

Roots, Blossoms, and Fruits of Marianist Social Justice Action and Education

by Thomas F. Giardino, SM

Most people in the Marianist Family are familiar with Father William Joseph Chaminade's, Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon's, and Marie Thérèse de Lamourous' concern for ministry with and to the needy and vulnerable persons of their time. And the Bordeaux Sodality was renowned for its action with good books for prisoners and education of the chimney sweeps, among other activities we would now call social justice ventures.

As education in primary and secondary schools began to emerge in Father Chaminade's mind, given his experience with the Bordeaux Sodality, he was clear that social-moral formation would need to be integral to Marianist education. (Recall that the first Marianist brothers and educators were members of the Bordeaux Sodality.)

The first volume of *The General History of the Society of Mary*, by Antonio Gascón, SM, readily describes in some detail these roots of Marianist thought and action. What may be less known is found in *The General History's* second volume, and it is a blossom that leads to the fruits evident today in the *Characteristics of Marianist Education/Universities* in the focus on "Service, Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation,"¹ as well as the Marianist Family Encounters Project.² Read on for this fascinating story!

Father Joseph Simler, SM, fourth Superior General of the Society of Mary (1876–1905), was profoundly influenced by Pope Leo XIII and his major encyclicals, most notably *Rerum Novarum* (1891), both in governance matters for the Society of Mary as well as Simler's guidance regarding Marianist education in and outside of the classroom. Simler used his own circulars to translate the pope's social teachings into practical advice for Marianist students, leading eventually to the creation of social study clubs and the development of "The Crypt" and *Le Sillon*. The pope's 1884 letter of blessing described Marianist students as "valiant soldiers in the Church and good citizens in the state."³

But it was a Marianist student, a Marianist brother, and a Marianist priest who nurtured the seeds that led to significant blossoms in their time and gave us a proud perspective on our time. The interactions among Brother Louis Cousin, Father Joseph

¹ To learn more about "Service, Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation," [click here for *Characteristics of Marianist Education*](#) or [here for *Characteristics of Marianist Universities*](#).

² To learn about the Marianist Family Encounters Project, [click here](#).

³ Letter of Leo XIII to Joseph Simler, May 12, 1884, attached to Joseph Simler, SM, *Circ. 29*, June 29, 1884, p. 61.

Leber, and student Marc Sangnier were defined by their shared commitment to social Catholicism and Pope Leo XIII's policy of *ralliement* (reconciliation), which was the effort to reconcile French Catholics with the French Third Republic. There was profound ideological and organizational synergy among these protagonists initially centered on the student groups at the Marianist Collège Stanislas.

Marc Sangnier (1873–1950), a brilliant student at Collège Stanislas in Paris, collaborated in founding the youth movement “The Crypt” (1893–94), which arose out of the synergy between Leber’s pedagogical preoccupations and Sangnier’s leadership. This youth movement was a direct response to Leo XIII’s social doctrine and encyclicals. Leo XIII encouraged Catholics to participate in the liberal parliamentary system and to address the social problems caused by industrialization. Under the guidance and direction of Father Leber, Sangnier and a group of students founded *Le Sillon* as a social Catholic movement aimed at making Christianity relevant to the working class. The group took its name from a review titled *Le Sillon*, first published in January 1894. The efforts sought to provide a religious alternative to anticlerical labor movements and promoted the idea that one could be both a devout Catholic and a staunch Republican (not in the US political party sense).

Later in life, Marc Sangnier served as a deputy in the French National Assembly (1919–24, 1945–50). In 1912, he founded the Young Republic League to continue his vision of social Catholicism after his previous movement (*Le Sillon*) faced ecclesiastical pressure. He also founded the newspaper *La Démocratie*, which championed progressive causes such as women’s suffrage, proportional representation, and pacifism. He is often cited as a spiritual and intellectual forefather of Christian Democracy. His influence was so profound that Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, later to become Pope John XXIII, spoke of him with great admiration, noting Sangnier’s “noble and frank humility”⁴ was the true measure of his greatness.

One of Sangnier’s mentors was Father Joseph Leber (1861–1902), who was a prominent Marianist educator and the primary pastoral force behind the student-led social movements at Collège Stanislas in Paris. Born into a humble Alsatian family, he possessed a deep sense of social justice and dedicated his career to forming young Catholics into active “apostles of Christ” capable of transforming modern society. He deserves more attention.

⁴ Letter of June 6, 1950, from the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, later Pope John XXIII, to Renée Besançon Sangnier, on the occasion of the death of her husband, Marc Sangnier, on the Feast of Pentecost, Sunday, May 28, 1950.

Father Leber's primary method of propagation was the establishment and protection of extracurricular study clubs (*patronages*) in schools. His philosophy and actions included, in 1893, guiding a group of bright and committed students at Stanislas—most notably Marc Sangnier—in founding “The Crypt,” a group that met in the school's cellar to study and debate current political, economic, and social issues. Father Leber drew on his previous successful experiences in other schools.

He fostered student initiative because he believed that education should respect a student's conscience and allow for the “free play of life.” He assisted students in writing the 1896 rules for the Crypt, defining it as a means of formation and preparation for life directed by the students themselves rather than the faculty. He aimed to bridge social gaps and to counteract the “social isolation” of the upper-middle-class students at Stanislas. Through his guidance, students were organized to engage in social works, such as visiting the elderly, teaching catechism in poor parishes, and establishing recreational clubs for street children.

Leber broadened the model and used the internal Marianist magazine, *Le Messager de la Société de Marie*, to present the “small collegial initiatives” of Stanislas as a model for all other Marianist schools to imitate. Then Father Leber's influence extended beyond Marianist schools, most significantly into the broader French Catholic landscape.

The Crypt was the incubator for *Le Sillon*, which evolved into one of the most influential Catholic political and social movements in France. Father Leber supported the movement's early goal of forming a “common soul” among young intellectuals and workers to practice democratic life based on Christian principles. He participated in national events, such as the Congress of Besançon in 1898, where he represented Marianist interests alongside the leaders of the Catholic Association of French Youth. He engaged in public advocacy by giving conferences at external institutions, such as the Luxembourg Club, to explain his pedagogical vision for using social study clubs to train young people for civic and social responsibility in a modern democracy.

Ultimately, Father Leber sought to prepare what he called “hearts of apostles”—young men (at that time, Marianist secondary schools were not coeducational) who would enter professional life after school and actively work to realize a Christian social order within the Third Republic.

Brother Louis Cousin (1855–1931) was the other significant Marianist religious to participate in and promote Sangnier's movement. Cousin was an “apostle” of the movement as an enthusiastic proponent of the Sillonists and directed two of their social

study clubs himself. He composed a social catechism to provide a practical program for the Sillonist clubs, which used debate and fraternization between middle-class intellectuals and young workers as their primary methods.

As the Adjunct for Primary Education in the Society of Mary's General Administration, Cousin used his influence to publicize *Le Sillon* throughout the Society of Mary, encouraging young Marianists and students to join the movement after their studies. Brother Cousin and Pope Leo XIII were aligned in their social mission. And while Cousin's interaction with the pope was primarily through the governance of the Society of Mary, he acted as a key agent in realizing Leo XIII's broader pastoral objectives. Cousin worked tirelessly to educate Marianist youth on "social economics" based on Leo XIII's encyclicals, such as *Immortale Dei* and *Sapientiae christianae*, along with *Rerum Novarum*.

More than just interesting history, the efforts of Sangnier, Leber, and Cousin, beginning with "The Crypt" in 1893, significantly reshaped student social action by moving beyond traditional piety toward direct engagement with social and political issues. These blossoms reflect the radical innovations of Father Chaminade with the Bordeaux Sodality (for which he was criticized by some local pastors⁵), which have come to fruition in our work today both in Marianist Lay Communities and in Marianist high schools and universities.

Along with our appreciation of this cooperation with the Holy Spirit, we can be encouraged and motivated to continue the legacy of Marianists and popes named Leo. In his 2025 apostolic letter *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, Pope Leo XIV concludes the letter on education with a call to action to educators, appealing for integral formation, serving the vulnerable, and enlivening three verbs for a civic examination of conscience: "disarm words, lift the gaze, and guard the heart."⁶

⁵ See, *The Spirit of Our Foundation*, vol. 3, § 212, pp. 231-40.

⁶ Leo XIV, *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, Apostolic Letter (Vatican: October 27, 2025), § 11.2.