

## Nursing Station

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[*Editor's Note:* The following homily, delivered at St. Joseph's Parish in Sykesville, Maryland, was given at the New York Province celebration for the beatification of Father Chaminade. Held on September 17, 2000, the Mass readings used were from the twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Is 50:5-9, Jas 2:14-18, Mk 8:27-35. This article first appeared in *Marianist Soundings*, vol. 5, no. 1.]

It was reported last week on National Public Radio that the Queen Mother of England, in honor of her one hundredth birthday, was visiting nursing homes in London. At one of them the Queen Mother sat for a talk with an elderly lady. It soon became apparent that the lady was bewildered as to the identity of her visitor. Gently the Queen Mother leaned toward her, patted her arm, and said, "You don't know who I am, do you?" Patting the Queen Mother's arm, the elderly lady responded, "If you don't know who you are, go to the nursing station and someone there will tell you, dear."

In our busy, hectic lives we all need *nursing stations* don't we? Those secure, dependable places where we can go to be reminded about who we are. Nursing stations are so very important to our lives. William Joseph Chaminade is one of the places Marianists return to time and time again to be told who we are and what we should be doing.

In the last few weeks I have tried to imagine what Father Chaminade's response would be to all this *beatification*. What would he be thinking, this humble, long-suffering, long-lived French priest, who in his lifetime accepted no honor or title from the Church except *missionary apostolic*?

I think he would be smiling at all this with great love—as he smiled with great love on Elena Otero of Argentina and cured her of her thyroid cancer. He would smile and remind us, as today's readings do, that *blessedness* comes with a heavy price. And that price is the cross.

Who is this man that we Marianists go to to understand ourselves and our work for the Gospel today? Who is this man the universal Church now calls blessed?

William Joseph Chaminade was the fourteenth of 15 children born to Blaise and Catherine Chaminade. Born into what we would call a middle-class family in Périgueux, France, in 1761, he would be the fourth of their sons to become a priest. The path of life seemed mapped out for him; everything was, as the French say, "hunky-dory."

But William Joseph's life would soon become a dramatization—as each of our lives are—of the tension so vividly played out in today's Gospel. Jesus asks his disciples, as he asks each of us, "who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:29). And when we answer the question, when we choose Jesus the Christ as the nursing station of our life, he who gives meaning and direction, we do not receive some cosmic pat on the back for the right answer. We receive the cross; we receive the chance to live the great Christian paradox that it is only in losing our life that we gain our life.

Father Chaminade's life is a living out of that paradox of losing life to gain life.

At 31 his first great dream of a school that would educate young men at Mussidan is shattered by the bloody civil war that history would call the French Revolution.

At 48 his dream for the rechristianization of France through a new type of sodality, flourishing lay communities, would be stifled by Napoleon's paranoid reaction to them.

At 69 his dream of converting France through a network of Christian teacher training schools was suppressed by a highly anticlerical government.

At 84 his greatest dream, his religious institutions of women and men dedicated to carrying out Mary's mission to the world, ran the risk of being obliterated by those followers closest to him.<sup>1</sup>

From today's First Reading, Father Chaminade knew in the core of his being the verses of Isaiah's "Suffering Servant."

I gave my back to those who struck me. . . . I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

He was banned from entering the novitiate in Bordeaux in his last years, because he, according to his detractors, would contaminate the novices. He was feeble and nearly blind in the last year of his life. And one of the doors leading from his bedroom to his beloved chapel of the Madeleine was bricked up, so he had to go down a long flight of stairs and outside to find his way to the chapel to pray.

Yes, he knew well the verses from Isaiah. Yet here we are 150 years later, you and I, Marianist religious and lay, all sorts of folk enamored of his teaching and his spirit, and a universal Church that now calls him heroic in virtue and blessed. Why?

We are here because Father Chaminade recalled, perhaps sung in his heart at the most difficult of times, the other verses of Isaiah's "Suffering Servant."

I have set my face like flint . . . he who vindicates me is near. . . . It is the Lord God who helps me.

William Joseph Chaminade is blessed and—dare I to presume a future papal pronouncement—is a saint because he understood that all of it, the plans, the dreams, and this great work for God was not about William Joseph Chaminade. It was all about God's action through him in our world.

Chaminade understood that the barrel that holds the wine is not the wine. But that barrel must be broken open for the wine to flow. And flow it did, and flow it does, because we are now the barrels.

That breaking open of barrels and that flowing has been and is a marvelous succession of labor for the Reign of God. The words of James in our Second Reading today could very well have been the banner that Chaminade marched with through his life. "I by my works will show you my faith."

- ◆ Chaminade labored his entire life building and rebuilding lay communities throughout a war-devastated country and Church. At the beatification ceremony itself, he would be hailed by Pope John Paul II as the *precursor of the active participation of lay people in the life of the Church*.
- ◆ Chaminade would engage in advocacy with Maria Thérèse de Lamourous on behalf of women and work with her at the building of the Miséricorde.
- ◆ He would collaborate with Adèle in founding lay communities and the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (Marianist Sisters).
- ◆ He contributed to the rebuilding of the French school system and to the training of teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from the "Introduction" of *Chaminade, Pragmatist with a Vision* by Joseph Stefanelli, SM (Dayton: NACMS, 2000).

- ◆ And at the age of 56, he would lay the foundation of our beloved Society of Mary, insisting on the discipleship of equals in our mixed composition that is still a model for our clerical Church.

Chaminade would live to see the first brothers come to the United States in 1849. Today, in 36 countries, there are more than 8,000 consecrated lay people and 2,000 religious who carry on the work he began.

“I by my works will show you my faith” (Jas 2:18). And what faith it was! Chaminade embraced the cross, losing his life that life and faith be given to many, like us.

His embrace of the cross as the ordinary circumstance of Christian life is perhaps best expressed in a famous quote familiar to Marianists.

I am like a brook that makes no effort to overcome obstacles in its way. All the obstacles can do is hold me up for a while, as a brook is held up; but during that time it grows broader and deeper, and after a while it overflows the obstruction and flows along again. That is how I am going to work.

My dear brothers and sisters, we are now the Marianist barrels, filled to overflow with the wine of Christ. We live in a world that Chaminade would never have imagined, yet it is not so very different from his own. May we have the courage to be broken open, to love ourselves, for the sake of the mission of Jesus.

As we wander sometimes lost and confused in the wards of the modern world, may we return to our Marianist “nursing station,” that is William Joseph Chaminade, to be told who we are by this blessed French priest. And he will remind us, as he did by his life and his legacy, that who we are is Christ—broken, crucified, and risen. We are to be that face and love of God for all God’s people.