

A Reflection on Saragossa

by Tom Redmond, SM

When the Chaminade Year began last January, I became acutely aware that these next twelve months would have a lot to offer our Marianist Family. In this awareness of grace I committed myself to some reading and study on Blessed Chaminade and other things Marianist. Through a conversation in July with Carol Ramey and Dan Jordan at NACMS I was asked if I would offer a reflection from my study for the month of October, near the Feast of Our Lady of the Pillar.

Let's begin with a bit of an historical perspective. Citing Father Simler's biography of the Founder (p. 5), we read:

William Joseph Chaminade was born (on April 8, 1761) in the house of his maternal ancestors. The name William was given him by a friend of the family, William Morear, a baker, who served as godfather. The principal part of his formation he attributed to his mother. From her he received his gentleness, his affability, his moderation, his great prudence, and above all, his religious education. . . . It is to his mother that he owed his devotion to Mary, a devotion at once sensitive and strong—it was going to be the soul of his holiness, the purpose of his apostolate, and his great means of captivating souls.

At the time of his Confirmation he chose the name Joseph.

In early 1792, after twenty years of living at the Collège of Mussidan in an environment of study and prayer, community and ministry, Father Chaminade's life was radically changed. The new government closed the school and confiscated the property. Aware of the growing turmoil he moved to Bordeaux, purchased a house, and began a new chapter in his priestly life.

For the first few months Father Chaminade was able to live quite openly in Bordeaux, make transactions, and send and receive mail. But in October of 1793 the Reign of Terror began with a fierce persecution, especially against the monarchy and the clergy. The guillotine was set up and anyone even under suspicion of alliance to the Roman Catholic Church was tried, found guilty, and brought to the scaffolding.

Despite the danger Father Chaminade remained in the city with several other faithful priests; they could have at any moment met a funeral cortege or even worse, be captured, arrested, tried, sentenced, and executed. He spread a rumor that he had emigrated, but authorities continued to search for him. He had several hiding places within his house, and whenever he

went out he wore one of several disguises, making it possible for him to continue an active priestly ministry among the faithful remnant.

In February 1795 a new government recognized the right of all citizens to the free exercise of worship, thus ending the persecution and the bloody Reign of Terror. Father Chaminade came out of hiding and even opened a public oratory near his home. Because he hid so well during the previous year his name was placed on the list of those who had left the country. He drew up a legal document with witnesses stating that in fact he had not left France.

In October of 1795 a convention revived the laws of 1792 and established a "dry guillotine"; all emigrant priests back in France had to leave. Father Chaminade had hid and disguised himself so well that the authorities thought he was among those who had left the country. His predicament was that his name was never removed from the list. Again, for almost two years, Father Chaminade took up his disguises to continue a priestly ministry with lay collaboration in Bordeaux. The moderates returned to power in the elections of the spring of 1797 and brought back some order and religious liberty, so Father Chaminade was able to reopen his oratory. But in September of that same year the ousted party regrouped and took control of the government. In a quick turnaround of events they enforced the laws against the emigrant priests who were then given two weeks to leave the country. Father Chaminade had no time to defend his stance that he never left the country in the first place. So in late September 1797 he left for Spain.

On the evening of October 11 he arrived in Saragossa to a public display of the Christian faith in the celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of the Pillar. What I'd like to propose is a reflection on "the inspiration" that Father Chaminade received and what this means for us today. On page 54 in *Origins of the Marianist Family* Father Eduardo Benlloch, SM, reflects on the phrase, "I saw you a long time ago." Father Benlloch writes:

Was this at Saragossa? How did it happen? Was it at a single moment of intense illumination or during a prolonged period of graces . . . What was the content of that inspiration: the foundation of the Society of Mary or a much wider pastoral project? Father Chaminade was not very concise in telling us what he saw, but we know very well what he did on returning to France. Immediately after his return to Bordeaux he established the Marian Sodality of lay people with a new spirit. It is certain that he saw this at Saragossa.

Let us take a look at some of the testimonials of those closest to Father Chaminade and their recollections of the Founder's time in Saragossa. Father Benlloch offers a rich collection of these on pages 10 to 18 in his book *Chaminade's Message Today*.

- Father Caillet offers that it was through divine inspiration that Father Chaminade conceived the project, a Sodality *and* a religious order dedicated to Mary.
- Father Charles Rothéa quotes the Founder as saying, "I saw you just as you are here, and this happened in the twinkling of an eye a long time ago." The phrase "in the twinkling of an eye" could be referring to an apparition, but when and where was "a long time ago"?
- Father Jean Baptiste Lalanne records the personal encounter he had with the Founder on May 1, 1817, when he placed himself before Father Chaminade and dedicated himself to his work. Father Lalanne goes on to quote the Founder: "This is what I've been waiting for such a long time. Blessed be God! God has manifested His will, and the moment has come to carry out the plan I have been seeking since God inspired me 30 years ago." Thirty years previous to 1817 would be 1787 while Father Chaminade was at the Collège of Mussidan! Was something brewing in his mind and heart while at the Collège of Mussidan? Some later Marianist scholars suggest Father Lalanne wrote 30 by mistake instead of 20; twenty years previous to 1817 would place Father Chaminade at Saragossa, 1797.
- Father Joseph Simler, the fourth Superior General of the Society of Mary, writes from a later Marianist tradition and suggests Father Chaminade "established under the protection of Mary pious associations for persons who live in the world and two religious congregations." The Founder's plan was for lay sodalists *and* religious to work together for the reconstruction of the Church in France and the prevention of new troubles for the Church. Father Simler concludes with "All this seems to have occurred during the repeated 'filial outpourings' before the statue of Our Lady of the Pillar." I read the words "repeated filial outpourings" as suggesting that the inspiration for Father Chaminade was something ongoing and developed with time.
- Father Henri Rousseau suggests that at Saragossa Father Chaminade heard a word that led him without hesitation through the last 50 years of his life in his work with the Sodality *and* the religious orders that were placed under the care of Mary and worked against religious indifference.

Father Benlloch concludes these recollections on page 18 with an insightful reflection. When Father Chaminade returned to France in November of 1800 he is a changed man; he is decisive and is "extraordinarily creative" with his personal missionary project. His attitude and mission in life are quite different before he left Bordeaux in exile. "Something had happened at Saragossa."

Father Chaminade returned to France in November of 1800. A month later, on December 8, the Sodality is born, and two months later on February 2, 1801, the sodalists make their first consecration. Father Benlloch reflects, "The date of the birth of the Sodality shows us the project was already mature in Chaminade's mind before he returned to France. . . . Chaminade's idea was very clear: to establish a Marian Sodality with lay members" (*Chaminade's Message Today*, pp. 48-49).

As I have prayerfully sat with all of this before the icon of Blessed Chaminade I cannot help but sense a deep joy in the Founder.

The thought I offer for our prayerful pondering is this. Could it be that our view of what happened to Father Chaminade at Saragossa gives some insight into how God and the intercession of Mary work in our lives through our Marianist commitment?

- Was the Saragossa experience for Father Chaminade a specific apparition that gave him in an instant the insight for his ministry when he was to return to France?
- Was the Saragossa experience for Father Chaminade an extended time of grace where he was able to put together pieces of his years at Mussidan with the upheaval of the Revolution with some specific insights into new ways of ministering in the Church in France?
- Was the Saragossa experience for Father Chaminade a mix of these two: an apparition with some specifics about his ministry *and* an extended period of time for graced reflection?

Father Benlloch hits the nail on the head when he states on page 54 in *Origins of the Marianist Family*, "Father Chaminade was not very concise in telling us *what he saw* (at Saragossa), but we know very well *what he did* on returning to France." For upon returning to France Father Chaminade gathered people into supportive faith communities centered on Mary that reached out to meet specific needs of the people of his time.

Maybe it is *both* what Father Chaminade saw or heard at Saragossa *and* what he did with the experience at Saragossa that is the graced insight for us. There is a subtle but very real integration of the contemplative with the active in this!

To conclude these reflections I'd like to use the last lines of the prayer to Blessed Chaminade that was composed for this year of Chaminade. In this last line we pray:

"May the Spirit who came upon Mary and who inspired you, lead us to that faith of the heart which will enable us in all our different words to do whatever he tells us." Amen.

Copyright © 2011

North American Center for Marianist Studies

NACMS
4435 E. Patterson Road
Dayton, OH 45429-1083