

Father William Ferree, SM: A Sketch of His Life and Contributions to Catholic Social Thought

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Introduction

Father William Ferree, SM, spent his entire life uncovering the invisible connections between ideas and synthesizing these ideas into a larger vision. More than a few people who knew him describe him as a genius and a man of great faith. Over the course of his life, Father Ferree carried with him a deep love and admiration for Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, the nineteenth-century French priest who collaborated with Venerables Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon and Marie Thérèse de Lamourous to found the Marianist Family, which is comprised of the Society of Mary (Marianist Brothers and Priests), the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (Marianist Sisters), and the Marianist laity. Ferree's entire life was driven by the desire to understand the full breadth and depth of Chaminade's vision and how that vision continues to be relevant to our modern social, political, and faith lives. In addition to his interest in Father Chaminade, Father Ferree also was passionate about social change and social justice. He is well known for his scholarly contributions to Catholic Social Thought, for he was among the first academics to write at length about social justice and Church teaching. However, many may not realize that his interest in social and political justice came directly from Ferree's engagement with Father Chaminade's ideas about transforming social institutions. Before exploring Ferree's fascination with Chaminade and his social justice scholarship, this brief biography will first explore how Ferree came to meet the Marianists and begin his vocation with them.

Ferree's Early Life

William Ferree was born on November 15, 1905, in Dayton, Ohio, to Claude and Emma Ferree. His father was a carpenter by trade, and his mother was a homemaker. Ferree, along with his parents, his two sisters, Leonora and Grace, and his younger brother John, lived in a small house on Sperling Avenue on the far east side of Dayton.¹ His family attended Holy Family Church, which was founded in 1905 to serve the growing English-speaking population of East Dayton.² He attended Holy Family parochial school, where he was taught by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.³ An interesting historical detail about Ferree is that, at the age of 7, he would have witnessed the Great Flood of Dayton. This flood decimated large portions of Dayton's urban core in March of 1913, causing the deaths of 360 people.⁴ Although the neighborhood in which Ferree lived was spared the worst of the flood's wrath, there is no question that the flood had a great impact on everyone in the Dayton area, even those who escaped its worst effects. There is no evidence that Ferree ever wrote about his experience of the Great Flood; however, it is worth speculating whether this tragedy gave Ferree his first lesson in the importance of individuals working for the common good, as he surely would have witnessed his neighbors rescuing people from the rising waters, as well as communal efforts to rebuild the devastated city.

¹ "Personnel File of Father William Ferree," (San Antonio: National Archives of the Society of Mary United States Province).

² Augustus Waldo Drury, *History of the City of Dayton and Montgomery County, Ohio*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1909), 364.

³ "Personnel File of Father William Ferree," San Antonio Archives.

⁴ "The Great Flood of 1913," *Miami Conservancy District*, Accessed May 5, 2017, MiamiConservancy.org/about/1913.asp.

After attending Holy Family School, Ferree attended the University of Dayton High School, where most of his teachers were Marianist brothers.⁵ His high school years were likely his first introduction to Father Chaminade and the Marianist charism. Ferree usually was ranked first in his class, and he received straight As throughout his high school career.⁶ He graduated from UD High School in 1924, at which point he entered the Society of Mary. After completing the required year of novitiate, he professed temporary vows as a Marianist brother on August 15, 1925, at the age of 19.⁷

Marianist Life and Early Synthesis of Father Chaminade

At this point in time, Marianist brothers with temporary vows would usually spend the next two years preparing to be teachers by studying education at the University of Dayton. These brothers—who were called scholastics—lived together in a building on the property of Mount St. John, located on the eastern edge of the city of Dayton. Although most brothers spent two years studying as scholastics, which in those days was sufficient for a teaching career, Ferree was a scholastic for four years. In those four years, he received two degrees from the University of Dayton: a bachelor of science in education and a bachelor of arts in philosophy.⁸ Such a long scholasticate was unusual for that time period, which suggests that his Marianist superiors already were well aware of Ferree's exceptional intellectual gifts and thus were willing to let him pursue two degrees.

⁵ "History of Chaminade-Julienne Catholic High School," *Chaminade Julienne Catholic High School*, Accessed May 5, 2017, Cjeagles.org/about-cj/history-chaminade-julienne-catholic-high-school. In the early 20th century, the University of Dayton (which, before 1920, was named St. Mary's Institute) featured a preparatory high school for boys. In 1927, the high school separated from the university and moved to the corner of Franklin and Ludlow in downtown Dayton, at which point it became known as Chaminade High School (today Chaminade-Julienne).

⁶ "Personnel File of Father William Ferree," San Antonio Archives.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Ferree professed perpetual vows in August of 1930 at the age of 24. Three days after his profession, he was sent to Iowa as part of the first Marianist community at Trinity College in Sioux City.⁹ Ferree taught classical languages and English at Trinity for three years. During his summer vacations from teaching, Ferree spent time at Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. taking graduate courses in English and Philosophy.¹⁰ His graduate studies were put on hold, however, when in 1933, Ferree was sent to Europe to begin studying for the priesthood. Ferree was 28 years old.¹¹ In the first half of the twentieth century, all Marianist brothers studying for priesthood went to seminary at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, where they lived together in a Marianist community located near the university. The seminary community was unique for its international character—Ferree would have lived with Marianist brothers from France, Spain, Italy, and Austria, and perhaps a couple from Japan as well, which was a newer mission of the Society.

Although Ferree began studying the writings of Father Chaminade as a scholastic, it was in the seminary that Ferree developed a great passion for studying the life and writings of the Founder. Ferree began to believe such a study was vital for the work of the Society of Mary.¹² While in seminary, he spent most of his leisure time studying “the documents,” as people called them, which were not only all that Chaminade had written, but also writings from other brothers who wrote about Chaminade over the years.¹³

⁹ “Trinity College,” *Apostle of Mary Magazine*, February, 1930. Trinity was a small diocesan college that the Society of Mary’s Cincinnati Province began administrating in 1930 at request of the local bishop.

¹⁰ *Ferree Resource Collection*, Comp. by Benjamin Doherty, (Dayton, OH: North American Center for Marianist Studies, 2008), 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² It is important to note that at this point in Ferree’s life, his writings mostly reflect an interest with the Society of Mary in particular, instead of the Marianist Family as a whole. His later writings reflect more of an interest with the entire Family of Mary, but I use the Society of Mary exclusively in these paragraphs because that was where his main interest was at this time.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

Interestingly, his passion for Marianist studies was not always supported by his superiors. On one occasion, Ferree sent a letter from Switzerland to the Provincial of the Cincinnati Province, and in this letter, Ferree expressed his idea that the brothers should establish several centers of Marianist studies around the world, one of which would be in the Cincinnati Province. The Provincial's response was lukewarm, saying in essence that Ferree should spend more time on his seminary studies and less time on unimportant extracurricular activities, including daydreaming about such strange ideas.¹⁴ Even Father Emile Neubert, the famous Mariologist who was Ferree's seminary director, responded to Ferree's idea of creating a bibliography of Marianist writings by saying that although he did not mind if Ferree worked on it in his free time, he did not see how it would be helpful or useful.¹⁵ Undeterred, Ferree continued his studies of Chaminade's writings, for he saw it as vital to the life and work of the Society of Mary. As he says in a personal notebook, "[no] other means on earth could be more powerful in 'increasing the religious spirit' of the Society [of Mary] than the sublime conception of the Founder!"¹⁶

As Ferree studied Chaminade's writings, he also developed a desire to synthesize and systematize the various themes that appeared throughout the Founder's life. He believed that such a synthesis would help piece together the entire vision of Chaminade's grand and ambitious plan for the Family of Mary. This "synthesis," as Ferree called it, also would be a guide for others studying Chaminade's thought. Ferree would spend much of the next several decades refining this synthesis, which he would

¹⁴ "Letter from Fr. Joseph Tetzlaff to William Ferree, 1934," (San Antonio: National Archives of the Society of Mary United States Province).

¹⁵ "Ferree Personal Notebook, 1934-1937," (San Antonio: National Archives of the Society of Mary United States Province).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

eventually publish and refine in the 1940s and '50s. And, as Ferree did his work on this synthesis and shared it with his brothers, he also inspired an entire generation of young brothers to become Marianist scholars.

Ferree's early attempts at writing this synthesis did not always come easily. Soon after he began piecing together the varying themes of Chaminade's thought, Ferree became frustrated by his inability to organize Chaminade's ideas in a coherent way. He had a breakthrough, though, when he met another seminarian, Angel Herrera, who inspired him to take a different approach. Herrera was not a Marianist but was a diocesan seminarian from Spain whose involvement with youth and Catholic Action reminded Ferree of Father Chaminade.^{17, 18} In 1954, nearly twenty years after beginning his seminary studies, Ferree wrote about Herrera's influence on the synthesis:

I learned something in these interviews [with Herrera], something that returned in different forms over and over again in the course of the discussions. It was that a man who wanted to undertake a really vast program, and was big enough to do it, would limit himself to very few ideas. In the same way, his work, once it was established, would be the incarnation, so to say, of those same ideas—few, exceedingly few, but profound and fruitful. This, in fact, constituted the specific difference between a truly great work that would succeed and endure, and a vast and ambitious one that would be fatally doomed to insignificance and extinction.¹⁹

After this providential meeting with Herrera, Ferree began to reorganize his synthesis of Father Chaminade's vision according to the idea that Chaminade, as a great man, must have had one great idea that was at the foundation of all his other ideas. To identify that one idea, Ferree consulted the writings of Father Simler, the fourth superior general of the Society of Mary. Simler insisted that the thrust of Chaminade's life and work was

¹⁷ Catholic Action was a movement strongly promoted by Pope Pius XI designed to motivate lay people to live their faith in society. Ferree was greatly involved in Catholic Action and saw it as being exactly what Chaminade envisioned for the involvement of laity in society. This paper will touch more on this later.

¹⁸ *Ferree Resource Collection*, 56. Herrera would later become Bishop and Cardinal of Malaga, Spain.

¹⁹ William Ferree, *A Program of Studies in Marianist Documents*, 2nd Printing, (Dayton: Marianist Publications, 1954), ix.

filial piety, an obscure phrase for the particular love that a person has for Mary that causes one to put oneself in the care of Mary, choosing the state of being a son or daughter of Mary, so that Mary forms one into Christ. When Ferree began studying Chaminade through the lens of filial piety, he finally had the piece of the puzzle that helped him understand all the themes of Father Chaminade's life work and, by extension, the important elements of Marianist life. Ferree's adoption of Herrera's theory of the "one great idea" would characterize much of Ferree's later writings on social justice, as well, for he would eventually articulate a theory of social justice that had one idea as its foundation—organizing for the common good.

The Connection Between Father Chaminade and Social Justice

Father Ferree's interest in social justice and social action flourished during his time in Fribourg as he became involved with *Pax Romana*. *Pax Romana* began in 1921 as an international movement of Catholic university students that was originally founded to defend the Church from a world perceived to be increasingly hostile to Catholicism. However, with the rise of nationalist and communist movements throughout Europe in the 1930s, the organization shifted away from exclusively defending the Church and toward focusing on promoting justice and the common good in society. In this time period, *Pax Romana* "placed a considerable amount of emphasis on the social responsibility of students and the laity as active agents."²⁰ This shift coincides with Ferree's early involvement with *Pax Romana* as a seminarian. With the permission of Father Neubert, Ferree spent his free time (when he was not studying Father

²⁰ Kevin Joachim Ahern, "Structures of Grace: Catholic Nongovernmental Organizations and the Mission of the Church," Doctoral dissertation, Boston College, 2013, 147.

Chaminade) helping the *Pax Romana* office in Fribourg by writing and translating their mailings and by contributing to their publications. His work for *Pax Romana* was deemed so essential, in fact, that the *Pax Romana* president wrote to the Cincinnati Provincial asking if Ferree could stay in Fribourg and work for the organization full time for several years.²¹ Nothing came of this request, for Ferree did not stay in Fribourg. He did, however, remain connected with *Pax Romana* for much of the rest of his life, later becoming its official chaplain and attending many of its international conferences.

Due to *Pax Romana*'s focus on the role of laity in promoting justice and Catholic presence in society, Ferree likely saw parallels between it and the apostolic vision of Father Chaminade that focused so much on the role of the laity in the life of the Church. In an early draft of Ferree's synthesis, which dates to 1937, sheds light on the connections Ferree began to make between social justice and Chaminade's apostolic vision, connections which he likely first began to see in his work with *Pax Romana*. A section of this draft exposes the particular challenges for the Church in the 1930s, a situation Ferree would have been acutely aware of as a seminarian in Europe.

Keeping in mind that Ferree's 1937 draft of the synthesis was written only 46 years after *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo IX's encyclical that addressed labor unions and the rights of laborers, and in the same decade as *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pius XI's encyclical that explicitly *names* social justice, Ferree knew that the body of Catholic Social Teaching was still unfolding and needed to be better understood. However, Ferree did not see this teaching being communicated because, as he says in this 1937 draft, the Church has not articulated to the majority of Catholics the fact that the Church

²¹ "Letter to Joseph Tetzlaff, 1937," (San Antonio: National Archives of the Society of Mary United States Province).

is pro-social justice and social reform, even though She rejects the Marxist philosophies of materialism and class conflict. This reality is due to the fact that “most Catholic leaders—[belong] almost exclusively, in sympathy, at least, to the Upper Classes.” Thus “the great difficulty of the Church in all countries including America in the face of Bolshevism is that the Communist leaders belong to the class they strive to influence, while the Catholic leaders do not.”²² For Ferree, this lack of articulation and action was of utmost importance, for if the working classes think their beloved Church does not care about their experience of social injustice, they may abandon their faith for the Marxists and Fascists who convince the masses that they *do* care about their injustice.

Ferree argues that these movements of Marxism and Fascism can be countered by a robust Marianist life and apostolate that involves people from all levels of society, from the poorest to the wealthiest, just as Chaminade’s early sodalities exemplified. Ferree believed a faithful living of Marianist life would build ties between social classes that would overcome the destructive forces of Fascism and Marxism, as he writes:

Modern society, from the individualism and selfishness of the last few centuries, has simply disintegrated, and all attempts to reconstruct it (outside of Christianity, of course) are made along lines of class, or nation, or race. This nationalism is rendered infinitely more harmful by the Marxist doctrine of class [warfare], which is the ascendant and cuts off all classes almost hermetically from any mutual influence on a grand scale except from that of violence...Father Chaminade’s conception of universality in Profession and Action²³ evidently cuts across these classes in the only way which can hope to be effective, by starting, sustaining, and directing simultaneous and parallel movements at every level of society, by fostering a union of cooperation and assistance between neighboring

²² William Ferree, *A Synthesis of the Characteristics of the Society of Mary (1936-1937 Study)*, Reprint, (California: Marianist Scholasticate, 1960), 39.6.

²³ As Ferree began to organize his synthesis, one of the main themes became how Chaminade applied the idea of “universality” in different areas. Two of those areas are Profession and Action; profession refers to social status or vocation (priest, teaching brother, working brother, sister, layperson who is a laborer or aristocrat, etc.) and action refers to the apostolate. Universality of both areas means that the Marianist project implies that *all* vocations, *all* classes, and any apostolate can be involved in carrying out Mary’s mission

levels, and by intimately uniting all levels...grouped together in the closest union on earth—that of total consecration to the same ideal.^{24,25}

Thus, Ferree believed that recreating the vision of the first Marianist sodalities, which would bring together Catholics of all races and classes into a common mission and community of authentic relationship, would offer an irresistible counter-witness to the problematic ideologies of Marxism and Fascism. Most importantly, what we see in these passages of Ferree's early synthesis is a clear articulation of a problem of the 1930s—social injustice and the dangerous elements of Marxism and Fascism—and a proposed solution using the vision of Father Chaminade's Family of Mary. In the decades following these seminary writings, Ferree's scholarship on social justice and social charity very seldom, if ever, make any reference to Father Chaminade or Marianist thought. However, we have in this document an obvious connection between Ferree's interest in social issues and his understanding of Chaminade's social and apostolic thought, as well as how living an authentic Marianist vocation contributes to a more just Church and society. It is in Fribourg that the seeds of his social justice scholarship lie.

Post-Seminary and Publication of the Synthesis

After four years of seminary studies in Fribourg, Ferree was ordained to the priesthood on March 13, 1937, at the age of 31.²⁶ Between 1937 and 1939, he taught philosophy to the scholastics at Mount St. John and to students at the University of Dayton. After these years of teaching, Ferree was sent to the Marianist House of Studies at the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. to finish the graduate work he started before seminary. His master's thesis, titled *Individual Responsibility in Social*

²⁴ That is, becoming a son or daughter of Mary, thereby becoming Christ in the world

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Personnel File of Father William Ferree," San Antonio Archives.

Reform eventually morphed into what became his PhD dissertation, called *The Act of Social Justice*. Both papers used the scholastic method to examine the idea of social justice, which was a relatively new phrase that had been used by Pius XI in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, published in 1931. In the 1940s, Catholic theology and philosophy still relied on scholasticism, which is the philosophical method of St. Thomas Aquinas. As a product of this method, Ferree aimed to uncover how this new idea of social justice fit into the philosophical theology of Aquinas. Ferree's goal, then, was to uncover both what social justice *is* and make the case for social justice's *consistency* with classical Christian, Thomistic ethics.

To accomplish this task, Ferree first looked to the cardinal virtues as explained by Aquinas: justice, temperance, prudence, and fortitude. He concluded that social justice must be the same as this cardinal virtue of justice except that, instead of being a virtue practiced by an individual, it is practiced by a group or society. This idea was reinforced by Ferree's uncovering of Aquinas' conception of legal justice, which is justice oriented toward the common good. Ferree concludes, then, that social justice is the same as legal justice; it's just a newer term. Once Ferree establishes that social justice *is* a virtue that corresponds to the Thomistic conception of legal justice, he begins to examine what the particular *act*, or action, toward which this virtue of social justice is oriented. This was an important task for legitimizing his theory; according to Thomistic philosophy, every virtue must have a corresponding action.

As Ferree examined social justice through the lens of Father Chaminade, who, again, proposed social solutions to problems within the Church, it became clear to him what the particular act of social justice is: organizing for the common good. He puts it clearly in his dissertation:

Besides this field of individual justice (where the individual as we have seen can be helpless in the face of an unjust system), there is another and higher field of social justice, where each one, no longer as an individual, but as an organizer, as a distinctly social being, is capable of modifying the very system itself by organized and institutional action...since the very essence of social justice is to demand from each individual all that is necessary for the common good, it demands this act of organization as a strict duty. Here certainly we have found exactly what we are looking for: an act which is social in its very essence; which in itself is not an act of prudence, or particular justice, or fortitude, or temperance; and which, therefore, if performed with the common good as direct object, will have to be a particular act of legal justice itself, according to St. Thomas' principle.²⁷

Ferree uses the example of a business owner to demonstrate what this organizing for the common good looks like, an example that comes directly from Pius XI. As Ferree (and Pius XI) says, free market competition may make individual employers unable to pay living wages to their employees because doing so would put them out of business. Paying employees more would raise prices of the goods being produced; competing employers do not also pay their employees more, then their prices will stay the same. As a result, people will buy the cheaper goods and the more “just” business will go bankrupt. In this situation, as Ferree and Pius XI argue, this sole business owner is “helpless” to pay a living wage. Enacting social justice in this situation, they argue, would not mean a single employer paying a living wage—this may be just on the individual level, but it is not *social* justice. Rather, what this employer must do is *organize* with fellow business owners who decide *together* that they will pay their employees more.²⁸ In this scenario, no business has an unfair advantage over other businesses, and all can have competitive pricing. The key in this example is the *act of organizing* to create a change on the systemic or institutional level. For Ferree, this organizing is the particular act of social justice, and this concept was entirely new.

²⁷ William Ferree, *The Act of Social Justice*, (Dayton: Marianist Publications, 1951), 73.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

Ferree's dissertation was published in 1943 at the Marianist publications center at Mount St. John. In 1948, he condensed the main ideas of his dissertation into a pamphlet titled *An Introduction to Social Justice*, which was published by Paulist Press. Since there were few people writing about social justice at that time, his writings were received with a great deal of interest, making Ferree rather well-known in Catholic academia. Ferree's ideas about social justice and its specific action did not change much throughout his life, but his passion for organizing for systemic change did lead him to explore theories of administration, as well as the social implications of the other virtues.

The Marianist Magazine and Early Experiences in Administration

After receiving his PhD, Ferree returned to Mount St. John in the summer of 1942 and became the editor of *The Apostle of Mary* magazine, which was a publication of the Society of Mary's Cincinnati Province. Ferree had written a few articles for this publication when he was a scholastic, which, in a show of humility, he only signed with the initials "W.F." Under his leadership, *The Apostle of Mary* was renamed *The Marianist* to embrace the new nickname for the Society of Mary that began to be used around that time.²⁹ The name change occurred in 1944. It also was around this time that *The Marianist* magazine began to include more lay contributors, as well as articles written by women religious. Ferree would contribute many articles to this publication, including a series on social justice that articulated the main points of his dissertation.

After being appointed the general manager of all Marianist Publications in 1945, a new responsibility was added to Ferree's plate in 1947, that of Director of Mount St. John. He would hold this position until 1953. During his time living at Mount St. John,

²⁹ *Ferree Resource Collection*, 15.

both in his publications work and as director, he got to know many of the young scholastics who lived on the property. Many of the Marianist brothers living today who knew Ferree as young scholastics have fond memories of him from this time. Some of these Ferree stories have become legendary and are often recounted whenever his name is mentioned. For example, it was well known among people who knew Ferree that he did not care very much about his appearance, and there are many humorous stories about Ferree's obliviousness to the way he looked. In fact, one of the only criticisms of him in seminary, written in an evaluation by one of his Fribourg superiors, was that he could be neglectful of his appearance.³⁰ Perhaps Ferree was so wrapped up in the thoughts in his head that he couldn't pay much attention to externals such as wrinkles in his clothing or untamed cowlicks.

A well-loved anecdote about Father Ferree at Mount St. John involves his love for heavy machinery and manual labor. He liked to do much of his thinking while driving a bulldozer or working on the farm at Mount St. John. When it came time for Mass, Ferree would go directly from the muddy fields to the chapel, put on vestments, and begin to say Mass, all while being covered in sweat and wearing the same boots and clothes he wore in the fields. When Father Bert Buby told this story, having seen it first hand as a scholastic, he mentioned that on these occasions, Ferree would leave clods of mud all over the altar. Oftentimes Ferree would forget to put on a chasuble and would just be wearing a plain alb, which, in the days before Vatican II, was quite a state of undress for liturgy.³¹

³⁰ "Personnel File of Father William Ferree," San Antonio Archives.

³¹ Fr. Bertrand Buby, interview with the author, September 29, 2016.

Despite some of Ferree's eccentricities, he loomed large on the property as his influence grew and his ideas spread. Both when he first came back from the seminary, and when he was director of Marianist publications and the property, Ferree would give talks to the scholastics about Chaminade and his social justice theories. Many young brothers began to look up to Ferree as an important leader and mentor and now name him as a major influence in their lives. Father Joseph Stefanelli, who is one of the most respected Marianist scholars in the world, cites Ferree as his primary influence in Marianist scholarship. Stefanelli remembers hearing about Ferree's synthesis of Father Chaminade when he was a scholastic; when Stefanelli finally read it, it inspired him to study the Marianist documents with other young brothers, which eventually launched him into his vocation as a Marianist scholar.³² Father Quentin Hakenwerth, who has become known for his writings on Chaminade's System of Virtues, said that he first became excited about being a Marianist when he met Father Ferree as a scholastic and heard his impassioned explanations of Chaminade's vision.³³ For Brother Phil Aaron, who also was a scholastic when Ferree was director of Mount St. John, the first time he ever heard of social justice was during one of Ferree's talks. This introduction to social justice had a great impact on him: he would later work with college students in social engagement and teach social justice classes at the University of Dayton.³⁴

As Ferree became more involved in leadership—either as the manager of Marianist Publications or as the director of Mount St. John—he began to study theories of institutions and administration. This new research was an extension of his social justice scholarship, for he began to understand that good administration of institutions

³² Fr. Joseph Stefanelli, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2016.

³³ Fr. Quentin Hakenwerth, in discussion with the author, November 2015.

³⁴ Br. Phil Aaron, interview with the author, September 12, 2016. One of the main sources Brother Phil used in his classes on social justice at was Fr. Ferree's pamphlet *Introduction to Social Justice*.

is how one organizes for the common good. Toward the end of 1943, Ferree began to express interest in administration and institutions in several articles in *The Apostle of Mary*. For the next two decades, Ferree would continue to research different theories of administration and write a series of monographs that focus on administration, social ethics, and the way institutions impact development of societies.

For Ferree, these administration theories were not merely ethereal, having no bearing on reality; rather, they were ideas to be enacted. As director of Mount St. John, he readily practiced an important aspect of administration theory: delegation of authority. Ferree expected other brothers in leadership to exercise their authority wisely, without micromanaging by him. Thus, when Father Bertrand Clemens became director of the scholastics, Ferree put total control over that area into his hands and trusted him to do the job well. As Father Bill Behringer says, Ferree had a tremendous capability for organization, and this was largely due to his delegation style.³⁵ As his leadership roles and responsibilities increased throughout his life, Ferree would continue to put this principle into practice and encourage other brothers to do the same.

Such an attitude about administration was novel in religious life of the pre-Vatican II era, which depended more on strict authority and management from the top. As a result, not all of Ferree's superiors appreciated his philosophy of delegation. A 1950 report of Ferree's performance as Mount St. John director, written by a provincial administration member, expresses disappointment at the "lack of supervision" on the Mount. The report states that "responsibility has gone to the heads" of some of the young brothers who do not "ask permission" for various things.³⁶ During a time in

³⁵ Fr. Bill Behringer, Interview with the author, October 7, 2016.

³⁶ "Personnel File of Father William Ferree," San Antonio Archives.

religious life when superiors' schedules were constantly encumbered by requests for permission from fellow brothers for every small action, no doubt Ferree realized how effectively he could operate as director if more brothers could express their individual agency in certain decisions. And based on observations of some others who worked with Ferree, his organization often worked well, although there are still some brothers who think that some of his ideas were a bit strange and never worked. But, for the most part, effective administration of the brothers at Mount St. John was, for Ferree, a micro-example of how to create a good, well-functioning institution that promotes the common good of society, and the Society of Mary surely was and is such an institution.

General Administration and Social Charity

After serving the property of Mount St. John in some capacity from 1943 to 1953, Ferree was asked to serve in a completely different place: the Catholic University of Puerto Rico. There was hope at the time that this university might become a Marianist university, and Ferree was to help with this endeavor, although this idea never came to fruition.³⁷ However, during Ferree's time as rector of the University in Puerto Rico, he did have some success in administration. One success, put humorously by Father Behringer, involved settling a conflict within the faculty of the university. When Ferree arrived, the faculty was divided into two camps fighting over what direction to take the university. Facing a stalemate and unwillingness to compromise, Ferree found a way to bring the two sides together—by making both sides mad at him.³⁸ It is unclear what their conflict was about, but whatever it was, Ferree found a path toward compromise in

³⁷ *Ferree Resource Collection*, 17.

³⁸ Interview with Fr. Behringer.

the faculty, even if it meant making himself their common enemy. By the time he left Puerto Rico, Ferree was well-respected at the University.³⁹ But before he could accomplish much there, he was elected to a new adventure: the General Administration in Rome.

Ferree had been chosen by his brothers in the Cincinnati Province to be a delegate to the 1956 General Chapter of the Society of Mary, which elects the international leadership of the Society for the next five years. At this chapter, Ferree was chosen to be the General Assistant for Instruction, which directs the educational institutions and vision for the SM in the world. Ferree held this post for five years, during which time he wrote several documents for the brothers about the importance of Catholic Action in secondary schools, administration and social ethics, and the results of a study he conducted on the delegation of authority in local administration. This position also allowed him to travel to nearly every continent to visit the educational institutions of the Marianist brothers.

After serving in the General Administration for five years, Ferree was reelected to another five-year term, this time in the Office of Apostolic Action. Apostolic Action was a new office and position in the General Administration, largely created at the urging of Father Ferree. This office mostly dealt with animating the laity in carrying out the apostolic mission of Father Chaminade and helping brothers better understand how to help the laity carry out this mission. Ferree believed involvement of laity was key to the apostolic mission of Father Chaminade. As a result, Ferree constantly promoted lay engagement in Marianist apostolic works. Many brothers credit the revival of the lay

³⁹ Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, *The Stranger is Our Own: Reflections on the Journey of Puerto Rican Migrants*, (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 22.

branch of the Marianist Family to these urgings of Father Ferree.⁴⁰ Ferree's vision of lay engagement heavily relied on the Church movement called Catholic Action, which was originally promoted by Pope Pius XI as a means of empowering the laity to live the Church's teaching in their everyday lives. In this vision, Catholic Action was similar to the goals of *Pax Romana*, except the target audience was all the laity, not just Catholic college students. Ferree's second term on the GA also coincided with the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. Due to his work in Apostolic Action and his social justice scholarship, Ferree was asked to be a delegate to the Council's Preparatory Commission on Lay Apostolate and Social Justice.⁴¹

The Second Vatican Council proved to be a watershed moment for the Church and the world; Vatican II brought sweeping changes to the Mass, how Catholics engage Scripture, relationships with other faiths, and the way the Church understands itself in relation to the world. The council simultaneously "updated" the Church to be more engaged with the modern world and brought the Church back to its original sources, stripping away some of the superfluous trimmings of the Middle Ages. Perhaps the most fundamental change in the council was its emphasis that being a lay person is a holy vocation; no longer is it acceptable to think that one must be ordained or have religious vows to have a sure path to heaven. Prior to Vatican II, lay life was seen as a "lesser path," less holy than religious life and priesthood. In contrast, the Council affirmed the Baptism that all believers have in common, as well as the holiness all are called to in that one Baptism. Ferree approached the council with great enthusiasm—he saw it as being the realization of Chaminade's vision for lay engagement with the Church, as well as the

⁴⁰ Br. Larry Cada, interview with the author, November 1, 2016.

⁴¹ *Ferree Resource Collection*, 12.

culmination of lay movements like *Pax Romana* and Catholic Action. However, Ferree could not have predicted the earth-shaking impact the Council would have on religious orders as they were called by the Council to rearticulate the meaning of religious life and of their founding charisms. In fact, Ferree would spend the rest of his life navigating the Council's aftermath.

After Vatican II, there was a mass exodus of men and women from religious orders and a stark drop in the number of vocations to religious life. In the United States, the total number of religious brothers, sisters, and priests in 1965 was 214,932. Five years later, the number was 194,474, a stark decline of 20,458 people. By 1980, the total number of religious brothers, priests, and sisters would be 157,229 (57,703 fewer religious than ten years previously).⁴² The Society of Mary's Cincinnati Province was not immune to this trend. There were several reasons for this exodus of religious: one was the freedom that came from the Church articulating the goodness of lay life, something which these (mostly young) men and women religious had never heard. Suddenly, religious life was no longer the "sure path" to heaven. Another reason was the cultural awakening of the 1960s, which was a decade of such rapid social change, the likes of which we had never seen. During this decade, social phenomena such as divorce, premarital sex, contraception, and leaving religious orders were not as taboo as they had been. This, combined with the increased questioning of authority and of the possibility of making *any* lifelong commitment, created a field of questioning and chaos that caused many women and men religious to seek dispensation from their religious vows.

⁴² "Frequently Requested Church Statistics," *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate*, Accessed May 5, 2017, Cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics.

As Ferree would reflect later, the effect of the '60s on religious life could not have been foreseen or stopped—it was a sea change that could only be ridden.

It was against this backdrop of cultural turmoil that Ferree wrote one of his last major reflections related to social justice when, in 1966, he reexamined a theory he briefly touched on decades earlier—social charity. In a three day talk to Marianist brothers at Chaminade High School in Mineola, NY, Ferree laid out an explanation of social charity, a concept he took from Pope Pius XI, who said that social charity is the “soul” of social justice.⁴³ Ferree explained that social charity is the love that one has for one’s common good—i.e., one’s society, social institutions, and organizations—that makes one work for the improvement of that institution or society to make it more just. He said that we must accept our society with all its flaws in order to work for good in the society:

just as we accept our friends with all their faults, so the first lesson of social charity is that we accept our society with all its faults. It’s our society; it’s the only common good we have. If we try to destroy that we have lost our common good and we can’t be without that. So that we must...maintain our common good in order to perfect it.⁴⁴

According to Ferree, such a love of institutions and society is in contrast to people like Karl Marx who “saw a society which was evil” and who “wanted to destroy that evil completely, to get it out of the way and then to remake a new society.”⁴⁵ Social charity also contrasted the youth culture movements of the '60s, like the hippies and beatniks, who saw a society so corrupt that they decided either to withdraw from it or, like Marx, to destroy it and build something new. For Ferree, one must have social charity in order

⁴³ *Ferree Resource Collection*, 142.

⁴⁴ William Ferree, “Social Charity.” *From Seminar Conducted at Chaminade High School, Mineola, NY, April 1966*. (Washington D.C.: Center for Economic and Social Justice, 2003), 11.

⁴⁵ *Ferree Resource Collection*, 150.

to do social justice, because without a love for one's society and common good, there is no motivation to do the difficult work of organizing for justice.

One may ask why, after nearly three decades of writing very little directly related to social justice, Ferree would suddenly begin writing about the subject again. The answer to this question is likely found in the cultural context—the mass social change during the 1960s came along with a distrust of institutions, both at the macro (government and corporations) and micro level (marriage and family). It seems likely that Ferree found this disenchantment of young people to be troubling, especially since he had been working for decades to animate young people to work for social justice. Suddenly, society was faced not with the problem of *what* social justice is, or *how* social justice is achieved, but with the problem of apathy toward and distrust of the very bodies that help promote social justice—institutions. With the anti-institutional mindset of many young people, Ferree may have seen the possibility of a just society being undermined, which is why social charity became such an important virtue.

Provincial of Cincinnati Province and Final Years

It was in this environment of institutional mistrust and vocational crisis that, after Ferree's second term with the General Administration, and after a brief period as President of Chaminade College in Honolulu, his brothers chose him to be Provincial of the Cincinnati Province. According to Father Bill Behringer, the brothers so respected Ferree's gifts for administration that they saw him as the best person to deal with the turmoil of the times.⁴⁶ This was in 1968, right in the middle of the mass exodus of men and women from religious orders. Ferree accepted the job. He immediately began

⁴⁶ Interview with Fr. Behringer

visiting SM communities and seeing the effect fewer religious were having on their ministries. In the process, he became convinced that what was *really* needed was an articulation of a theology of religious life that would counter both the perspective that religious needed to go back to how things were before the council and the perspective that religious life's insistence on fidelity and perpetual commitment is constrictive.⁴⁷ Instead of embracing either of those viewpoints, Ferree insisted that, while the *form* of religious life may change (as in the way religious life looks, the structure of community and its works, etc.), the *values* must stay the same (i.e., perpetual commitment, the vows, focus on prayer and community, etc.).⁴⁸

To articulate this theology of religious life, Ferree planned to write a series of letters on the topic (called circulars) to members of his province. Unfortunately, Ferree was only able to write two of these circulars because he suffered a massive heart attack while visiting the brothers' communities in Cleveland, just two years into his term as Provincial. He stayed in the hospital recovering for over a month, but his health was compromised. Suddenly the four hours of sleep that Ferree insisted was all that any adult needed to function (even though it often meant he would fall asleep during Mass) were no longer enough for him and his heart. He finished his term with the help of Brother Stan Matthews, who was the Assistant Provincial.⁴⁹ At the end of his term, due to his failing health, he decided not to seek reelection.

Following his provincialate, Ferree did not retire and fade to the background; rather, he was determined to use the time he had left to work on some of the most

⁴⁷ *Ferree Resource Collection*, 202. As Ferree says in this document, there were members of the Cincinnati Province who believed one or the other of these views—either forget the council happened or abandon religious life because it's against the times.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Interview with Fr. Behringer

important problems facing the Church, the main one being the lack of religious vocations. He began to believe that congregations could replace many of their lost vocations by recruiting middle-aged men and women who either never married or were widowed, an idea that he called the “Second Career Vocations Project.”⁵⁰ Few brothers believed that Ferree’s idea would succeed in replacing all the vocations lost, including Father Behringer, who became Provincial after Ferree. Even so, the brothers gave Ferree the time and space to pursue his ideas. He wrote extensively about this idea of recruitment among older men and women, basing his thinking on the fact that Jesus called his disciples as older men and women, most of whom already had families, so why wouldn’t religious orders do the same as Christ?⁵¹ He was interviewed by several Catholic and secular newspapers who took interest in his vocations work, including the *Dayton Journal Herald*, and he even conducted a massive statistical study of vocations.⁵² Although Ferree did raise greater awareness of the potential for older men and women in becoming religious, very few dioceses and other religious orders took his ideas seriously, and only a handful of older men joined the Society of Mary as a result of the Second Career Vocations Project.

While Ferree conducted this vocations work in the last decade of his life, he also continued speaking and writing about social justice. He addressed the National Conference of Catholic Bishops as they were drafting their pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, offering his insights on the issues the bishops should cover.⁵³ He also began working on a manuscript for another book on social justice called *Forty Years*

⁵⁰ *Ferree Resource Collection*, 16.

⁵¹ Interview with Br. Cada.

⁵² “Personnel File of Father William Ferree,” San Antonio Archives.

⁵³ Norman Kurland, interview with the author, September 14, 2016.

Later, which would pick up some of his original ideas from “The Act of Social Justice” and assess them in light of current justice issues.⁵⁴

One of his lasting legacies was collaborating in the foundation of the Center for Economic and Social Justice. In the early 1980s, two men named Norman Kurland and Bill Shirer came across Ferree’s writings on social justice and were struck by how well his ideas complemented the economic theories of Louis Kelso, an economist whom both men greatly admired. They developed a relationship with Father Ferree and, in 1984, Kurland and Shirer officially founded the Center for Economic and Social Justice (CESJ), an organization that would promote greater employee ownership in corporations and other market-based solutions to social justice issues.⁵⁵ The CESJ was especially active in the 1980s, when it successfully lobbied for legislation during the Reagan administration. This organization has continued to promote the social justice writings of Father Ferree to this day, including republishing and distributing his pamphlet *Introduction to Social Justice*.⁵⁶

In 1985, in the year of Father Ferree’s sixtieth anniversary of religious profession, his vocation commitment reached its completion when he was called home to God. After another heart attack and a brief hospital stay, Ferree passed away on August 30, 1985. Father Bert Buby remembers visiting Ferree at his bedside, hearing his confession, anointing him, and praying the rosary with him in his final days. He remarked in an interview that Ferree seemed completely ready to enter God’s Kingdom.⁵⁷ A Mass of Christian Burial took place at Queen of Apostles Church on the property of Mount St.

⁵⁴ “Personnel File of Father William Ferree,” San Antonio Archives.

⁵⁵ Interview with Mr. Kurland.

⁵⁶ “History & Accomplishments,” *Center for Economic and Social Justice*, Accessed May 5, 2017, cesj.org/about-cesj-in-brief/history-accomplishments.

⁵⁷ Interview with Fr. Buby.

John, where his brothers and other members of the Marianist Family said goodbye. He currently rests in Queen of Heaven Cemetery on the very property which was profoundly shaped by the work of his hands.

In describing the impact of Father Ferree, Brother Larry Cada says that the Marianist Family in the United States is living in the wake of Ferree. His fingerprints cover so much of what exists now, from the Ferree Professor of Social Justice Chair at the University of Dayton, to the revitalization of the lay branch of the Marianist Family, to the explosion of Marianist scholarship that culminated in the establishment of the North American Center for Marianist Studies (also located at Mount St. John), to a renewed interest in Chaminade's System of Virtues—these are only a few examples. In the end, no one can summarize Ferree's dedication to the Marianists, to the Church, and to God better than the man himself. Shortly before his death, Ferree celebrated his 60th jubilee of religious profession, and in the program booklet for the Jubilee Mass, each jubilarian wrote a paragraph of reflection about their years of religious life. In this paragraph, Ferree said that the essence of his religious vocation was “to give back to God the best one had.” In everything he did, Ferree certainly gave God his best. The Marianist Family, and the Church, is better because of him.

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