. That inconvenience would disappear the day the Sovereign Pontiff would guarantee the unity and inviolability of the Constitutions.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Drafting of the Constitutions**

The first Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary, in 501 articles, were the point of departure for all subsequent works. They were drafted by Brother David Monier under the direction of Father Chaminade. The Constitutions of the Sisters of Notre Dame, an institute founded by Saint Jeanne de Lestonnac (1556-1640), were taken as the basis for this work which was completed in December 1815. It was named the *Grand Institut*. A second draft, in 48 articles in August 1816, was called the *Petit Institut*, in opposition to the first and much more developed text.

However, the work was far from completed.

After the death of the Foundress in 1828, Father Chaminade went to Gray to continue this revision with Father Lalanne. The following year he gave the good news to Mother Saint Vincent de Labastide, Mother General of the congregation. However, this “rough draft” was not completed until the first days of June 1838.

- July 24, 1838: approbation of the Constitutions by His Excellency Cardinal d’Isoard, archbishop of Auch.
- July 25, 1838: approbation by Mgr. Casanelli d’Istria, bishop of Ajaccio.
- April 12, 1839: pontifical approbation. Decree of Praise, accorded to the entire institute by order of His Holiness Gregory XVI.

The Constitutions were polycopied in 1839 through the care of Mother Saint Vincent de Labastide. She had them printed in 1856 and sent to all the houses of the institute (Circular of May 6, 1856).

Meanwhile, the General Chapter of 1847 had taken place. It was presided over by Father Caillet, new Superior General of the Society of Mary and “Spiritual Superior” of the institute. He invited the members of the Chapter to send him in writing the observations they would like to make regarding changes to be introduced into the Constitutions with a view of having them approved. Special assemblies were formed to that effect and set to work.

1856: death of Mother Saint Vincent. Election of Mother Marie Joseph de Casteras by the following Chapter.

The exercise of various responsibilities had prepared the new superior and had given her a clear knowledge of the personnel and the works of the institute. She thought over and prepared the proposal of introducing to the Holy See a request in favor of the canonical institution of the Daughters of Mary. Since the decree of praise accorded by Gregory XVI at the request of the Founder, the Constitutions had been sufficiently tested. Mother Marie Joseph set to work to actively prepare the elements of this move. She consulted bishops, theologians, canonists, and in particular Mgr. Ladoue, who had been the vicar-general for Mgr. de Salinis, former archbishop of Auch. He advised her in 1863 to modify only the most important points. He had written: “It would be better to send the statutes to Rome such as they are, given that it was under that primitive form that the decree of praise was received. The Congregation charged with the revision will not fail to make the changes it might think useful.”

In 1864 Mother Marie Joseph learned that Bishop Fillion of Mans was about to depart for Rome. The Mother General, who had had occasion to know his benevolent goodness when he occupied the episcopal see of St. Claude, sent him a copy of the former draft of the Constitutions, asking him to be kind enough to solicit from some consulter-member of the Sacred Congregation the goodness of making an officious examination. That work was accepted by Mgr. Chaillot. At his return from Rome, Bishop Fillion presented to the superior the notebook of the Constitutions with annotations.

The list of the articles to be modified was the subject of a council meeting of the General Administration. A copy of that meeting was sent to the Spiritual Superior.

It was on the occasion of these changes in the Constitutions that the ties were broken which had attached the Institute officially to the Society of Mary. The Roman court, which no longer favored that kind of dependency, took advantage of some misunderstandings to pronounce the dissolution. Despite the absence of an administrative link, a close union continued to reign between the two families of Father Chaminade.

Before the meeting of the General Chapter of 1866, Mgr. Ladoue came to spend several days at the motherhouse to help the council prepare the questions that were to be discussed there and to revise according to Roman thought the articles which had been annotated by Mgr. Chaillot.

Bishop Levezou de Vezins himself came to the community despite his infirmities and asked that a reading be made to the capitulants of the annotations and of the decision from Rome that placed us under the immediate jurisdiction of the bishop in each diocese. He released the Sisters from the vow of enclosure. Until then the rules of enclosure had been those of papal cloister; they were incompatible with the works of the Daughters of Mary. However, he made it very clear that the Sisters had to continue observing the rules of enclosure as in the past; they were included in the vow of obedience as was said in the annotations coming from Rome.

Mother Marie Joseph was able to place before the eyes of the capitulants the Constitutions revised on several points where experience had shown the need for certain modifications. The work was accepted in full.

The Reverend Father Ginhac, SJ, from their residence at Toulouse and preacher of several retreats to the community, was much appreciated by the Mother General. He agreed to do a final revision. The revised Constitutions obtained the vote of the bishops in the dioceses where the institute had establishments.

Finally, the dossier of the matter was sent to the prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in the name of and on the part of Bishop de Vezins of Agen. His age and infirmities made it impossible for him to go to Rome in person.

The response to this request was not made until May 12, 1869. On that date, by a decree of the Sacred Congregation, Pope Pius IX approved the Institute as a society of simple vows under the direction of a Mother General without prejudice to the jurisdiction of the ordinaries and conformably to the prescriptions of the sacred canons and the apostolic Constitutions.

The Roman curia postponed to a more suitable time the approbation of the Constitutions concerning which observations were communicated. The Constitutions were returned on May 24, with four observations. As though to soften the blow which Mother Marie Joseph might have suffered, she was permitted by a decree of July 24, 1869, “to add, in keeping with her present request, the title of Immaculate” to the name of the institute.

Without losing courage, Mother Marie Joseph, all happy and grateful for this first result, took up her pen again and profited from all her leisure moments to revise, as instructed, the text of the articles to which the animadversions of the secretary of the Sacred Congregation had been directed.

Soon she was able to send to the cardinal prefect a new proposal approved by the General Chapter of 1871. Success crowned her perseverance. By order of Pope Pius IX, on February 28, 1874, a decree was issued that, in keeping with consecrated usage, accorded the approbation of the Constitutions for a trial period of seven years.

More than seventy years old, Mother Marie Joseph decided to go herself to explain the text of the rule to each of the houses of the institute. She died in the exercise of that function, far from the motherhouse, in June 1874.

The new Mother Superior, Mother Marie Sophie Baud, did not lose sight of the steps to be taken for the definitive approbation of the Constitutions. However, the weakening of her health diminished her ability to travel. The General Chapter of 1874 had not completed the revision asked for by the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. So, in 1881, a prolongation of another seven years was asked for the trial period. It was conceded by order of His Holiness Leo XIII, in the same form and sense as in 1874.

Of the 74 articles composing the Constitutions, 39 had been explained and developed. That explanation had been inspired by principles of theology, of canon law, and of different works in harmony with the decisions and spirit of the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars.

Finally, Canon Rumeau, later bishop of Angers, who presided at the Chapter, gave the interpretation of the indult of February 12, 1875, concerning cloister. The indult granted the latitude required for our works, but under the authority of the respective bishops and of the Mother General.

The General Chapter of 1884 was delayed a year because of cholera, which erupted at Marseilles during the vacation period and rendered impossible the arrival of the delegates from Corsica. It was only on August 28, 1885, that the members of that Chapter could meet with a view of a final examination of the Constitutions.

On August 29, 1886, the Constitutions thus revised were sent to Mgr. Savelli, secretary of the Sacred Congregation through the intermediary of Mother Saint Raphael Gandolfi, superior at Ile Rousse (Corsica). On November 14, he wrote, “the manuscript will not be presented to the

Sacred Congregation because, surely, it will not be accepted. It might serve you as a Custom Book, but only after having undergone numerous amputations.”

On December 30, 1886, the Constitutions approved in 1874, with some modifications, were sent to Mgr. Savelli.

It was very wise to return to these pages already approved: Cardinal Zigliaria had written on April 14, 1886, “The Constitutions that you wish to have definitively approved should be uniquely those very ones that Rome gave you for a trial, for the Church approves definitively only Constitutions whose trial has been successful.”

The cardinal prefect had the Constitutions of 1874 officially examined, together with the letter which the Sacred Congregation had written to the Mother General on May 24, 1869, to point out to her the changes which he had introduced and which were the object of four observations.

Mgr. Rumeau, who in 1887 had preached the Advent sermons at Saint Louis of the French, took an interest in the great question of approbation.

On July 13, 1888, His Holiness Pope Leo XIII deigned to approve “in perpetuity” the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate whose motherhouse is at Agen. The Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary were significantly shortened by the notable reduction by the Roman consulters. They formulated only the fundamental points in 74 articles.

The General Chapter of 1919 was held at Sucy under the presidency of Mgr. Millot, vicar-general of Versailles. That Chapter modified a number of articles of the Constitutions which were not in conformity with the new code of canon law promulgated in 1918.

The Chapter of 1937: Several motions returned for study by the General Administration ask to envisage the suitability of a repartition of the different Offices among the Assistants as it had been at the origin of the foundation when the Mothers of Zeal, Instruction, and Work had had their work well specified. The General Administration gave this point all needed attention.

The {Second} World War obliged the postponement of the next Chapter until 1947. That Chapter led to three important changes to the Constitutions:

- 1) One of the most important sessions of the Chapter was the profound study of the “vow of stability” in the service of Mary such as it had been instituted by the Founder and such as it was being practiced by the religious of the Society of Mary (Marianists). The capitulants decided to ask the Holy See to be allowed to omit that fourth vow.

- 2) Father Chaminade had been very attentive to the “signs of the times.” The General Chapter of 1947 decided firmly to enter more into the spirit of the Founder and to adapt itself to new circumstances issuing from the profound transformation of society, by modifying the first article of the Constitutions relative to the members composing the congregation. In fact, for some time already, there was thought of having in the institute only “one class of Sisters.” That desire was ratified by the Chapter.

3) At the beginning of the foundation, Father Chaminade has based the government of the congregation on “the Three Offices,” a rule always in use in the Society of Mary.

It was proposed that the Mother General be aided by three Assistants charged respectively with the Offices of Zeal, of Instruction, and of Temporalities. A fourth Assistant, as counselor, could fulfill the function of Secretary General and complete the council.

The Chapter approved the restoration of the primitive organization, subject to a precise description of the functions of the Assistants General. That system would have many advantages due to the growing complexity of affairs and the specialization which they more and more demanded.

The distinction of Offices should also be established in the communities. It is not a separator, but, on the contrary, it creates points of contact and reciprocal dependencies. It helps the Sisters to realize in its plenitude the doctrine of the Mystical Body.

The accord of the Holy See was necessary for putting these three decisions into practice, for they modified certain articles of the Constitutions.

Father Scherrer, procurator of the Society of Mary in Rome, was asked to kindly remit to the Sacred Congregation of Religious requests soliciting those changes. The capitulants were especially fearful that Rome would not respond favorably at first. But Father Scherrer was such a good advocate in presenting the Marian doctrine of Father Chaminade from which the vow of stability was derived that the consuler charged with the affair “found that very beautiful,” and the cause was gained.

The second request, asking for the suppression of the Coadjutrix Sisters, was fully in accord with the views of the Holy See. The third, on the modification of the system of government, also was accepted without difficulty.

Armed with these authorizations, the General Administration set to work to prepare the new text of the Constitutions with a view to reprinting the book of the Rule which dated from 1888; the corrections of the General Chapter of 1919 simply had been inserted in handwriting.

The basic text was scrupulously preserved. The only modifications were those which had to do with the decisions of the Chapter. Reverend Father Hoffer, second Assistant of the Society of Mary, who, as councilor, had attended all the chapter sessions, was willing to present the work for approval of the Sacred Congregation.

Then, was it not a surprise for the General Administration to learn that the text presented had been completely redone?... Father Hoffer did not spare his pain.... He had a number of meetings with the consulters and stressed the spirit which Father Chaminade had wished to give to his congregations. Finally, after many retouches, the text was approved on December 7, 1949, by Cardinal Lavitrani.



The 74 articles of the Constitutions of 1888 had become 205 articles. The chapter on the spirit of the institute and the general plan corresponded to previous Constitutions. The augmentation of the number of articles all came about from the introduction of canon law that affected some articles of the Constitutions.

But there also were important changes: the congregation would henceforth be divided into districts. The General Chapter would be held every six years (instead of five) and would elect the Mother Superior and her Assistants for six-year terms. The election of delegates to the Chapter would also undergo great modifications.

This last point will prove, in practice, very faulty. The Chapter of 1959 asked for the division of the congregation into provinces; that allowed an election of delegates at two rounds. An indult authorizing these changes was solicited from Rome. The Sacred Congregation did not think it proper to respond affirmatively.

The Chapter of 1965 returned to the question of the elections with a vote at two levels. The Sacred Congregation of Religious did not give its agreement, preferring a vote on multiple candidates and by district. At that same Chapter the capitulants decided to increase from three to five years the minimum period of temporary profession, a plan ratified by the Holy See.

The *motu proprio* “*ecclesiae sanctae*” of August 6, 1966, explaining the council decree “*Perfectae caritatis*,” ordered that a special General Chapter be held within the next three years to undertake the “adapted renewal” asked for by the Vatican Council.

That Chapter of *aggiornamento* was held in Rome in two sessions: July 15 to August 2, 1969, and December 23 to January 15, 1970.

The Constitutions *ad experimentum* were entirely redone, responding to the desire of the Church.

The capitulants strove to follow the directive of the Council in impregnating the new Constitutions with the evangelical, Marian, and apostolic spirit.

The Chapter decision required changing the districts into provinces in order to obtain the authorization of the Sacred Congregation of Religious.

May these Constitutions open an era of evangelical renewal and direct all the energies of the members of the congregation “toward a sole end: to live, in Jesus Christ, the love which he himself had for his Father, for his Mother, and for all humans, his brothers and sisters.” (Const. art. 1)