

Living in a Time of Crisis: It's in Our Marianist DNA

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What can we learn from our Founders and forebears and their time about how to keep the faith, maintain our hope, and grow in love in a time of pandemic and distancing from community?

When I received the news several weeks ago that the Archdiocese of Cincinnati had canceled all public Masses through Easter, I wanted to weep. While some people live for Christmas, the Triduum is my favorite time of year. They are the “High Holy Days” of Christianity. To not experience the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday, the adoration of the cross on Good Friday, the joyful return of the Alleluia at the Easter Vigil . . . it didn't seem real.

As I reflect on what it means to be a Marianist at this time, I realize that this experience of exile from public celebrations of the Mass, this disruption of our daily lives due to the threat of death—this is part of our DNA as Marianists. This is our history. Who better to look to than our founding Marianists to discern how to approach the upcoming difficult months?

As I study their lives, I am constantly struck by the parallels between our circumstances facing the coronavirus pandemic and their circumstances of violence, death, and exile. Of course, there are some obvious differences: the reason we cannot have public liturgies is to mitigate the spread of a deadly contagion, not because our faith is being persecuted. The violence we are facing is the violence of disease, not a violence inflicted by other human beings. When we set aside some of those differences, there are so many lessons we can learn from our Marianist ancestors and their context about how to respond to the pandemic. I would like to offer just a few observations and reflections on some of these parallels.

Faith and Love: Chaminade and Marie Thérèse in the French Revolution

As many of us know, the French Revolution was not very kind to the Catholic Church. There were many reasons for this which cannot be addressed here, but it is not an

exaggeration to say that to be a practicing Catholic—especially a Catholic priest—was dangerous at many points throughout the Revolution. It could get you killed, as Father Chaminade learned firsthand when one of his good friends, Father Langoiran, was killed by a violent mob near Bordeaux.¹ Langoiran was killed because he, like Father Chaminade, refused to swear an oath to the new French Constitution, an oath that had been condemned by the pope and many other clergy in France. As the government became more and more anticlerical, it became increasingly dangerous for Father Chaminade and other priests like him to minister or be seen in public. And it became increasingly dangerous for French Catholics to gather to practice their faith.

When Father Chaminade went into hiding in Bordeaux in 1792, at the beginning of the violent and deadly Reign of Terror, the Catholic Church went into hiding as well. Churches were not just closed—they were desecrated. Statues were smashed, tabernacles were destroyed. Convents and monasteries were forcibly closed; monks and nuns had to renounce their vows or face the guillotine.² People could not have Catholic funerals, weddings, baptisms. Few people could even receive the Last Rites before dying. Clergy fled the country or were imprisoned by the thousands. The organization and institution of the Church was in shambles.

In the midst of the biggest crisis faced by the Catholic Church since the Reformation, this was how the Church survived: laypeople dared to believe that their faith was not confined to a building or a leadership structure, as important as both are. They realized that, if they could not have Mass, they could still gather together and pray. Popular devotions like the rosary became even more important in a time when people were cut off from communal liturgies. A generation of children who could not be baptized or receive their First Holy Communion came to know God by sitting in their mothers' laps, holding rosary beads, and hearing stories about Jesus and Mary and the saints. Often these gatherings would happen within families; sometimes it was neighboring women who would gather with their children in one of their houses.³

¹ Eduardo Benlloch, SM, *Origins of the Marianist Family: Notes on Marianist History* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2010), 33.

² Joseph Stefanelli, SM, *Adele* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 1989), 32-33.

³ Olwen Hufton, "Counter Revolutionary Women," in *The French Revolution in Social and Political Perspective* (New York: Arnold, 1996), 293-94. Hufton writes about how the Church moved into the home

One of these daring laywomen was Marie Thérèse de Lamourous. She and Father Chaminade became acquainted several years after the Reign of Terror when the Church endured another round of persecution, and Father Chaminade had to go “underground” again. Marie Thérèse would connect people who needed the sacraments with Father Chaminade, who would offer Masses in secret in Marie Thérèse’s home oratory.⁴ If either of them were caught, they surely would face the guillotine. What’s more, in the absence of priests being active in parishes, Marie Thérèse took it upon herself to teach catechism and provide other pastoral ministries. In a time where spiritual leadership by the clergy was nearly impossible, she became a spiritual guide for Catholics displaced by de-Christianization. She is the perfect example of a laywoman who kept the faith alive when the public face of the Church was in shambles. In the face of grave danger, her love for God was so great that she was willing to sacrifice her life to keep the Church alive in the hearts of the people.

During the French Revolution, the faith survived because the people kept it alive. The laity—especially laywomen—kept tending to the fire of faith. Is it any surprise, then, that when Father Chaminade returned to France in 1800 after being exiled in Spain, the first thing he did was gather laypeople into a new community, which became the Bordeaux Sodality? He understood that laypeople in community are central to the Church’s life and mission; they contribute to the faith and holiness of the Church just as much as the clergy. This is not to minimize the heroic clergy and religious during the Revolution who also kept the faith alive, often at the expense of their own lives. But theirs are the stories often told, not these humble groups of women and children praying in secret.

The virtues of faith and love were the key to the heroism of Father Chaminade and Marie Thérèse. When Chaminade was in exile in Spain from 1797-1800, he had time to reflect on all he experienced during the first years of Revolution. He and Marie Thérèse frequently wrote letters to each other while he was in exile because Chaminade continued to be her spiritual director from afar. These letters offer much insight into the

during the time of persecution and the collective resistance of many women to the secularization of the Revolution.

⁴ Joseph Stefanelli, SM, *Mlle de Lamourous* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 1998), 81.

faith that sustained him during these difficulties. As Chaminade was fleeing France to go to Spain, he wrote to Marie Thérèse:

What is a faithful soul to do in the chaos of events which seem to swallow it up? Sustain itself calmly by that faith which . . . assures us that all things work together unto good for those who love God.⁵

For Marie Thérèse, this love for God meant embracing the sacrificial love of Jesus. This love was why she risked her life, and would continue to offer her life to God, as she wrote in 1796:

I desire God only, his glory, his honor. . . . Without personal interest I offer him my entire self, my tastes, my inclinations. In a word, in a spirit of sacrifice I offer all that can depend on my liberty, whether interiorly or exteriorly . . . Deign, then, [O God] to receive this unhappy creature. Receive her as a victim, take possession of her; she is offering herself to you; she is sacrificing her life for love of you.”⁶

Hope: Adèle and the Illness that Killed Her

Adèle was born on June 10, 1789, just a month before the Revolution began. Thus, unlike Chaminade and Marie Thérèse, Adèle had no experience of the Church and French society before the Revolution. Whereas Chaminade and Marie Thérèse experienced the Revolution in Bordeaux, one of the largest cities in France, Adèle experienced it in the countryside in her family’s château. This does not mean that Adèle and her family were spared from suffering and violence, however. In many ways, Adèle’s childhood was marked by loss. Born into a wealthy and respected noble family, she was supposed to want for nothing in her life. However, a comfortable and luxurious childhood and adolescence became anything but when the Revolution began. Her father,

⁵ Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 10 to de Lamourous, Sept. 15, 1797; vol. 1, pt. 1.

⁶ Stefanelli, *Mlle de Lamourous*, 460.

a member of the King's Royal Guard, fled the country when she was two.⁷ Adèle wouldn't see him again until she was nine, when she, her mother, and her brother also were exiled by the government. Her entire childhood was overshadowed by danger. Because her family were prominent members of the French nobility, they faced the constant derision and hostility of the people, some of whom wanted nothing more than to see them delivered to the guillotine. On at least two occasions during the Revolution, her family's home was ransacked by roving mobs and government officials.⁸

All these hardships taught Adèle she could not place her hope in the things of this world—wealth, power, prestige—for she saw how all these and more could be taken away in an instant. But God? God was everlasting. Because of these early challenges in her life, Adèle wrote the following on her twenty-first birthday: “Let us place our hopes, our desires, and our joys in the Well-Beloved, for he alone is able to fill a heart which has been created for God alone.”⁹

Adèle's hope was not cheap or naive. She knew how cruel and difficult life could be, how wildly chaotic.

Well after the Revolution was over, when Adèle started the Marianist Sisters, the suffering she experienced came not from war or Revolution but from within her own convent, which was ravaged by tuberculosis shortly after its foundation. Sisters fell ill and died left and right. Young women in their teens and twenties came into the community healthy and excited to begin a religious vocation; some months later, they were dead. Some of Adèle's best friends, the very women who helped her start this new community, also died of this illness. Remember, these were the days before people knew much about disease. For example, bloodletting was still a common remedy for a variety of illnesses, which surely did more harm than good.

One can imagine the temptation to despair that Adèle experienced. For years, she and her closest friends dreamt of starting a new religious congregation. Adèle must have felt like her entire life had been preparing her to be a Foundress. Then finally, when by the grace of God they begin to make this dream a reality, they are met with the scourge of disease. They could not send sisters to as many towns as they would like; they could

⁷ Stefanelli, *Adele*, 24.

⁸ Stefanelli, *Adele*, 27-28.

⁹Adèle, *Letters*, no. 125.5 to Agathe Diché; vol. 1, p. 140.

not do as much ministry as they would like; they could barely even breathe!¹⁰ What unfolded was nothing she could have imagined. Adèle eventually knew this illness firsthand: it would take her life at the age of 38.

Reading her letters, we know Adèle *was* tempted to despair. In the last few years of her life, she frequently asked close friends and sisters to pray for her. “Pray to the good Lord that I might have courage and inner strength—you know I have need of this.”¹¹ “My dear sister, since my last letter to you my heart has been prey to bitterness. I have lost one of my dear daughters.”¹² “I admit that I, too, have my moments of discouragement . . . I sometimes give way to tears.”¹³

She was tempted to despair, but Adèle chose hope. As she spent the last two years of her life practically bedridden, she never gave up hope that God would continue to work in the Daughters of Mary. From her bed, she continued to write countless letters to her sisters, especially the young sisters in formation.

Adèle died surrounded by her sisters. She spent her final moments clutching a crucifix to her breast and praying. Her final words were, “Hosanna to the Son of David”: the joyful words the people of Jerusalem cried out to Jesus, whom they hoped and believed was the Messiah.¹⁴ Adèle lived a life of hope in God’s Kingdom, and she worked tirelessly to contribute to that Kingdom until she, herself, was folded back into that same Embrace. In our current circumstances, can we also embody this hope in the Kingdom in the face of so much tragedy and despair?

We Can’t Go Back

These challenges our forebears experienced brought about an everlasting change in each of them, a conversion that continued to expand and deepen until the end of their lives. Today we are called to a similar conversion. Someday—God only knows when—we will be able to return to our normal lives. We will gather in crowds again, hug and kiss

¹⁰ In an 1825 letter, Adèle instructs the sisters not to do their usual reading at table during meals because the sisters’ lungs “are exhausted.” See Adèle, *Letters*, no. 558.13 to Sister du Sacré Coeur Diché, Jan. 31, 1825; vol. 2, pp. 281-82.

¹¹ Adèle, *Letters*, no. 560.10 to Sister Louis de Gonzague Poitevin, Feb. 5, 1825; vol. 2, p. 284.

¹² Adèle, *Letters*, no. 563.2 to Mother Emilie de Rodat, Feb. 22, 1825; vol. 2, p. 286.

¹³ Adèle, *Letters*, no. 579.6 to Sister de l’Incarnation de Lachapelle, May 21, 1825; vol. 2, p. 305.

¹⁴ Stefanelli, *Adele*, 363-64.

people again, go to restaurants and music festivals, and visit our elderly family members. When that day comes, with all the joy that brings, we must also remember: we can't go back to how we were before. This crisis is inviting us to grow deeper in these virtues of faith, hope, and love. As Pope Francis said during his *Urbi et Orbi* blessing on March 27, 2020, "The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look toward those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize, and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame (cf. Is 42:3) that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled."¹⁵

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¹⁵ Francis, "Moment of Prayer and 'Urbi Et Orbi' Blessing Presided over by Pope Francis" (Mar. 27, 2020), accessed Apr. 28, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html)

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