

Sharing Our Marianist Stories Ep. 21 Transcript

Courage in the Face of Fear: Marie-Thérèse Self-Offering (with Patti Gehred and Gabby Bibeau)

00:00 - Patti Gehred

When we talk about Marie-Thérèse, we have so many stories of her courage, all that she did to support Father Chaminade during the French Revolution, all she sacrificed for the women of the Miséricorde, how she fought the government. And so, you look at her and you think, “Oh. I’m no Marie-Thérèse.” But then you read this and you’re like, “No, she struggled like all of us. She was human.”

00:35 - Patti Gehred

Welcome to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. I’m Patti Gehred.

00:39 - Gabby Bibeau

And I’m Sr. Gabby Bibeau.

00:42 - Patti Gehred

And for this podcast, we’re continuing our looking at the writings of the three founders. We looked at Father Chaminade, we looked at Mother Adèle, and today we’re going to discuss some very interesting writing from Marie-Thérèse. Can you talk about that, Gabby?

01:01 - Gabby Bibeau

Yeah, I can talk just a little bit as a preview, and then of course we’ll get into it more. But unfortunately, unlike Father Chaminade and Mother Adèle, we don’t have very much of her own writing and her own words to look to. But what we do have is this self-offering, this text of a self-offering that she made in 1797. It seems like she first made this kind of act of self-offering in 1792. We don’t have any writing for that, but we have this from 1797 that, actually, it seems like Father Chaminade wrote down or copied out. But this is an offering that Marie-Thérèse makes to God in writing as a victim and expiation of the crimes committed during the Revolution. And we can talk more about that. But it’s just a really interesting, and it provides a different insight into her life and her personality.

02:17 - Patti Gehred

As we do in NACMS, we read these things a lot. But I saw something a little different this time, so I look forward to talking about it. And part of it is, as you mentioned when we talked about Father Chaminade, is we do have to be a little forgiving of the language because the language is just at that time... could be very dark. And you have mentioned that before. That’s kind of historically true, isn’t it, Gabby?

02:47 - Gabby Bibeau

It is. And also, Marie-Thérèse herself and - again, we’ll talk, I don’t want to get too ahead of myself - but Marie-Thérèse also had some real struggles, emotionally and psychologically, that lent itself to that kind of darkness, too, which we’ll talk about.

03:10 - Patti Gehred

And just think that Father Chaminade had an influence on this. So, it wasn't quite as dark. That's something to think about, too. This is *with* his positive influence. So why don't you go ahead and read it.

03:23 - Gabby Bibeau

Okay. Her personal notes, which are presented here, which we're about to read, are dated January 1797. So, Marie-Thérèse says: "I sincerely renew the offering I have made of myself to be his victim. I wish to live this way all my life and to be his victim in every possible and imaginable sense of the word. I agree to the immolation of every particle of my being with a view to his good pleasure alone and his glorification as my creator. Without personal interest, I offer him my entire self, my tastes, my inclinations. For my offering, I exclude nothing. I abandoned myself to him. His glory is the only good I desire. Unworthy creature, miserable, proud, downright sinner that I am through the blackest and gratitude after so many benefits, I still dare to tell him I wish to belong only to him. I know very well that of myself, I can do nothing. But God, who has brought me into existence, is all powerful. God gives me the desire or the wish, however weak, to bow to the blows of his justice. But if any illusion yet lurks in what I am writing here, may this infinitely powerful God, this Father, infinitely good turn it to his glory. May he thwart my enemy and convert to his utter confusion all the foolish fancies with which he would wish to envelop me. If my imagination or my passions are taking the place of proper sentiments in me, may God destroy, stifle, and banish these futile phantoms."

05:45 - Gabby Bibeau

"God, you know what I am. You know better than I the depth of corruption which defiles everything I do. You also know the... I am at a loss for the right term that is making me write this. You know that it seems to me, at least, I would sign it with my blood. But you also know that illusions haunt me. My pride constantly deceives me, and I imagine the sentiments with which it inspires me to be my own. Who will deliver me? Who will cure me if not you, O Lord? Do you not wish me to turn to you? Then give me also the grace of always desiring to address myself to you. Accept the miserable offering I am again making to you. Deign then to receive this unhappy creature. Receive her as a victim. Take possession of her. She is offering herself to you. She is sacrificing her life for love of you. Here, my God, is what I wish to say to you every moment of my life. Every day I will read what I have written here."

07:11 - Patti Gehred

Thank you. Gabby. Could you set us up historically where we are and what she's witnessed?

07:20 - Gabby Bibeau

Yes. So as I mentioned before in our little introduction to this letter, it seems like from the research that I did very briefly before our conversation that in 1792, she made an act of self-offering to God in expiation for the crimes of the Revolution. So, 1792 was the beginning of what we call today in the French Revolution, the *Reign of Terror*. And it was the most brutal, most violent, most bloody stage of the Revolution. This is where the guillotine becomes really

well known. Thousands upon thousands of people were being executed by the guillotine. But there was also horrible popular violence by violent mobs. So one of the most gruesome points that really, I think, begins this Reign of Terror are what's called the September Massacres. And that was where France, they had just gone to war with other powers in Europe who didn't like the Revolution and wanted to save the monarchy in France. So France was at war, and there was this great panic across the country that people who were in prisons were somehow spies for the other European powers that we were at war with. And so, there was this great panic. And so, people rose up and stormed the prisons. And the prisons were filled with priests who didn't take the oath to the government and also a lot of petty criminals. Some of them were teenagers, children who stole food, things like that. [The mob] indiscriminately stormed prisons and just slaughtered the people in the prisons, and it was horrific.

09:30 – Gabby Bibeau

So, Marie-Thérèse in Bordeaux - and Bordeaux at this time, again, experiences this kind of terror - we know she's hearing about this; she's seeing this. She would not be untouched by this violence because her spiritual director, who was a priest, went to the guillotine. I don't remember what year, if we know what year. So she's seeing this horror and she is thinking, "Oh my God, God is going to condemn all of these people, these people who are committing these horrible sins: murder, rape, maiming people." And so, she makes this offering of herself as a victim. You know, offering her life to God basically to say, "Look kindly upon the people who are killed and upon those who are doing the killing." And I also think it was like a consecration of herself, because she could also be killed. We know that she did a lot of work in the underground church in Bordeaux of helping connect priests who were in hiding to people who needed sacraments. There was many acts of bravery that she herself did. So it was also like an offering of herself to God, like "Take me. Use me to do the work that I can do, and then knowing that at any moment I can be killed, too."

11:08 – Gabby Bibeau

So, we think she first made that offering in 1792. and then this is like a really strong renewal of that offering. I also want to say that this document, the original of this self-offering, she did sign in her own blood. Like, it was intense. That was how intense it was... this is serious. And yeah, she read it every day of her life. She renewed that offering of herself every day.

11:40 - Patti Gehred

She's not saying, "I'm a good person, so save me." She's offering herself, sacrificing herself for everyone. And in a way, as dark as this is written - and I'm hoping some of the language of her own feels like she her almost self-hatred; I hope a lot of that's just the language of the time. I'm sure that is inner struggles that she had. No one's perfect. I'm sure she had a lot of inner struggles and then witnessing what she witnessed only amplified that. But her response was to try to save everyone, not just herself. And I think this comes back to the Miséricorde. She's dealing with these constant kind of demons and self-doubts. I'm sure a psychiatrist today would have some labels. But she worked them out by trying to help others.

12:46 - Gabby Bibeau

I think in terms of the darkness, how hard she is on herself and when she says things like “unworthy creature, miserable, proud, downright sinner that I am through the blackest ingratitude after so many benefits...” So, we know that Marie-Thérèse really struggled with scrupulosity, which is - if people are not familiar with that... Today that is a psychological diagnosis of, I think it's like a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, of this overwhelming debilitating sense, “You are bad. You are damned,” and can lead to like repeating prayers over and over again because you didn't do it right the first time, or you have a feeling like God isn't happy with how you did something like that. Going to confession every day, maybe multiple times a day.

13:59 – Gabby Bibeau

So, what's really cool, and you see in her relationship with Father Chaminade, who became a spiritual director for her, and then they really became collaborators and friends, is he is very clear to her, “Do not repeat prayers. Meditate on God's mercy,” really trying to help her overcome that scrupulosity. And so, for me when I read parts of this, I'm partly like, “Aw, Marie Therese, that's so sad. That's like your view.” But I know it was something she struggled with. And I think when she renews this in 1800, I see - you can read a different version of this - that part of it is less pronounced. So I think as she gets older, that is something that becomes better, is alleviated for her. And it also is probably a way for her - the fear and the trauma of this time, to have it be channeled into this kind of anxious sense of feeling like you're a bad person. It makes sense to me that it took that shape.

15:21 - Patti Gehred

I don't know if I had witnessed the Reign of Terror that I would have been able to keep such a strong faith that there was a loving God. I mean, I have read that the streets were literally running with blood. Nobody could escape the horror. And then, to still believe there was a loving God. And then, I mean, I think when you read her biography that Fr. Joe Stefanelli wrote, she had these tendencies as a little girl. So, this was going to be exacerbated by something like the Reign of Terror. But just the fact that she could keep that faith was very impressive. And I appreciate you bringing up the relationship between her and Father Chaminade. I mean, he certainly helped her. And then I think some of her OCD helped him with finances and all these little details and things that he needed support with as well.

16:20 - Gabby Bibeau

Yeah, over time. When the Society of Mary was starting and then the Daughters of Mary were starting, Chaminade relied on Marie-Thérèse a lot to be a representative in some business affairs. And when the Marianist Sisters started, he sent Marie-Thérèse to Agen to help the Sisters kind of get up and running, because she at this point, for 16 years, had been running the Miséricorde of women who were leaving lives of prostitution. And so, she knew how to run a house - a religious

house full of women, and so she was very competent at that. So, it did. It really starts out as a spiritual direction relationship, and then it becomes a friendship and collaborative.

17:16 – Gabby Bibeau

Something that I think is important - that I'm think I'm just now making this connection - So, *Miséricorde* in French means “mercy.” I don't think that's an accident, that that's what the *Miséricorde* was called. Because a result of Marie-Thérèse's struggle with her sinfulness, this feeling of her being so sinful, is that she really had to concentrate on the mercy of God. And she really had to trust in that in a way that I think she couldn't take it for granted. You know, like that became such a focus for her. And I think that was one of the reasons why she accepted this ministry to work with these women.

18:09 - Gabby Bibeau

“To be mercy.” And that's one of the quote[s] we do have from her: “Let us and our house be mercy.” You know, to be mercy for them and to really trust in God's mercy. But when I share this with other people, I especially share the very last part, which is still so beautiful. She's offering herself talking about herself. She's offering herself to you. She is sacrificing her life for love of you. “Here, my God, is what I wish to say every moment of my life.” I mean, that's just beautiful. And she lived that. She was faithful to that. And it's just - I find it very inspirational once you can move past some of the really heaviness of it.

18:59 - Patti Gehred

And... I believe she read it every day. Every day at the same time, and probably did all sorts of things. But then you look at how she ran the *Miséricorde*. She had a really strict schedule for that house. Up at 5:00, praying, allowed to talk, not allowed to talk, praying, and that's probably exactly what those women needed. Having just been on the streets and kind of at the will of whatever life threw at them, she brought them in this house where there was stability and control of yourself. I mean, she had a lot of control too. She, you know, she wasn't super gentle, you know. She knew what she was doing. And under all that saying, “And you are a child of God. You are loved.”

19:49 – Patti Gehred

The line that really strikes me amongst many of this was about her imagination. “If my imagination or my passions are taking the place of proper sentiments in me, may God destroy, stifle and banish these futile phantoms.” That goes back to the Silences, or the System of Virtues and, I think, really hits the nail on the head of what a lot of this issue is. Does your imagination running wild? I mean, her deciding that she was worthless, and because of human actions, God must be so disappointed. I mean, that's all in her imagination. So I have a feeling - in fact, I know that we have somewhere - that Father Chaminade addressed this with her.

20:47 - Gabby Bibeau

That's a really great connection to the silences, Patti, because... Well, at this time, pretty much all the letters we have from Father Chaminade in these years, 1795 to 1801, are his letters to

Marie-Thérèse. So, we can see the advice he gave to her. But I wonder if his experience directing her helped him really come up with or think through the Silences, because that is part of Silence of Mind and Silence of Passions. It's not just shutting out things, but of recognizing what's true and what's not true. So, for Marie-Thérèse to have this feeling of like, "I'm bad, God thinks I'm bad, wants to send me to hell." To be able to kind of distance yourself from that and to say, "That's not true." And then to ask God, like she does here, to take that away from her.

22:01 - Patti Gehred

When we talk about Marie-Thérèse, we have so many stories of her courage, all that she did to support Father Chaminade during the French Revolution, all she sacrificed for the women of the Miséricorde, how she fought the government. And so, you look at her and you think, "Oh. I'm no Marie-Thérèse." But then you read this and you're like, "No, she struggled like all of us. She was human." She could function and she worked on it and got better, but it never went away. But it also supported a lot of this courage, a lot of her determination to help the women of the Miséricorde. So we don't have to be perfect. It's just nice to know that she wasn't just this determined woman that... fearless. You get the feeling that she was fearless. And here she was anything but fearless.

22:50 - Gabby Bibeau

That's a great point and I think that's so true. I don't think she, or even anybody was fearless, but definitely courageous. It's like, "Despite my fear, I'm going to trust in God, in God's protection and in God's walking with me throughout all of this." Yeah, I do think that's helpful. And for anybody else who is experiencing fear or anxiety or low self-esteem, to really pray to Marie-Thérèse and say like "There's so much you can teach me about how to overcome this." I think that's another great thing we can learn from her.

23:34 - Patti Gehred

Well, I've really enjoyed this visiting of the Founders and I hope we continue. We'll keep digging for some good letters or writings that we can share and delve into. And I think what we try to do at NACMS is look at history and see how it is relevant today. And it just always amazes me how relevant it is today.

23:56 - Gabby Bibeau

Yeah, I've enjoyed this too. This is great. And I hope you listening have also enjoyed and learned something new and maybe if you are interested in reading more about Marie-Thérèse, we have a great little booklet you can buy from NACMS that's, like I don't know, \$6 or so. You can look on our bookstore. If you want to know a lot more about her, we also have the definitive biography of Marie-Thérèse, written by Fr. Joe Stefanelli some years ago, that has everything you want to know and more about Marie-Thérèse. So, you can find that on our bookstore as well.

24:39 - Patti Gehred

And if you have any letters, you'd like us to read or dig into or you've heard a quote that you want us to find, we're in. Let us know. We'd love to do that. Thank you for listening.