

Father Chaminade's Son, Justin

by Joseph Stefanelli, SM

[*Editor's note:* The following material was developed as a presentation for a local Marianist World Day of Prayer celebration. It was delivered on October 14, 2012, in Cupertino, California.]

Today we unite ourselves in prayer with our whole Marianist Family around the world—religious and lay, women and men, young and old, single and married. We are a reflection of the Bordeaux Sodality such as it was in Chaminade's time—an image, but enlarged. When I was asked to share some thoughts on the Marianist tradition of prayer, I knew there was nothing new or exciting that I could present on that subject. So, instead of a discourse on the nature or practice of prayer, I decided to share with you some snapshots of Marianist persons of prayer, as the camera today might zoom into a crowd to pick out one or two individuals. All the people in our Marianist crowd are people of prayer, including the “holy Marianists who have preceded us,” as we say every Thursday morning. But some were more so, were recognized as such by their comrades, were, perhaps, the material out of which God fashions saints. Most were just “ordinary people,” not great preachers or writers or teachers or anything else considered “great,” except by God who sees into hearts and minds.

Father Chaminade was the spiritual director of many such ordinary saints, beginning with his work at Mussidan and later in Bordeaux. Father Jean Baptiste Lalanne, SM, tells us that the Founder spent hours in the confessional and in his office providing spiritual guidance. Many of his numerous business letters have incidental bits of spiritual advice. But there were many other letters explicitly of spiritual direction. How many? We have no way of knowing. What we do know are the ones we have among the more than 1,500 letters preserved in our archives. Some of the persons he directed are well-known to most of us, beginning with his letters to Mlle Marie Thérèse de Lamourous from exile in Spain; to Father Leo Meyer, SM, the founder of the American Province and Chaminade's loyal disciple to the end.

Among many others we might mention Brother Claude Mouchet, infirmarian at Saint Remy. We have fifteen of Chaminade's letters to him, covering the five years from 1836 to 1840. They are intertwined with advice, especially for his life of prayer. This brother, in fact, had the gift of the habitual presence of the Lord and a kind of “continual mental prayer.” The Founder encouraged him gently, assuring him that it was “Jesus who prays in you.”

Unfortunately, some of the collateral damage associated with the merger of the American provinces was the removal of the Marianist library, which used to be housed with the Pacific Province Archives here in Cupertino. It was moved with the archives, and it is now in Dayton. That means that our resources available here are quite limited. But I believe they are enough to enable us to make a fairly clear sketch of one of the brothers who had Chaminade as spiritual director.

This is a sketch, then, of Chaminade's son. Oh, yes, Chaminade had a son. That is not the "best kept secret" of our Marianist tradition because the fact was known from the very beginnings of the Society of Mary. But it certainly is one of the least known facts of that tradition. No, this was not a son in the tabloid headline style, the result of what some politely term "a sexual indiscretion." But he was, nonetheless, really Chaminade's son. His name is Justin Dumontet. Perhaps you have never noted his name before, but you have heard it from the necrology every year. The editors of the French letters of Father Chaminade say that he was "one of the most interesting figures of the Society of Mary of his time." Justin was born in Bordeaux in 1812 and died there on December 15, 1903, at the age of 91. But the road from Bordeaux to Bordeaux took him across much of southern and central France. Perhaps this year, when we get to December in the reading of the necrology, you might recognize his name.

I should mention, in passing, that Father Joseph Simler, SM, points him out as having left quite copious manuscript notes on events about which he had heard from Chaminade, dating to the years before the Revolution, or which he had witnessed himself in the years after the Revolution.

Justin's grandfather, on his mother's side, was an Italian. He resided in Bordeaux after the Revolution and was a professor of the Italian language at the lyceum of that city. He was converted by Chaminade in 1801, shortly after the Founder's return from exile in Spain. By 1823, the grandfather, as well as Justin's father, had died—or, at least, had disappeared from Bordeaux. It was in that year that Justin's mother also died, and Justin becomes an orphan. He is barely 10 years old. He is then legally adopted by Chaminade. It was probably not a full legal adoption in our sense, with rights to name and inheritance, but rather a "guardianship," or a foster parentage, to safeguard the minor. Chaminade habitually called every religious "my son" or "my daughter," but it is clear from his actions that, when using that term toward Justin, there is a deeper relationship connoted.

The young boy makes his First Communion in the Madeleine and is admitted to Saint Laurent as a postulant. Later, he would love to recall how Chaminade, putting his arms around him, would repeat, "My child, be faithful!" Six years later, in 1829, Justin professes his first vows at the age of 17. He remains at Saint Laurent, where Chaminade is also residing. The following year the revolution of 1830 forces Chaminade to go into domestic exile at Agen. Justin remains at Saint Laurent for another year; then he is called to Agen. Chaminade is living with the brothers of the primary school community, and Justin joins him there. Both at Saint Laurent and at Agen, Justin acts as a personal servant to the Founder. He himself will later testify:

I have had the happiness of being responsible for his personal service for almost a year while he was living at the novitiate of Saint Laurent, and I was a fortunate witness of his pious practices. Before I helped him into bed, I was able to take care of a cauterized wound on his arm. I prepared his bed and received his fatherly "goodnight." ... At Agen, for two years, I again had the happiness of serving him. ... It was there that I realized that he took the discipline, for the drapes of his cubical were stained with blood at the height of his shoulders, and his undershirts bore signs of congealed blood at the shoulders. I pointed this out to the Daughters of Mary when I would take his linens to them to have them laundered.

Two years before the Founder returns to Bordeaux, he assigns Justin to our school at Villeneuve-sur-Lot. Justin is there when Chaminade writes the first letter we have to him. It is dated March 4, 1834, and is posted from Agen. It can certainly be presumed that Chaminade had all along been his spiritual guide, from his First Communion through his postulancy and novitiate at Saint Laurent to his profession of vows and first years in community in Bordeaux and at Agen. In both places the two would have had frequent personal contacts. But now they are physically separated and have to resort to short letters to one another.

It is unfortunate that we do not have here in Cupertino the *Répertoire*, which Brother Ambrogio Albano, SM, published some years ago, of Chaminade's passive correspondence. In it Albano provides the name of the writer, the dates of the letters, the point of origin and of reception, and a short summary of the contents. It would be interesting to see Justin's letters to the Founder, especially because Chaminade's letters are often in response to ones received from his young son.

Justin is now 21 years old, legally no longer a minor. This first letter is a short one, but very forceful:

Have a little more courage and faithfulness; you are moving along the right path. That path seems a narrow one, as indeed it is; but it is the one which leads to eternal life. O my son! have you ever reflected on these words of the Gospel: It is the narrow way that leads to eternal life! So, do not think any longer as a little child does, do not any longer behave as one. After all, my son, your age is no longer that of a child.

The next letter is only three months later, June 10, 1834. Justin is still at Villeneuve-sur-Lot and Chaminade is still at Agen. They are not very far distant from one another in miles, but in those days miles on foot were very long ones. The Garonne River, as you know, is the major river of southwestern France. It begins in the Pyrenees to the southeast and flows northwest until it reaches Bordeaux and eventually the Atlantic. The Lot River meets the Garonne about 20 kilometers downstream from Agen where Chaminade is, and Villeneuve is some 30 kilometers up the Lot River—so, the two are about 50 kilometers distant from one another, about 30 miles.

It is clear that this letter is Chaminade's response to one received from Justin. He writes:

I am pleased to learn, my dear son, that during the month of March you asked for the spirit of prayer. We shall never do anything in the order of salvation without the spirit of prayer, but with it we can succeed in everything. However, my dear son, you must not content yourself with asking for it—rather, be strict with yourself on the subject of prayer. If you are really faithful in praying with faith and humility, the temptations against chastity will weaken little by little, and, besides, you will grow even stronger by resisting them.

I shall give you another secret that is almost infallible, especially if joined to the first. It is that of never seeking to do your own will in anything. If you try to put this into practice, you will not be long in realizing the good effects. On this subject, I have seen, as it were, miracles accomplished by this practice and, for that, only a little courage is

needed. Whatever desires you might have, my dear son, remember that the cowardly will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The next letter is of March 18, 1837, three years later. We may certainly presume that there were others in between, but not conserved for our archives. Chaminade has returned to Bordeaux for the death of Mlle de Lamourous in 1836, and Justin is now at Moissac on the Garonne, some thirty kilometers upstream from Agen. It seems that matters in the community there are not at their best, for Chaminade writes:

Do all that depends upon you so that peace and union may always be preserved among you in the community. Whatever pains we have to experience, we can easily put up with, provided that all the brothers take part in preserving fraternal union.

Apparently Justin also has written that he fears his daily Communion is running the risk of becoming routine or too habitual if not guided by faith. Chaminade agrees:

You are right, my dear son, in thinking that faith and faith alone is able to prevent your Communions from being made from custom and habit. Faith will make you look upon each Communion as a very special favor. Having but little time to prepare yourself as you might desire, you will join to the ordinary preparation the practice of making of all possible actions during the day a sort of preparation or thanksgiving. Faith will make the thought of Holy Communion predominant in you.

In January of 1838, Justin is still at Moissac and is still beset by temptations that he finds very bothersome. Chaminade writes from Bordeaux.

The combat you sustain will always become easier in proportion as you gain new victories, if you always know how to make use of the arm of faith. With the timely use of this weapon, we can always triumph over all the invisible enemies of our salvation.

Unfortunately for us, this is the last letter we have from Chaminade to his son. Sometime after this, Justin moves to Clairac on the Lot River, some kilometers downstream from Villeneuve. He is director of the community now and head of the primary school there. He will subsequently be named director of four other houses, at Réalmont, Chalabre, Servian, and Gensac. The names of these various towns where he was stationed mean little to us, of course. But for Justin, they are different mini-worlds where he lives and works for most of his long life. He finds himself in many different societies, different environments, different groups of pupils, parents, friends, different surroundings in which to live and love and grow in his educative and administrative functions, but especially in his spiritual life—different places where he learns how to find God and to deepen his love for the Mother of Jesus, a variety of different opportunities to grow in age and grace and wisdom and to become more like his Lord.

It is during this time that the Society is living through the anguish of Chaminade's final years. We might wonder a myriad of questions. How is Justin fairing? What is he thinking of it all? Whom can he believe? Does he have outspoken opinions on the matter? Or, does he observe a rigid silence? Perhaps the answers can be found in the archives in Rome.

What we do know is, after his stint as director and teacher in those five different towns, Justin retires from the classroom. He becomes sacristan in Paris and then in Bordeaux. His final years are spent at the Marianist school in Caudéran.

We can say that, from the time he had been a child, Justin was formed to a life of prayer and of virtue by the Founder. His fellow brothers and the parents of his pupils found him a living saint. Wherever he lived and worked he was a model of edification. A brother who knew him well said of him: “It may certainly be said that his whole life was a sequence of acts of zeal inspired by the glory of God and the salvation of others. No one could leave his presence without having heard some fervent words of encouragement and hope on our Lord or on the Most Blessed Virgin.”

At a period in history when frequent Communion was rare, even among religious, Justin was faithful to daily Communion. When he was sacristan, he was remarkable for his respect and piety in taking care of the altar, and he had a special gift for preparing young children for First Communion. When he was at the Madeleine, he devoted himself with great zeal to the work with the chimney sweeps.

This is the end of our sketch. We have followed the path Justin took under Chaminade’s caring guidance and can see that it led to its ultimate goal: a life lived in God, with God, and for God. But also a humble life, without ostentation, almost unknown outside his narrow field of life, a life well lived and well worth living.

It would be interesting to visit the archives in Rome, not only to peruse the passive correspondence already referred to, but also to search through the personal files of Justin Dumontet and of the brothers who lived with him and worked with him over those many years ... to search through the community files, the minutes of community meetings, the reports to the General Administration, and the evaluations of Justin by his peers and by his superiors.

To a great extent, he is still mostly unknown but, I would say, worthy of being better known. Perhaps someone will someday visit the archives and Chaminade’s son will emerge as a glittering light among those holy Marianists who have preceded us.

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Addendum to “Father Chaminade’s Son, Justin”

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You might be interested in these two additions to the conference I gave on “Father Chaminade’s Son, Justin.”

1) Dumontet was among the last survivors who had known Chaminade and who were interviewed by Father Charles Klobb during the first five years of the 1900s. Klobb, as Simler’s secretary, was gathering information for Simler’s biography of the Founder. Dumontet shared a great amount of information on the Founder’s early years, before and immediately after the French Revolution. (Dumontet died in 1903; Simler in 1905; Klobb in 1906.)

2) During the debates on the animadversions on the Constitutions, the Holy See appointed Cardinal Mathieu of Besançon as Apostolic Visitor of the Society. He had known Chaminade personally and was happy to help restore his name. The Cardinal was over 70 years old; he shared the life of the community, asking neither special meals nor special accommodations. He interviewed 718 religious in person, and received 42 letters from America and Austria before presiding over the General Chapter of 1868, Nov. 16-19. Among the communications from the religious to the Cardinal is the following from Justin Dumontet:

September 19, 1868

Bishop:

One sign of the divine protection of the little Society of Mary founded by Father Chaminade is the favor granted it by our beloved Pontiff Pius IX in naming Your Eminence Apostolic Visitor.

Blessed be the Lord for this grace, and may the hearts of the Brothers of Mary always keep its precious memory! How our hope has been renewed after these troublesome days on reading the lines Your Eminence has deigned to send us on February 27! You tell us that it was the love of the Most Holy Virgin, whose sons we are, and the veneration of the memory of our Founder, Reverend Father Chaminade, which have led you to accept the mission of Apostolic Visitor to the Society of Mary. What thanks we owe you, bishop, for this great act of generosity of a Prince of the Church for the poor Brothers of Mary.

What draws our hearts even closer to Your Eminence is that you wish to associate with us and join your own thanks to ours for Father Chaminade, and thus pay the father through the children what Your Eminence feels he owes to the one whose kindness you are happy to recall.

After such encouraging words our hearts are filled with confidence, and we come to you as to a good father. We had a great need for this because what has been happening for some years has anguished many hearts, separating brothers and closing hearts to confidence in authority.

How different the early times of our Society from what we see now! How much all of this grieves those who saw how the spirit of charity and filial confidence animated the first members of the Society! For this reason we bless Divine Providence which has deigned to send us Your Eminence to reanimate this primitive spirit and reestablish the bases of the Society of Mary scattered by the multiplication of its works that cannot progress simultaneously together without being damaged or even destroyed.

The brother who has taken the liberty to express his thoughts has been in the Society of Mary since 1823. Received very young into its bosom, I grew up in Bordeaux under the eyes of Father Chaminade who was a good father to me. He gave me my First Communion, protected my youth, and admitted me to perpetual profession in 1836 at the age of 24.

In the great uneasiness that there is now in the Society since it deviated from the purpose the Founder had, there is now added another worrisome and deplorable thing, that is, the lack of confidence in the immediate successor of Father Chaminade.

All that has happened since 1845 at the time of regrettable events in the Society, and above all at the end of the life of our respected Father Chaminade, is far from contributing to winning hearts to his immediate successor. Father Caillet was not a staff of support in the old age of our respected father, a venerable old man and confessor who was exiled for the faith. Yet, he had so much right to the attentions that sons should give to the white hairs of an old father! Yes, our Good Father Founder had to drink the chalice of bitterness that his own sons gave him in his last days. Our older religious who were witnesses to the conduct shown to this good old man have recognized that all of the problems that have arisen for our Society in these recent times are a punishment from God and a lesson for the Society of Mary. We have no bad will toward those who were the instruments of God's trials which came to this saintly old man, but one cannot help but deplore the fact that the heart of our venerable Founder was saddened. Father Chaminade was our father. We all loved him, and to cause him the least pain was to hurt his sons. Father Caillet did not understand this delicacy of conduct toward the good old man. This is what has alienated the hearts of all of the older religious of the Society. One cannot but have a wounded heart when recalling what our Good Father Chaminade had to suffer.

Pardon, bishop, that I have allowed myself to speak this way. I had to open my heart to a Good Father, and that is what you are now for our dear Society who has not had one since the death of the one to whom we owe our vocation to religious life. I have great confidence in Your Eminence who has become our father out of the merciful goodness of God and as a great favor of Mary who wants to continue giving her attention to the work of our Father Founder. Ask our

Holy Father the pope to bless the activity we have undertaken in France for the education of its children.¹

¹ Eduardo Benlloch, SM, *Origins of the Marianist Family: Notes on Marianist History* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2010), pp. 338-40.