

A Conference on Father Chaminade's System of Virtues

by William Ferree, SM

A conference on Father Chaminade's System of Virtues given by V. Rev. William J. Ferree, SM, at Villa St. Jean (c. 1936); translated from the French.

I would like to speak to you this evening about a subject which has interested me for years, but which I have begun to see clearly, it seems, only during these last months in the Seminary. I mean the system of asceticism which the Good Father bequeathed to us: The Virtues of preparation, purification, and consummation.

One might ask himself just where the great difficulty lies in understanding these virtues, because the ordinary form in which this system is presented to us has nothing complicated about it. Which is true, for the ordinary form of presentation is a simple historical enumeration and definition. We say glibly that "by this method the first generations of the Society of Mary were formed" (Schellhorn, § 2) or that the theory of the three divisions of virtues "forms the basis of the first directories of the Institute," and that "its influence made itself felt a long time after the death of the Founder" (S.F. II, § 864). But if we take this historical viewpoint, we run the risk of gazing passively, like tourists in a museum where the most beautiful works of man's genius are arranged so regularly along the walls, that the tourists, so pressed to see other things, do not even suspect that before their eyes unfolds the painful development of the human spirit throughout the ages.

But once we cease looking passively and attempt a bit of analysis, difficulties—great difficulties—arise on all sides. Let us see some examples of these. In 1822 Good Father Chaminade wrote a brief letter to the Sister Novices at Agen: "Your Institute is the way which must lead you (to heaven). The Virtues of preparation are, in the Institute, those which elsewhere have made great saints; the virtues of purification are proposed to the predestined, and the third order of virtues, those of consummation, are the virtues of Jesus Christ and of Mary. May the grandeur (sublimity) of these perspectives not astonish you; they are those of God . . ."

In these few words there are, or it would be more exact to say, there were for me when I read them the first time, three enigmas:

1) The Virtues of preparation are, in the Institute, those which elsewhere have formed great saints. Why this opposition between the Institute and "elsewhere," in the question of sanctity. Is this just an effect of the style of Brother David, to whom Father Chaminade dictated the letter? Or did the Founder really wish to suggest that that which sufficed for a great sanctity elsewhere was just the beginning of the Institute? This last interpretation seems more exact; but then, how to explain it?

2) The "virtues of purification are proposed only to the predestined." Just what exactly could this mean? Is it merely rhetoric, where one would not insist too much

on the literal meaning? Or does it express a reality as great as the words?

3) The third enigma does not strike the attention like the first two, but once discovered, it is even more mystifying than the others. "The virtues of consummation are the virtues of Jesus and Mary." We expect to find there something truly sublime: the first group of virtues by themselves have made great saints; the second are proposed only to the predestined; but these last are the very virtues of Christ. Father Chaminade does not name them here, and if we had only this text, our imagination would wear itself out trying to reconstruct such sublime ideals. Very naturally, we would search among the highest supernatural virtues and the most intimate mystical union with God. And other appreciations of these virtues of consummation that we find would also impel us to search even higher. For the very name of "consummation" Father Chaminade seems to have inspired himself by an exhortation of St. Bernard: "You have vowed not only *all* sanctity, but the *perfection* of all sanctity, and its highest *consummation*." (S.F. II, 463a) The Founder saw in them "the consummation of the mystical life, or the life of the risen Christ, to which we must aspire" (S.F. II, 464a). And in the same letter which serves as text for this conference, he takes pains to forewarn his readers: "May the grandeur of these perspectives not astonish you; they are those of God" himself. His disciples echo these sublime appreciations: "There is nothing more heroic" said one of them, "nor more sublime, and it is the summit of perfection. How have I dared to explain to you what I do not understand myself, that of which I have barely the first notions?" (S.F., II, 465).

What are, then, these incomprehensibly sublime virtues? Here is the third enigma: they are humility, modesty, abnegation, renouncement of the world. Nothing more, and I assure you that the first time I saw them enumerated, I was really deceived. In effect, if one wished to judge a priori (to give a prior judgment), these four virtues of humility, modesty, self-abnegation, and renouncement of the world, seem to have the character of a beginning of spiritual life, rather than its consummation; above all of a consummation so sublime, that it truly merited the estimation that we saw it given by Father Chaminade and his disciples. How explain this contradiction?

There are also other difficulties, but the above suffice to show that there is much spadework to be done before we can say that we understand exactly what is meant by this system of spiritual life which we call the three kinds of virtues. Because it is really a system; a system, I believe, which is marvelously conceived, and which we should make relive if we wish to see the SM live up to the fullness of its grand mission.

We do not have time to trace even a broad outline of this system in this brief conference, but I propose to suggest a solution for each of the enigmas with which we have been amusing ourselves. In these three little explanations we can give an account, I believe, of the astonishing riches which await us here and elsewhere in the work of Father Chaminade if we take pains to avoid looking around us passively like the aforementioned tourists in their museum, but seek unceasingly the profound

why of all we have received from our Venerated Founder. There has been already so much work accomplished along this line since the time of B. P. Simler, that we may be led to believe that there is nothing left to do, but everything seems to indicate that the task of the future is just as large, to say the least, as that of the past.

Before giving solutions to our enigmas, we must remove two evidently erroneous concepts. The first is the belief that Father Chaminade only sought in this system of virtues a practical, simple method to train his novices. This thesis cannot be upheld, and it would be easy to cite conclusive texts about this point. The three types of virtues pertain to our entire life, and not only to the years of formation.

The second error would be the belief that our historical perception of these virtues is definitive. Actually, the documents that we have seem to indicate clearly that the theory was in process of evolution in the mind of Father Chaminade. This point is easy to prove, and it is important for one who would wish to analyze the system to its very essence, because we do not know if Father Chaminade attained the term of this evolution. There may still be developments to make in the very elaboration of the theory.

Now, let us return to our three enigmas. First, if the work “of preparation was sufficient by itself to make great saints elsewhere,” why does it not suffice likewise in the Institute? To answer this question, it is necessary to establish the exact end of the work in question.

The SM is the incarnation, so to say, of an ideal—the most faithful imitation of Jesus Christ Son of God, become son of Mary for the salvation of men. In becoming members of this Society we consecrate ourselves totally to this ideal. In our entire life, there is not a single power of body or soul that should escape this total consecration. That is asking very much, and in wanting such a totality (of consecration), the Founder was obliged to supply us with powerful means. He found them.

In the vows of religion, and you know what force he wished to give these vows, he found the fundamental means. But the vows (as such), excepting Chastity—concern, above all, our exterior acts. If there were only that (think of the strict obligation of the vow of obedience—how rarely the vow is invoked), how many actions of our life would escape our consecration. So he added the insistence of the *Spirit of the Vows*, and behold the means of gathering together under our consecration even these acts (especially the interior ones) that ordinarily do not fall under matter of the vows.

But there are still many actions—by far the majority in an ordinary life—which are not fully voluntary and thus escape almost entirely even this much more extensive consecration of the “spirit of the vows.” Now, the *virtues of preparation* are precisely the way that Father Chaminade chose to consecrate even these ordinarily non-

voluntary, and therefore non-consecrable, acts. It is simply a question of making them voluntary: Thus silence of the words is defined: "To speak only when one wills to," and therefore the consecration becomes a possible thing: "to will it only when it is necessary." The necessity, evidently, is when our ideal demands it.

So this ideal—objectively so universal—is assured from thenceforth of a universality almost so absolute in our interior as in our exterior. For the first time it even becomes *possible* to consecrate ourselves *totally*, as Father Chaminade desired it, to this ideal "so great, so magnificent, so universal." The realization of this ideal has not yet begun, properly speaking, yet right at the beginning we are, so to say, at the summit; we are in proportion of working at it as we should. There is the proper meaning of the virtues of preparation "in the Institute." "Elsewhere," for example, among the desert Fathers, this work of domination over one's faculties, of self-mastery, truly made great saints, but in the Institute this is only a preparation—a preparation for the imitation of Jesus Christ become son of Mary for the salvation of men.

Let us attack the second of our enigmas: the virtues of purification are proposed only to *the predestined*. I shall proceed a bit faster here because it is easy to supply the details, once the solution is suggested. Even after we have acquired the virtues of preparation—that is, a real and totally effective consecration to our ideal—certain things in our corrupt natures can betray us even to the point of becoming unfaithful. The virtues of purification put us in condition to uproot these causes of our faults. What are these causes? They are within us and are these: hesitations, our inclination to evil, our weakness. One does not have to be very conversant with ascetical literature to be astonished that the four traditional causes are here reduced to three. The ordinary enumeration is: malice, ignorance, concupiscence, weakness. One can easily recognize the last three in the system of Father Chaminade, but where is the first—malice? The explanation is very simple: the virtues of purification are proposed to *the predestined*, that is, to those who have no malice, properly speaking, because their will is totally consecrated to the ideal of which we have already spoken.

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And now, to the last of our problems: How is it that such prosaic virtues, if you will pardon the expression, as humility, modesty, abnegation of self, and renouncement of the world, are found exalted to such a point that they become "not only all sanctity, but the perfection of all sanctity and its highest consummation"? It is really too bad that we do not have time to examine this problem in its essence, because it is perhaps the best example that one can find of that which I like to call the inevitability of all that is found in the *Spirit of Our Foundation*. If one proposes almost any isolated element of this spirit, he runs almost infallibly into difficulties. I call to mind as an example the difficulties that we ran into in a certain pedagogical conference concerning a real mission of converting and saving the world. You objected that that is precisely the mission of the entire Church, and how could it be the mission of a "little Society" which has only "feeble services" to offer to God, and

to the Church? And furthermore, if the powerful Church Universal had not succeeded in 20 centuries in converting the world, it was unlikely that the SM would succeed. What new means, in sum, did it bring to the Apostolate to justify such a presumption?

There were other objections, but these two suffice as examples: when one proposes an isolated element—and a mission to “save the world” is very precisely an element—of the *Spirit of Our Foundation*, one brings to life apparently insurmountable difficulties. But once one sees this element in the ensemble, the very difficulties show themselves as marks of power and efficacy. At this time after long studies, I say openly, and with the conviction that I can demonstrate it, that the writings of Father Chaminade and the organization of the Society contain a force completely new in the Christian Apostolate, and form a system that completely justifies—as far as our reason can take into account the interplay of forces—his pretension of “converting the world.” If that is true, and I repeat that I believe I can demonstrate it—it follows that this pretension, not long ago so foolish and naïve, has become precisely the expression of all that there is strong and powerful in our mission.

But if we accept, then, that one can speak without raving of a mission of converting the world, to bring about the salvation of mankind, the first objection still remains untouched: how to reconcile such a mission with that of the Church?

You remember, perhaps, that on the occasion of this objection, I said that no possibility of “competition” could exist between the Church and the SM, because the two were in two completely different orders, that the Church was an institution and the SM was only an ideal.

That certainly did not clarify the question very much at the time, but now that we are speaking of the Virtues of Consummation, perhaps the ground is better prepared. Let us look once again at these Virtues of Consummation. In effect, what exactly do they consummate? It is precisely the annihilation in us of all that there is of ourselves, leaving there to exist only what is of God, that is, our “Gift from God,” our Marianist ideal: “the most faithful . . .”

Humility, the first and the most fundamental of these virtues, removes from us all consideration of ourselves as the end of our existence and activities; modesty removes from our influence on people all that is properly ours; that is, our deficiencies and inordinations; abnegation removes all personal interest in our relations with the world; and lastly renouncement of the world takes from us all consideration of this last (the world) as end of our activity or of our aspirations.

And *there* you have a real consummation. Turn as you will, you will not find anywhere the least possibility of letting any self-seeking whatsoever enter, if you remain faithful to these virtues. But it is not there—on this negative note—that the sublime grandeur of these virtues lies, and which justifies the praises, seemingly so

extravagant, of our Founder.

Their true grandeur is found in their presence in the Institute—in the role they are called to play there; and mark well, this role is precisely to render possible a mission of “saving the world.” In a certain sense it is the very mission itself. The objection that was made of competition with the Church was only the most evident of an almost infinite series of similar objections. What good work would escape “competition” with a society which would make pretense to convert the entire world? Every existing good work would thus become an objection to such a pretension, and the sum of these objections would be truly insurmountable.

But no! This objection can be sustained only if the pretension is considered separately. All the heartrending and bitter rivalries, all the “competition” between the good works which propose to themselves the advancement of the reign of Christ come from only one source—self-seeking in the work of God. Only the interests run afoul of each other, never the ideals.

Recall now that former “explanation” which explained nothing: that one could not even imagine the SM in “competition” with the Church—let us add now with any good work whatsoever—*because it was only an ideal*. Now we can easily see the explanation which escaped us before. It is the presence in the Institute of the Virtues of Consummation, because they literally leave nothing to subsist (in the whole organization and all of its members) except the ideal. The Society becomes literally the concrete expression of this ideal, nothing else, nothing more. Let one imagine now, if he can, circumstances where this “competition” with the Church could arise as was feared not long ago, in a “mission of saving the world.” There is only one circumstance of this order: It is the infidelity to the very spirit of the Institute, as it manifests itself in the Virtues of Consummation.

Before concluding this conference, let us admire once more the “inevitability” of the elements of our Foundation. At first sight the universal mission of the Society did not seem to have any relation whatsoever with the “virtues of consummation.” They are apparently two absolutely disparate elements. But the very objections which the universal mission give rise, to make us see finally that the virtues of consummation are the only way of pretending to it without raving. Yes, it is the only way, and, most amazingly, *it is there*—provided explicitly by the Founder, at the same time that he gave the mission!

Similar discoveries are really daily experiences for anyone who works to penetrate the profound reasons behind all the “characteristics” of the works of Father Chaminade. Everything falls into a pattern inexorably with a logic that is frightening! Let us return a moment to our letter with its three enigmas, the last of which we still have to resolve. How reconcile the sublime appreciations of the “Virtues of Consummation” with the plebian virtues finally proposed to us when the pretentious appellation is removed? But you can give the answer yourselves. Being the interior

realization of the grand and universal ideal that Father Chaminade left us, these virtues have an absolute right to all the appreciations one can give to the ideal itself. And these appreciations, if they are correct, will be truly sublime.

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This conference is based on a quotation from Chaminade's letter of January 10, 1822, to the novices of the Daughters of Mary in Agen.

See *Letters of Father Chaminade*, no. 186a; (French) vol. 1, p. 316; (English) vol. 1, part 2, p. 371.

See also *Marian Writings of Father Chaminade*, vol. 2, no. 225, (French) p. 87, (English) p. 87.

Joseph Schellhorn, SM. *Catéchisme de la vie intérieure, à l'usage des novices et des religieux de la société de Marie*. (Gembloux: Belgium, 1920).

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North American Center for Marianist Studies (NACMS)
4435 East Patterson Road
Dayton, Ohio 45430-1083
937/ 429-2521