

[*Editor's Note:* The following article appeared on April 23, 2000, in the French newspaper *Sud-Ouest Dimanche*. Robert Fachet, SM, Province of Meribah, translated the article. The French original was published days prior to Blessed Chaminade's beatification on September 3, 2000.]

The Soldier of Mary **William Joseph Chaminade**

by Christophe Lucet

The Marianists have been looking forward to the event for a century: the man who, in Bordeaux in 1817, founded this "international" (congregation) of Faith will be beatified on September 3.

Bordeaux has seen the birth of at least three "international" (congregations) of Faith. The Congregation of the Daughters of Notre Dame was founded by the sister of Montaigne, Jeanne de Lestonnac; the Holy Family was born at Martillac. The third, perhaps best-known, is that of the Marianists, of which the Lycée Sainte-Marie Grande-Lebrun in Bordeaux gives witness to (that congregation's) involvement in education.

Present in 36 countries, missionaries, at the same time both lay and religious (its distinguishing trademark), animating schools, parishes, universities, spiritual centers, the Society of Mary has remained faithful to the memory of its Founder, William Joseph Chaminade. For almost a century the Marianist Family has "argued" before the Vatican the cause of a man whose virtues the papacy at last recognized, declaring him "Venerable" in 1973.

The way was now open for the beatification which will be declared finally this September 3 by Pope John Paul II, a great devotee of the Blessed Virgin. Declared "Blessed" the same day as Popes John XXIII and Pius X (rather elite company), will Chaminade be canonized? This is not yet an issue, but his own contemporaries had already taken the first steps when in January 1850 they shouted in the streets: "The Saint of Bordeaux is dead."

Resistant to the Terror

If the nineteenth century was so bright for religious endeavor in our nation, if three-quarters of the world's missionaries were French by 1914, it is to men like William Joseph Chaminade that we are indebted. No one perhaps portrayed so richly the "face" of the Roman Church on French soil when he took the road of exile to Saragossa in 1797. Even before the Terror attacked the "enemies" of the Revolution in 1793, "nonjuring" priests lived in hiding for three years, hundreds of whom would die regrettably on the pontoons of Rochefort.

Disguised as a Tinker

Son of a commercial draper, born in Périgueux in 1761, Chaminade at age 40 left the direction of the Seminary of Mussidan and became a member of the nonjuring “resistance.” The Church, triumphant under the royalty, became in a short time a Church of the catacombs, and certain revolutionaries styled those faithful to the Church as “the last representatives of an extinct race.” Every person convicted of having given asylum to a nonjuror was liable to the guillotine. And so (our) churchman travels through Bordeaux made up as an itinerant peddler of notions or as a tinker, crying “cooking pots! cooking pots!” in order to foil the vigilance of the sans-culottes. And when these same sans-culottes came to arrest him in 1795, Marie Dubourg, a servant woman as cool as a cucumber, saved his life by hiding him under a washtub and inviting the soldiers to a toast, clinking glasses over this makeshift table.

At Saragossa, where he arrived the day of the Feast of the Virgin of the Pillar, this priest had a revelation on which he remained discreet, but from which he came to be convinced that the survival of Christianity would come about by means of a new apostolic effort under the protection of Mary, mother of all believers. Upon returning from exile and being named administrator of the Diocese of Bazas, Chaminade did not cease working at rekindling the torch of faith.

In December 1800, there were twelve—like the first apostles—who formed the new fraternity, blending lay persons and priests in the same secular dress. Rapidly they brought together hundreds of young people and adults around the Chapel of the Madeleine in Bordeaux. Schools, orphanages, centers of arts and crafts—the movement was launched, even though Chaminade’s troubles were far from over—witness his struggle with Napoleonic power or with the revolutionaries of 1830.

Repentant Young Women

Just as the Jesuits are soldiers of Christ, future Marianists, as soldiers of Mary, give themselves to the mission of helping the official Church re-evangelize all levels of society. Thus they inaugurated work with young chimney sweeps and asked a certain [Marie Thérèse] Charlotte de Lamourous to involve herself with repentant young girls, as former prostitutes were called at the time. These daughters of the Miséricorde would become one of the most dynamic works of the nineteenth century. Chaminade also came into contact with Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, who founded in Agen in 1816 the Daughters of Mary, and who opened a free school for young girls “of every status and every condition.”

A year later came the birth of the Society of Mary—a religious congregation in this instance—the first seven members of whom took up residence on Rue de Segur in Bordeaux. They opened in the capital city of Aquitaine a school, l’Institution Sainte-Marie, which quickly distinguished

itself for the innovative style of its pedagogy. The Society took root in the east where it established a normal school for teachers in Franche-Comté and a novitiate in Alsace. As early as 1849, a year before Chaminade's death, a foundation was born in America. Chaminade left 250 religious working in 45 houses. Twenty years later they numbered more than one thousand spread through France, Switzerland, and the United States.

A Socrates of Bordeaux

“Chaminade understood that the Church of the nineteenth century would not move forward on the same foundations as before the Revolution,” comments Bernard Payrous, a priest of Bordeaux. “Very innovative in the area of the apostolate of the laity, Chaminade wanted to create ‘a man who does not die.’ In an era fraught with crisis of thought, this man of immense courage leads me to think of a Socrates of Bordeaux, a man of enormous influence. He helped large numbers of young people become men, and he was a great educator.” Less known than a contemporary like [Félicité Robert] Lamennais, Chaminade will perhaps leave an imprint that will be more profound.”

His devotion to Mary, which takes up anew the ongoing theme of the “donation to Mary” stemming from the great [Pierre de] Berulle, is wedded to the convictions of the author of the “Treatise on True Devotion,” [Louis Marie] Grignon de Montfort, canonized in 1996 by John Paul II. “It is in alliance with the Virgin and under her protective standard that the Brothers of Mary will be able to collaborate with her work of salvation, especially in the field of education,” comments Bernard Peyrous. “A spiritual guide, never a detached mystic, fundamentally confident of the action of God among men, Chaminade was convinced that the education to this effect is possible.”

In an era when the demise of the Church is yet again proclaimed by so many people, the confidence in the future is perhaps the most precious legacy bequeathed by Father Chaminade to the Marianists of the twenty-first century.