I had a dream the other night. *I had the rare privilege of an interview with Blessed Father Chaminade!*

by Paul Landolfi, SM

Come Holy Spirit, come through the powerful intercession of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, your well beloved Spouse.

PL Hello Father! I have been thinking about Consecration and the vow of Stability. This is the year of Consecrated Life. May I ask you a few questions? You seem to have a different interpretation of the generally accepted view of Stability. Is this true?

WJC **First of all, I am very glad to see you. It's not often that I get the chance to talk with you. No, I don't think I have changed the basic meaning of Stability as understood ever since St. Benedict's time, but you are correct, my understanding of Stability in the Marianist Family does have a special twist. I'll be glad to explain myself; in order to do this I must share with you my own development in appreciating Mary and her role in the life of the world. As you can guess, this directly influences Stability.**

PL Father, I know that in the Marianist Family Stability has everything to do with our devotion to Mary, but it must mean more than just a person loving Mary and being devoted to her. I know lots of people who are not Marianists who also love and honor Mary.

WJC **You're absolutely right. Never did I intend to have a monopoly on love for Mary! Even if people had the very same views as I did, I would not want to deny them such a grace, but rather work with them to make Mary better known and loved. Nevertheless, I must speak about my own background if you are to appreciate what I am saying about Stability.**

You know, ever since I can remember, my family always loved Mary. Like many Christian families they dedicated me to the Mother of God.

What a grace was given to me! I was baptized on the same day I was born, so I was always a child of Mary. But as I grew up I came to understand and appreciate this fact more and more. I'm sure I learned very much from my own mother. She really loved me, but she never hesitated to correct me. As I grew older I looked on my mother's qualities and realized how much Mary was also kind, loving, and such a good teacher.

PL I guess we never come to understand ourselves completely at any time. We always progress in our knowledge of ourselves and of the world around us. I heard you went to school in Mussidan. This *collège* helped you appreciate the Blessed Mother greatly, if I am reading correctly.

WJC Yes, at school it didn't take long before I was attracted to and joined the postulants of the Congregation of St. Charles. The school was run by these holy priests. My brother, Jean, was among the faculty. I suppose that's why my parents wanted me to go to that school. My brother Louis was also a student. Jean was a Jesuit, but the Society of Jesus had been dispersed by Rome. That's why Jean was teaching there. These teachers really loved Jesus. They showed me that becoming like Jesus was everyone's goal in life. I began to see that even my love for Mary had to lead me to become like Jesus. Isn't that why Mary became the Mother of Jesus and our Mother? These thoughts began to shape in my heart as a postulant in the Congregation of St. Charles.

At school I experienced Mary's special help when I hurt my foot. My brother Jean, who was always my friend and who taught me so much about prayer and virtue, asked me to pray to Mary. He suggested I make a vow to walk in pilgrimage to the shrine of Notre Dame du Roc if I got better. I did so and Mary heard my prayer. Some people will still tell you I was healed by merely natural means. I believe God works through natural means also, but compared to what I had suffered before, the suddenness of my recovery after praying to Mary convinced me that Mary helped me. It is good to have her on your side.

PL What does Notre Dame du Roc mean? Where was this shrine?

WJC It means Our Lady of the Rock. It is a shrine in the mountainous region of Mussidan, a good distance from the school. This was not the first time I had visited the shrine. In fact, I became a member of the Rosary Confraternity there. This shrine always had special meaning for me through the years. The statue of Mary venerated there is unique. I believe I came to

appreciate Jesus' words to Mary and John at the Cross because I loved to pray before this image of Mary. Mary is holding Jesus who has died on the Cross. It is a Pietà. Mary's faith is steady like the rock. You know, rocks have played an important part in my life. Even Stability makes us firm like a rock.

PL Father, I remember that when you went into exile at Saragossa you venerated the image of Mary standing on a pillar. In light of what you have been saying, perhaps even that had special significance for you?

WJC **Isn't it interesting how the Lord works. Years after the incident of my pilgrimage to Notre Dame du Roc, I would be inspired by our Lady again, standing on a rock, Our Lady of the Pillar in Saragossa, Spain. The Lord continually surprises us. God always seems to prepare us for what is expected. That is why it is important to listen to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and follow them as carefully as we can. That's what Mary tried to do. That's what I tried to do during my life.**

PL Can you share with us some of the times you felt inspired by the Holy Spirit.

WJC **For instance, I felt drawn to become a religious. My brother Jean had a lot to do with that. He had taught me the ways of prayer and how to listen to the voice of God. The Holy Spirit inspired me toward a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. I visited a few religious communities, but discovered these were really not fervent. They just didn't resonate with what God was saying in my heart. These communities had been in existence for a long time and those living in them felt very secure. But they seemed to have lost something in the process. The French Revolution changed all that. Then, it wasn't safe to be a religious. I continued to feel attraction for the religious state. Again my brother Jean guided me to make private vows. Even though I was only 14, I knew what I was doing. I knew what I wanted. I'm sure Mary was preparing me even though I didn't see that so clearly at the time.**

PL Another question Father! You came back yourself and taught at the Collège of Mussidan along with your brothers. What was your role there?

WJC **After I finished school, I continued my studies for the priesthood and, in due time, was ordained. I had remained a member of the Congregation of St. Charles and tried to live according to the Rule of Life I had taken when I was a postulant. This Congregation was not a religious**

Order. It was more like a Sodality for priests and those preparing for the priesthood. In that sense I was trained well for my work later on. I came back to teach at the *collège* after ordination. There were three of us Chaminade brothers there. I was given the job as the treasurer. However, it was as a teacher there that I really began to think about Mary and the meaning of Stability.

PL I don't understand what you mean, Father. Could you explain that a little more?

WJC **Certainly. I had some very good students. One student, in particular, Bernard Daries, was evidently touched by God's grace. Since I worked very closely with him (I was his advisor through to his doctorate), we became fast friends. God inspired him to found a religious order. Bernard wanted to call this Order, the Society of Mary. Isn't it fascinating how God works in such strange ways! We both wanted to belong to Mary completely. But this was not yet God's providential time. Then came the French Revolution. People may think of it now as a glorious time, but they don't understand the great devastation of religion, the death of so many good people, the loss of faith for so many, and the near ruin of the Church in France. Revolutionaries placed the goddess of reason in the niche at Notre Dame in Paris, where the statue of Mary once stood. What an insult to the Mother of Jesus! These were hard times for all of us, but through it all I experienced the special protection of Mary. Although all priests were sent into exile, I decided to remain. I felt strengthened by the Holy Spirit to minister to the people, so many of whom were riding to their death each day in the tumbrels. I can tell you story after story of how Mary protected me. Divine Providence became a reality for me. I took many risks to serve the people, but I knew Mary always was there helping me. Finally I, too, was forced to go into exile.**

PL Why did you choose to go to Saragossa?

WJC **I'm not really sure. I had to leave the country very quickly. Saragossa was fairly close. I knew there were French people and some of my close friends there. In Saragossa were priests, religious and laypeople, and even a bishop—all exiled from France. We had a hard life because we were unable to work. We had to survive the best we could. We helped each other. I used to make little figurines out of plaster and sell them. The little we earned we shared. It was like the early Church. Bishop Tour de la Pin and I became**

good friends there. He wrote to Rome later to help me obtain the title and powers of Missionary Apostolic because I knew I would need them when we returned. We had to restructure the Church in France after the Revolution. This was the main point of our conversations as exiles. Despite all the sufferings we endured, I was very happy there. Mary was in our midst. We prayed together, suffered together, and tried to help each other. The Acts of the Apostles came alive. We tried to meet everyone's needs. Those who had, shared; those who did not have, received. The night I arrived, on the eve of the feast of Our Lady of the Pillar, I was immediately caught up in the celebration. The tradition around this shrine is that Mary encouraged St. James the Apostle when he was most frustrated in his work of preaching the Good News of Jesus to the people. Mary appeared to him standing on the Pillar, the symbol of faith. He continued his mission trusting in the power of Jesus, and we see the wonderful results. There at the shrine in prayer I spent a lot of time saying *Thank you* to Mary for protecting me. I told her often that I belonged to her and that I wanted to be at her service. The Lord works in providential ways to develop us. It was while I was in prayer that the moment came that changed my life.

PL: Tell us about it, Father, because we have heard snatches of your encounter with Mary. These have drawn us closer to Mary ourselves. We want to give ourselves to her also and to help her in her work. It would be very helpful if we heard from you what really happened.

WJC **I thank God for your words. They only confirm for me what Jesus and Mary have done for me. Before Mary in prayer I realized that to her the final victory was given. Just like St. James must have felt, I understood that despite the apparent defeat of religion through the Revolution, Mary would triumph. She had conquered all heresies and would now be victorious over the complete indifference and hostility to religion that gripped France. This conviction gave me a focus. It helped me to see where I was going and what I was to do. Mary would help me to become like Jesus. I would help her make Jesus present throughout the whole world. This conviction became so vivid, and I was given such an understanding that as soon as I returned to France I immediately began to implement these insights. I was a missionary of Mary, a collaborator with her. I would help her bring Jesus back to the world, especially to my beloved France.**

PL Father, is this why you started the Sodality of Bordeaux? You called this your work of predilection. Why is this so? How was this Sodality different from others?

WJC **You are asking a lot of questions, but I am happy to answer these, because it *was* my *work of predilection.* I started the Sodality of Bordeaux to bring religion back to my country. Catholics had been isolated. Everyone was afraid to practice their religion openly. You wouldn't believe the social pressure good people faced. Mary had showed me that we had to build communities of faith, where people would be permitted to express their faith and where the group would support the religious practices that nourished this faith. Other sodalities worked with certain groups or classes. The Sodality of Bordeaux was open to all, men and women, married and single, priests, rich and poor. As the Sodality grew, we became a close family, just as I had experienced in exile. Mary was the heart of our Sodality. In such a loving atmosphere, we realized we were all her sons and daughters. Jesus was present in our midst. Mary attracted to us those she wanted, after all it was her work. She helped us to love one another, while Jesus exercised his saving power through this love. Much good was accomplished through the Sodality. Oh! If we only knew how much Mary protects us! My life was extremely busy during this time. I used the powers given me by the Holy Father as a Missionary Apostolic as effectively as I could. We were given for our use the Church of the Madeleine, and this became the center of our activity. Yes, I know how Mary works. If we give ourselves to her she will do much good for us and through us. Cardinal Donnet, the archbishop of Bordeaux, at one point said, "*when I trace all the good that is happening in my Archdiocese, I find the name of Chaminade and the Sodality behind it.*" It wasn't that we were doing so much. Rather, it was because we were listening to Mary, trying to do what she inspired. How much she desires that everyone become like Jesus!**

PL So the Sodality of Bordeaux came first, then the Daughters of Mary and the Society of Mary. How did these religious congregations arise from the Sodality?

WJC **Yes, from the Sodality came the religious congregations. The Lord gave me such good friends. Marie Thérèse de Lamourous remained my friend and spiritual daughter through the years. I thought she would be the one God sent to help me. But the Lord chose her to develop the work at the Miséricorde with women in need. She surrendered her whole life to that. She still remained a big help to me with the other religious congregations that**

sprang up. First, came the Daughters of Mary with Adèle de batz de Trenquelléon. Adèle really loved Jesus and Mary. What a beautiful spirit she had! How filled she was with missionary zeal! She was a natural in organizing. She had groups formed even before I knew her. It must have been Mary who sent her into my life in order to fulfill the mission the Mother of Jesus had given me. These friends helped me to remain focused on my mission. There were so many needs demanding attention. That was why we prayed to Mary each day. I will never forget the day, May 1, when Jean Lalanne, who had been in the Sodality for such a long time, came to see me. Eight years before, in 1809, he made a retreat with me. He was so young, but very generous. God sent him to help me fulfill the plan given 20 years before. Some people think that, when God asks us for something, we see everything clearly. The truth is that the Lord shows us piece by piece, asking us to be faithful day by day. Slowly but surely, the complete picture forms, while, as we go through it, we see only a puzzle with pieces yet unrelated. Lalanne came to me and said, *"Father, I feel called to give my life to do what you are doing. This is what I think God is asking of me."* I was overjoyed, not because I thought I was going to get more help, but because I saw that Mary's plan with which she had inspired me was coming to fruition. At Saragossa I understood that you can't have the fullness of the Christian life unless you also have religious life. Adèle had started the Daughters of Mary. Jean Lalanne now, with some other sodalists, began the Society of Mary for men. This was almost twenty years after I returned to France. If you think Rome works slowly, God works ever so deliberately. But when the Lord acts, watch out! .

PL Father, I don't know if we are getting off track, but I'm not sure how all this fits into our topic of Stability. I sense it has something to do with Mary and something to do with the Marianist Family, whether we are religious or laypeople. Just what exactly was the insight you received and how does this make our notion of Stability different than the usual notion accepted by the Church?

WJC No, we are not getting off track. You are correct in thinking that Mary and the Marianist Family are somehow related to the notion of Stability. Let me continue, and perhaps it will become a little clearer.

At Saragossa I came to understand that Jesus called me to be united with Mary to raise up a nation of believers who would offer themselves to her in order to fulfill her mission. Her mission was nothing less than the Church's mission to bring Jesus to the world. The Sodality had its work cut out for it, since the lack of religious instruction was practically universal.

Much had to be done to bring the sacraments to people who had been starved and neglected. However, we were convinced that Mary was there with us. In our efforts to do her work I learned how she was the Mediatrix of all graces. I encouraged all those who joined the Sodality to dedicate themselves to Mary, that is, to consciously choose her as their mother. By Baptism and faith we all already are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of Mary. But I was looking for people who would understand this, choose deliberately to be Mary's sons and daughters, and dedicate themselves to help her make Jesus present in the world. Through her intercession they themselves were being formed into Jesus. That was the source of their happiness. So you can imagine how pleased I was when first Adèle and then Jean Lalanne came to me and told me they felt inspired to continue this work as religious. It was like a dream come true; it was what I had been waiting to hear for so long. I wanted to be sure that what I was doing was God's work, not my own. Their desires were a sign from God that what I had been inspired by was really from God and not from my own enthusiasm. It was really a great moment for me, and I was so happy. I saw that the work would continue. A vast multitude, coming through the centuries, walked past my mind's eye. They would all be sons and daughters of Mary, and she would cooperate with them, dispose them to receive the Holy Spirit, so that they could become like Jesus. She would use them, despite their weaknesses. She would supply the light and strength to enable them to touch hearts, to bring others to Jesus. Wherever they banded together Jesus would be in their midst, and God's Kingdom would be closer at hand.

PL Father, doesn't Stability, then, still mean that we persevere in a place?

WJC **Generally, religious thought of Stability as remaining in one house for one's life, serving God. This was the essence of being religious for them. I wanted real religious also, but I wanted Stability to mean something much more. Members would enter and remain in a *state of being* much more than in a place. God knows what happened after the French Revolution when religious were disbursed. There had to be a way for maintaining commitment other than to be associated with an institution. I wanted persons who would not be fixed to a house but would be fixed in a state, the state of being devoted to Mary. That's what Mary wanted. She wanted dedicated people who would help her. She wanted her sons and daughters to be open and docile to the Spirit of Jesus. This required more than permanence in a place.**

PL But how would this happen?

WJC **Religious would make the vows that all other religious make. Their profession of poverty, chastity, and obedience would be their way of saying, "*I choose Mary as my mother. I want to be like Jesus. I want to make him present in the world."* But they would take two other vows also – *Stability and the vow to Teach Faith and Morals.* By Stability they would mean, *I want to remain in the state of being the son or daughter of Mary. I want, with her help, to become more like Jesus. I want to do everything I can to help Mary bring Jesus to my world.***

Unfortunately the other vow has been discontinued, but I hope its spirit will always be present, for I think it explains very clearly what I was given to appreciate at Saragossa. The vow to teach faith and morals (today you would probably call it the vow to evangelize), was a commitment to make everything we did come from faith and lead to the sharing of our faith. You see how important is our stated purpose of building communities of faith? That's why I said, you will recall, *"we don't teach simply to be teachers. We teach in order to collaborate in forming Jesus Christ in the hearts of others."* In a way we represent Mary and act in her place. In her name, we dispose others to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit who alone forms them to the likeness of Jesus. That's Mary's role.

So that's what Stability means to me. Stability means that I want to persevere in a state of being totally Mary's son or daughter, another Jesus; that I want to give myself to her so that she can help me become like Jesus and do the works of Jesus. That's why I insist so much on the imitation of Mary's virtues. She really is the living icon of Jesus. Near her we know who Jesus is, the kind of works he does, and what we are to become. We are also helped by her powerful intercession and prayer, for all the grace of Jesus comes through her. Jesus himself wants it that way.

PL Father, you seem to be touching upon two points—that we become like Jesus through Mary and that we cooperate with Mary in her mission. I understand how Mary helps us become like Jesus, but how do we help her in her mission?

WJC **We give ourselves to Mary to help her in her mission. Her mission is to bring forth Jesus, and she is involved every time people are converted and turn to Jesus or become more like him. But while Stability implies this, how we do this is often misunderstood. You know after Vatican II there was some talk among religious of just making one vow—a vow of charity. It**

sounded good, but such a vow really had no teeth in it. How could you really evaluate it? Among Marianists, there also was some talk of making one vow—the vow of Stability. They understood Stability as a general act of consecration or dedication to Mary. While this sounds attractive, it also has no teeth. If approved, this plan would have impoverished us and not put us in any position to effectively help Mary.

Stability really spells out our Marianist identity. Why? Whether our Stability is temporary or perpetual, whether made as a religious or as a member of a lay group, we make our promise or vow of Stability *within the Marianist Family.* That's the key. We make our consecration within the context of an organization that is dedicated to Mary. The Marianist Family is the Family of Mary, and therefore when we are faithful to the Rule of the Marianist Family and of the particular group in the Family to which we belong, that's how we really love, honor, and remain united with and cooperate with Mary. So, a direct dedication to Mary, while it seems more praiseworthy, is really not the way to cooperate with her. It is more effective to dedicate ourselves to her indirectly. I dedicate myself not to the person of Mary directly but to the Family which belongs to her and which she has inspired. The spirit of the Marianist Family has been approved by the Church; therefore, we know we are not just acting according to our own subjectivity. During the Generalate of Father Simler we were very fortunate that we did not lose the vow of Stability. At that time there was a desire to have it only for the few. But Mary wants all to be her sons and daughters. Fortunately there is a growing appreciation of its importance among the various groups in the Marianist Family.

I pray each day in heaven that people will come to understand what Mary taught me at Saragossa. Oh if we only knew how much Mary is with us! How much we belong to her and she to us! If we are members of a group in the Marianist Family, it was Mary who prayed for us and led us to join it. She calls us to be part of her Family, her sons and daughters. She wants us to belong totally to her. That's why we have to take Stability very seriously. Certainly for the religious, the vows themselves are a self-offering to God in the spirit of Mary, but the vow of Stability is where we state publicly that we want to remain in such a state. By this vow I say, "*I place myself in Mary's Family. I will love this Family. I will try to make it as holy and as large a Family as possible. I will be faithful to the decisions of my community. I will do everything I can for this Family.*"

PL Thank you, Father, for your insights. Thanks for helping us understand what you meant by Stability. Please continue to pray for the Marianist Family of which you are Father and Founder. You have shared so much with us. Continue to pray for us that we may be faithful. Thanks again for your time and insight.

WJC **It has been a pleasure talking with you. I hope we can do this again.**