

The 91-Year Journey to the Beatification Blessed Father William Joseph Chaminade

by Tom Redmond, SM

On Thursday, September 3, 2020, the Marianist Family marked the twentieth anniversary of the beatification of Father William Joseph Chaminade. The miraculous healing of Elena Graciela Otero, a lay Marianist in Buenos Aires, Argentina, through the intercession of Father Chaminade, affirmed the many efforts in the long 91-year journey of his cause.

This article describes the circumstances of the miraculous healing and then looks at two separate historical events on the road to the beatification of Father Chaminade.

Miraculous Healing of Elena Graciela Otero

In January 1991, Elena Otero began to suffer complications from a malignant tumor (thyroid cancer) on the right side of her neck that led to difficulty in her breathing. Her lay community, Myriam Peregrina, began praying to God for a cure through the intercession of Father Chaminade. Following an examination in February, doctors decided on surgery. Without Elena receiving any medical treatment or intervention, the doctors discovered during a follow-up medical exam in March that Elena's tumor was gone.

After a diocesan investigation into Elena's healing, her case was submitted to Rome in May 1996. In October, the investigation was accepted as valid by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints; two medical consultations then evaluated her case and considered the healing as "scientifically unexplainable." The Congregation voted unanimously in favor of the miraculous healing, and on December 20, 1999, the decree for the beatification of Father Chaminade was announced.

The beatification ceremony was held in Rome in September 2000 with three events:

- Saturday, September 2: Evening prayer was celebrated at Collegio Santa Maria, a Marianist school near the General Administration of the Society of Mary.
- Sunday, September 3: The beatification of Father Chaminade was celebrated in St. Peter's Square, along with the beatifications of Pope Pius IX, Pope John XXIII, Benedictine Abbot Columba Marmion, and Archbishop Tommaso Reggio.
- Monday, September 4: A Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated in St. Paul's Basilica, presided by Canadian Bishop Raymond Roussin, SM.

Two Events that Supported the Beatification

One hundred and thirty years before Father Chaminade’s beatification, two separate events, both “discoveries,” helped pave the way for the glorious 2000 celebration in St. Peter’s Square.

Event One: “Re-discovering” Chaminade

The 1870 siege of Paris by Prussian-led armies forced the General Administration of the Society of Mary into seclusion. With time on his hands, Father Joseph Simler, SM, General Assistant for Education, began looking through the archive boxes in the attic that had been moved from Bordeaux in 1861 to the new General Administration headquarters at St. Stanislas in Paris. It was here that Father Simler came to know the Founder on a deeply personal level. In those boxes were notes of retreats and conferences given by Father Chaminade and copies of his letters and his circulars. Father Simler—aided by Father Charles Klobb, SM—began detailed research, including examining city records in Périgueux, Mussidan, and Bordeaux. The life and the vision for mission of William Joseph Chaminade started to come into focus.

This research led to the publication of the biography of Father Chaminade in 1901, along with the publication of the first volumes of *The Spirit of Our Foundation* and the initial volumes of the *Letters of Father Chaminade*.

With this new awareness of the Founder and a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Marianist charism, the General Chapter of 1905 encouraged the General Administration to open the cause for Chaminade’s beatification. The cause was introduced on the archdiocesan level in Bordeaux in 1909. Seven years later, in 1916, the Archbishop of Bordeaux wrote the decree stating that the cause for Father Chaminade was worth pursuing, and the cause was introduced in Rome.

Event Two: “Dis-covering” Chaminade

The second event that supported Chaminade’s cause happened in the same timeframe. After the Founder died on January 22, 1850, his coffin was buried in a large common crypt reserved for diocesan clergy. In 1871, twenty-one years later, Father Estignard (a former Marianist) and Father Lalanne, SM, joined efforts to preserve the heritage of Father Chaminade by erecting a mausoleum for Chaminade.¹

Fathers Estignard and Lalanne received proper permission to enter the crypt from the Superior General (Father Chevaux, SM) and the mayor of Bordeaux. It was difficult for the pair to find the specific casket after twenty-one years of diocesan clergy having been buried in this common vault. But Father Estignard had been present at the funeral for Father Chaminade, so he knew what he was looking for—a

¹ The following details were drawn from Father Joseph Stefanelli’s “From Old Bones, New Vigor,” located in *Marianist Visions*, vol. XXI, nos. 7 and 9 (Province of the Pacific: Dec. 1, 1993 and Jan. 1, 1994); and Herbert G. Kramer, SM, *Chaminade Lore* (Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission, 1983), 420-22.

large oak coffin, circled by iron bands. In January 1871, Estignard and Lalanne, along with cemetery personnel, entered the crypt. They climbed down ten steps to enter the vault, which was 30' long by 18' wide.

They found the casket after a long search; it was in the back, resting on the ground. Finding Father Chaminade's coffin among so many was one thing, but moving it to the center of the vault for examination was another. As they tried to carry the moldy and worm-eaten casket, pieces broke off, but they finally were able to get it to the center of the vault and to remove the remaining pieces of the coffin.

Both Estignard and Lalanne immediately recognized the skull—the strong forehead and large temples—as Chaminade's head. Also, Lalanne recognized the small crucifix in the coffin as the one from Father Chaminade's room. There was a book bound in a well-preserved calfskin covering that Estignard recognized as the *Manual of the Servant of Mary*, the only book Father Chaminade composed and had printed. The remains were placed in a new casket, which was transferred in late 1871 to the newly constructed mausoleum.

As mentioned earlier, Chaminade's cause was introduced to Rome in 1916 by the Archdiocese of Bordeaux. In April 1922, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints moved Chaminade's cause to the next level—the official recognition of his remains. If Estignard and Lalanne had not taken the initiative to search for the coffin and erect the mausoleum, Father Chaminade's remains could have been lost forever. But now, because of the actions of these two priests, the remains could easily be located, identified, and examined—a necessary step in advancing the cause of beatification.

Road to Venerable and Blessed Chaminade

On April 19, 1922, the mausoleum was unlocked, and Father Chaminade's 1871 coffin was opened. The bodily remains were examined by doctors, the local bishop, and some religious and lay Marianists. An official documenting of the remains was made. Then, Father Chaminade was placed in a new coffin—his third (1850, 1871, 1922). The remnants of the coffin of 1871 were placed in an oak container that was sealed and taken to the Chapel of the Madeleine.

In 1936, the Congregation for the Cause of Saints raised several questions about the last years of Father Chaminade, but the growing tensions that led to World War II hampered progress on a response.

In 1967 Father Vincent Vasey, SM, the Postulator General for the Society of Mary,² asked the Congregation for the Cause of the Saints to specify their questions and concerns regarding Father Chaminade. Father Vasey's detailed response addressed the concerns raised by Rome; his book, *The Last Years of Father Chaminade 1841-1850*, shares his research with the Marianist Family.

² The Postulator General is the official representative of a religious order who interacts with Rome on the causes of its members.

In February 1973, a favorable opinion was given on the recognition of the heroic virtues of Father Chaminade, and on October 18, 1973, Pope Paul VI ratified the vote of the Congregation of the Causes of Saints and declared Father Chaminade “Venerable.” At that point, a miracle through the intercession of Father Chaminade was needed to obtain his beatification. After eighteen years of waiting, the Marianist Family received the miracle: the healing of Elena Otero through the intercession of Father Chaminade. As described earlier, the beatification of Father Chaminade was held in September 2000.

Now, only a second miracle is needed for Blessed Father William Joseph Chaminade to be declared a saint.

Concluding Thoughts: Meaning of Father Chaminade’s Beatification

With his Beatification by the Church, Blessed Father Chaminade is recognized as a holy man. We are encouraged to pray to him, to ask for his intercession, and to trust in his intercession. It is appropriate to conclude this article with reflections from some of our Marianist wisdom figures on the holiness of Father Chaminade.

Good Father Ernest Sorret, the Superior General during the early efforts of the cause for beatification, wrote that we are in a position of collaboration with the cause of Father Chaminade. “Miracles will not occur unless we supplicate the Almighty for them, and they will be of no probatory worth for the cause unless we obtain them through his intercession.”³

Father Joe Stefanelli, SM, reflects that for us—religious and lay Marianists—God graces us with a gift that the whole Church now enjoys, which we are to preserve, enliven, and share with others. Individually, we are called “to know and live the spirit and aims of the founders, we are called to study their lives, spend time with them, to enter into their inner dispositions, and to allow their dreams and hopes and vision to become ours gradually.”⁴

³ Ernest Joseph Sorret, SM, *Circ.* 7, Jan. 22, 1926.

⁴ Joseph Stefanelli, SM, “Founders, Still Alive and Well” in *Marianist Visions*, no. 9, Jan. 1, 1991 (Province of the Pacific).