



# Father Simler 2<sup>nd</sup> Founder

## Chapter 12

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## Father Joseph Simler, SM

Fourth Superior General of the Society of Mary (1876 to 1905)

by Tom Redmond, SM



“In the course of a generalate of nearly 30 years, he was called to complete the work of the Founder by establishing the definitive text of the Rule, by finishing the interior organization of the Society, and by extending its influence across the world. For all these deeds, he deserves the title *second Founder*, which has been given him with good reason.”<sup>1</sup>

If this were not enough, Father Joseph Simler, the “second founder,” also helped reclaim the reputation of *the Founder*, Father William Joseph Chaminade, which had been so maliciously discredited during a grab for power near the end of Chaminade’s life. In this year of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Father Simler’s death, in a special way, we give thanks for all that he provided, and we seek to incarnate his example in our day, so we, too, can be “second founders.”<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, it was during the Franco-Prussian War that Simler came to fully appreciate

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Lebon, SM, *Our First Century: 1817-1917* (St. Louis, Missouri: Marianist Resources Commission, 1975), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Psychology of Asceticism*, Johannes Lindworsky states that “each one must to a certain degree himself become the founder of the Order, grasp the ideal of the founder, animate himself therewith and apply it to himself and his particular conditions.” Father William Ferree, SM, a premiere Marianist scholar, was fond of quoting this passage.

Perhaps today we can find ways to foster this sense of “second founder” to all women and men who comprise our Marianist Family.

Chaminade, a man who fought for “new wars” (new ways) of being Church based on the filial love of our Mother, Mary. Reflecting on this period of his life, this is what Simler had to say:

Kept enclosed or captive in Paris, I made use of my leisure time to look over the archives of the Society of Mary, when my attention was drawn to the documents concerning Father Chaminade, the Founder of the Society of Mary. The reading of these documents was a revelation to me. In truth, I said to myself, Father Chaminade has been and is still more than is thought, an unknown man, not only in the regions where he exercised his apostolate, but even in the religious families in which the members live of his spirit, and as it were, under his direction.<sup>3</sup>

Here is a brief overview of Father Simler’s life.

He was born to Hippolyte Simler and Mary Ann Klein on October 21, 1833, near Colmar, France. Joseph, gifted with a keen intellect and an exceptional work ethic, attended Institute Sainte Marie and made a strong impression upon the Marianist faculty.

“Upon the invitation of the director, Father Fridblatt, he thereupon accepted a position as professor at the school, where he spent the next three years. He had, it is true, conceived the idea of becoming a missionary, but as he had not as yet a fixed plan for carrying out his project, he was quite willing to cooperate in the work of education, and generously offered his services without remuneration.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1853, he entered the Marianist novitiate of St. Anne, where Father Chevaux was the novice master. He pronounced his first vows in 1854 and his perpetual profession in 1856. Being called to the priesthood, Simler completed his training in the diocesan seminary and was ordained on December 19, 1857, by Cardinal Mathieu.

Simler ministered as an educator and administrator at Institution Sainte Marie and the Petit Collège of Stanislas before being elected as Assistant for Education to the General Administration in November of 1868. He served in this position for eight years and improved textbooks, reviewed academic regulations, and visited the various schools, including those in America, where he inspected 23 communities in 12 cities during his six-month stay.

In 1876, at the age of 43, he was elected as the fourth Superior General of the Society of Mary, an office he would hold for 29 years.

Here are a few of Father Simler’s accomplishments as Superior General, during a tenure that established a truly “catholic” (universal) nature to the Society of Mary:

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Cousin, SM, *Joseph Simler, Fourth Superior-General of the Society of Mary* (Dayton, Ohio: Brothers of Mary, 1913), p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> *Biographical Sketches*, vol. 3 (Kirkwood, Missouri: Maryhurst Normal, nd.), pp. 21-22.

- ❖ He worked strenuously for the Approbation of the Constitutions given in 1891; through the animadversions he held fast to the essential elements of identity in the Society of Mary: mixed composition and the vow of stability.
- ❖ His biography of Father Chaminade, which was begun during the 1870-71 siege of Paris, was published in 1901.
- ❖ The Society of Mary reestablished relations with the Daughters of Mary in 1889.
- ❖ His *Guide in Mental Prayer for the Man of Good Will*—published in 1886—was so popular that its usage spread far beyond the Society of Mary, its intended audience, and was used by seminaries and other religious orders. It was translated into many languages and was eventually expanded by Simler into the *Catechism of Mental Prayer*.
- ❖ Personnel of the Society expanded from 1,200 to 2,000 during his first 25 years as Superior General.

Because of religious persecution by the French government, the General Administration moved from France to Nivelles, Belgium, in 1903. He died in Nivelles on February 4, 1905.

While only slightly above average in height, Father Simler was a giant in administration and truly a “second founder.”

**Texts cited:**

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