

Marianist Education: Confidence and Conscience

by Thomas F. Giardino, SM

“Education based upon confidence, and confidence upon conscience.”¹ Where did that come from? I've read and written some things about Marianist education, but I had never come across this pedagogical principle. Then I read *The General History of the Society of Mary*, which includes a volume on what is often called “the Simler era.” This era refers to the time in the Society of Mary’s history when Father Joseph Simler was the General Assistant for Education (1868–76) and his long and fruitful term as the fourth Superior General of the Society of Mary (1876–1905).

He is often called “the Second Founder.” Why? Even as a young religious, his knowledge of Father Chaminade’s thought and action was recognized. Father Jean Chevaux, the third Superior General, said of him, “Simler is the one who most strongly has the spirit of Father Chaminade.”² Father Chaminade had recognized the landscape of his time, where the Enlightenment and secularism meant that Catholic Christianity could no longer rely on cultural inheritance to nurture and reinforce the faith. Chaminade realized that the times required an intentional, active choice of faith. From this reading of the signs of the times, Father Chaminade and the early brothers developed the first fruitful stage of Marianist pedagogy.

The 1870s in France found the world in flux again as Enlightenment thought and action intensified. There was a secular surge as the Third Republic (1870) sought to “Republicanize” France, viewing the Catholic Church as a rival for the soul of the nation. The Church, under Pope Leo XIII, began to pivot and shift from a total rejection of Republicanism to encouraging Catholic participation in the Republic in a wise manner. Caught between these forces, the Marianist position had to prove that religion was compatible with modern values seen as order, work, and progress. Simler understood that for the Society of Mary to survive, it could not be intellectually inferior to the state. Simler had a dictum: “for the good of religion, we must work to make our capacity . . . greater than that of our rivals.”³

¹ Antonio Gascón Aranda, SM, “The General History of the Society of Mary,” vol. 3.1, unpublished English manuscript.

² Antonio Gascón Aranda, SM, *The General History of the Society of Mary: Generalate of Father Joseph Simler*, vol. 2 (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2025), 20.

³ Gascón Aranda, *The General History*, vol. 2, 93-94.

What happened? There was a kind of legislative siege between 1879 and 1886. In 1879, there was an attack on religious congregations that the government said were not “authorized” (the SM was!). In 1881, primary education became free, and a state monopoly began. The Third Republic viewed the school as the instrument to integrate the masses into its view of what a secular Republic should be. And the teaching congregations were seen as the enemy because they held loyalty in the majority of rural areas in France. This legal siege was to create a “neutral” school, which was effectively a school without any reference to God or religion.

The impact was that the Marianists were methodically removed from the many municipal schools they had built and staffed for decades. In 1882 religious instruction was banned from the curriculum, and religious were expelled from municipal schools in 1886. The challenge was that the state demanded that all teachers should hold a certain kind of diploma, assuming that the religious would fail. Simler overhauled the formation for the brothers, demanding an increased academic rigor that, ironically, created a superior teaching core, in which the brothers became better qualified than most of the teachers in the public schools of the time.

Simler’s genius was reconciling the Marianist charism with the modern world. He did not fight modernity with rejection, but with excellence and adaptation. He institutionalized Father Chaminade’s vision, ensuring that the founding project of 1817 could survive the storms of the twentieth century. What were some of the characteristics of that pedagogy? We might call these the characteristics before the “Characteristics,” that is, the *Characteristics of Marianist Education*.⁴ Here is where “education based upon confidence and confidence upon conscience” comes into play.

The distinct characteristics of Marianist pedagogy and educational philosophy (which are familiar to us now) were rooted in the concept that teaching is a means to a higher end: formation in faith based on the person and message of Jesus Christ. This philosophy, established by Father William Joseph Chaminade and codified during the generalate of Father Joseph Simler, centers on integral education—forming the whole person’s character, heart, and will—rather than just imparting academic knowledge. This could be called the method of persuasion and respect for dignity.

A defining characteristic of Marianist pedagogy is respect for the student’s interior world and free will. Educators believe that a student cannot be forced to

⁴ *Characteristics of Marianist Education* (Marianist Press, 1996); *Characteristics of Marianist Education*, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (2020).

be good but can be persuaded to desire what is good and learn to avoid what is evil. This approach emphasizes:

- **Education from Within:** The educator’s goal is to teach the student to work on himself or herself and to develop a strong, free conscience.
- **Gentleness and Conviction:** Marianist educators prefer persuasion and conviction over coercion, which they believe only inspires contempt in students. Educators were formed to respect the students’ dignity and agency over their own interior world, aiming to win their free and voluntary cooperation, orienting their free will toward what is good and true.
- **Reason and Agency:** Students are taught that true happiness is found in a good conscience and self-control, preparing them for the responsibilities of adult life. Thus, character formation accompanies that of intelligence.

And what about us today, Marianist educators in the tradition of Chaminade and Simler? It is not too difficult to compare their challenges from outside forces with ours, often from state or federal governments, regarding private, Catholic education today. And I suspect that we recognize in ourselves these defining characteristics of Marianist pedagogy that Simler codified and that the *Characteristics of Marianist Education* and *Characteristics of Marianist Universities*⁵ have adopted and adapted for our own era. An era distinguished by post-pandemic mental health issues and compounded by the effects of some addictive dynamics of social media, just to name two issues.

Our own challenge flows from our Marianist educational spirituality and philosophy that the educator is the “best rule” and that we educate more through our daily presence and example rather than simply our words. I do not know if Father Simler had read Mother Adèle’s counsel that, if we strive to become holy, our institutions will do well. In any case, Marianist educators know that our authentic witness and confidence in the student wins their free cooperation and stimulates their agency for lifelong learning.

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⁵ *Characteristics of Marianist Universities* (Chaminade University of Honolulu, St. Mary's University, University of Dayton, 2019).

⁶ Gascón Aranda, SM, “The General History,” vol. 3.1.