

WILLIAM JOSEPH CHAMINADE AND THE FRENCH SCHOOL OF SPIRITUALITY

Introduction

In preparing for this presentation¹, I was reading Jean-Jacques Olier in the Classics of Western Spirituality published by Paulist Press, in *Bérulle and the French School: Selected Writings* and came across a quotation from Chapter 4 of the *Introduction to the Christian Life and Virtues*. It struck me as a very good description of Father William Joseph Chaminade's plan of action:

“God’s way of advancing a soul is first to point out faults that are contrary to the virtues as well as its powerlessness to protect itself and to preserve itself from them without the help of Jesus Christ.

Second, he places before its eyes adept people who are committed to the study and practice of the purity of the virtues. They become for the soul living models and supplements of the presence of Jesus Christ. He then gives it the desire to imitate them.

Third, this good master of souls gives, through his Spirit, the grace to tame the flesh, which is opposed to virtue. He also even brings it, despite its resistance, to an interior exercise of the virtues.

Fourth, he shows the soul the purity of the virtues and the holy way in which our Lord himself practiced them, grounding it with a disposition toward these virtues through Jesus Christ, who is the one and only master of them. And this becomes so natural to the soul, which is thus grounded, that it is only in this divine exercise that it experiences joy and freedom.”²

We will see as we go on how a propos these words of Olier’s are.

Who was William Joseph Chaminade?

Who was William Joseph Chaminade? At the time of his beatification in 2000 he was called an “Apostle of the Laity.” In an earlier time he was appreciated for his Marian insights and spirituality. He was a founder of lay communities of faith and credited with continuing the work of the Jesuit sodalities after the French Revolution (during the suppression of the Society of Jesus). Out of his work with lay communities came two religious congregations called Marianist. First the Marianist Sisters or Daughters of Mary Immaculate (1816) and a year later the Society of Mary (Marianists) composed of brothers and priests.

¹ Presentation at the Fifth Conference Retreat on the French School of Spirituality, Christ the King Seminary, Buffalo, New York, USA, July 30 - August 4, 2005.

² Jean-Jacques Olier, *Introduction to the Christian Life and Virtues*, in William Thompson, Ed., *Bérulle and the French School: Selected Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989, p. 227-228.

He was born in the town of Périgueux in Southwest France about 150 Kilometers /100 miles Northeast of Bordeaux on April 8, 1761. He died in Bordeaux on January 22, 1850 – after having lived through the final thirty years of the Ancien Regime in France, the French Revolution (or as the French say, the Great Revolution), the Napoleonic era, the Restoration and then the July Revolution of 1830, which was a serious setback to his activities.

He had three brothers who became priests – Jean-Baptiste, the oldest, entered the Jesuits in 1759 shortly before their suppression in France in 1763, Blaise became a Franciscan Recollect, and Louis became a diocesan priest. There were fifteen children altogether, six of whom lived to adulthood. William was the youngest of these.

The three brothers, Jean-Baptiste, former Jesuit, Louis and William were together from 1771 at the minor seminary at Mussidan, a small town between Bordeaux and Périgueux – Jean-Baptiste as teacher and eventually superior, Louis and William as students and later, after joining the Congregation of St. Charles which was responsible for the seminary – as teachers – and for William, business manager. Louis and William were ordained some time around 1785, William after some period of time in Paris at the Seminary of Laon, a Sulpician residence, probably in December-January 1782/3 and perhaps for a time a bit later. He had studied theology in Bordeaux earlier.

As the events of the Revolution unfolded with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and its required oath which he refused to take, he left Mussidan (the Collège had already been confiscated) and went to Bordeaux for seven years of clandestine ministry there. He was thirty years old. In 1797, after an easing of the revolutionary regulations against non-juring priests, and then a sudden re-imposition he had to leave France and go into exile. He went to Spain where he met his brother Louis – and together they went to Saragossa where they stayed for three years. Saragossa is the location of one of the most important shrines to Mary in Spain – Our Lady of the Pillar, where Mary (living in Jerusalem at the time) is said to have appeared to St. James, the apostle, who was discouraged on his evangelizing journey in Spain.

There were obviously discussion there about what kind of pastoral activity would be most useful when a return to France would be possible – there were many French priests in exile in Spain (as well as in England, the Germanic states, the papal states, etc.). This seems to have been an important period in Chaminade's life, and a time when he came to some clarity about his future ministry. Marianist tradition places a divine inspiration for his work here at the shrine of Our Lady of the Pillar. It is a Marian inspiration.

At the end of 1800, he was able to return to France and within weeks had opened an Oratory and begun the development of the Sodality, or what we today call Marianist Lay Communities, communities of faith. It was a continuation of the Jesuit Sodality which had already passed through numerous hands after the Jesuit suppression, and I think it was also Chaminade's way of continuing the work of Missions so important a century before among the leaders within the French School of Spirituality. He also developed what we might call a secular institute or something modeled on the secret communities within the Jesuit Sodalities, the Aa groups (which, by the way, in the 19th

century the Sulpicians introduced in their seminaries as a formative tool³). In 1816 a young woman of an affiliated sodality expressed a desire to become a religious within the context of the lay community and a year later a young man expressed a similar desire. These are the foundational steps in the beginnings of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate and the Society of Mary.

To rapidly sketch out Chaminade's idea: the lay communities were a means of Christian formation, or militant re-Christianization – I think a real continuation of the missions of John Eudes, the Sulpicians, the Oratorians, the Vincentians, the Montfortians of the first generation. These were communities dedicated to Mary. In 1838, that is, twenty years after the foundation of the religious congregations, Father Chaminade wrote to the Pope, Gregory XVI,

“To erect a powerful barrier to hold back the torrent of evil, heaven has inspired me to solicit from the Holy See at the beginning of this century letters conferring on me the title of Missionary Apostolic so as to revive or to rekindle everywhere the divine torch of faith, while presenting on all sides to an astonished world, imposing masses of Catholic Christians of every age, sex, and condition, who, united in special associations [the sodalities] practice our holy religion without vanity or human respect, in all the purity of its dogmas and morals....From that time [1801], Most Holy Father, fervent Sodalities – some of men and others of women – were organized in several cities of France. Religion had the happiness of counting a large number of adherents in a relatively short time, and much good was accomplished.

But, Most Holy Father, this means, as excellent as it may be when it is wisely used, is not sufficient. Philosophism and Protestantism, favored in France by ruling power, have taken hold of public opinion and of the schools, attempting to spread in all minds, especially during childhood and youth, this libertinism of thought, more harmful even than that of the heart from which it is inseparable.

I have believed before God, Most Holy Father, that it was necessary to found two new orders, the one of virgins and the other of young men, who would prove to the world by the fact of their good example that Christianity is not an out-moded institution. They would show that the Gospel is as practicable today as it was 1800 years ago; they would challenge the propaganda hidden under a thousand and one disguises; and they would take over the battleground of the schools by opening classes of all levels and subjects, especially for those classes of people most numerous and most abandoned.

³ André Lanfrey, FMS, “La Société de Marie [Mariste] comme congrégation secrète: Essai de réinterprétation des origines maristes,” in *Marist Notebooks* (Casa generalizia, Fratelli Maristi, C.P. 10250, 00144 Roma), n. 9, July, 1996, p. 28. Probably “Les Assemblies des Amis,” the Aa were secret, more fervent groups which arose out of the Jesuit sodalities in the seventeenth century.

Here you have, Most Holy Father, the design with which Divine Providence has inspired me, in the foundation of the Society of Mary and Institute of the Daughters of Mary more than twenty years ago.”⁴

In an earlier letter to Pope Pius VII, he had explained:

“The more particular spirit of these groups is to provide a special leader for zeal, another for instruction, and still another for work, while obliging the Superior of the society to have all the members act together along these three lines without interruption.”⁵

Now, I want to make three interpretations.

1. The religious foundations were made at a time when the lay communities were strong, so I think Chaminade’s view was essentially that the religious were to be a leaven in the mass – recall Olier’s comments about the efficacy of good example – to help keep up the fervor of the origins.
2. When he talks of leaders for zeal (today we would tend to say religious life), instruction, and work, he is talking about a way of pushing the whole movement to imitate Christ who prayed, taught and acted – a reminder to live the life of Christ.
3. When speaking of raising up masses of Catholic Christians who would show by their existence that Christianity is practicable – he is responding to the changed situation in the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century where intellectual leadership had passed from the Bérulles, Oliers, Eudes, and Bossuets to the Voltaires, Rousseaus, and Diderots. He wants to prove that Christianity was livable and even attractive and enjoyable to an unbelieving public which believed Christianity was superstitious and a real block to true human development. He is thus extremely careful when he writes about “direction” to emphasize giving people the spiritual food that is appropriate to their development.

From this time on, that is from about 1818 until his death, Chaminade’s concerns and activities are all connected to the development of the religious congregations.

He is continually writing letters (many of direction), working on the constitutions, and writing drafts for a manual of direction (which included methods of prayer).

Essentially Chaminade was a man of action. He was not a theoretician or a scholar, not a writer of theological texts or spiritual reading books. He was what we might call a pastoral agent. He was implementing if you will, Olier’s directives for becoming virtuous quoted above. Whether Chaminade knew Olier before the Revolution I am not sure, but by the early 1830’s he had read these words since he had

⁴ William Joseph Chaminade, *Letters of Father Chaminade*, Thomas Poitras, SM, Trans., Monograph Series, Document 8, 9 volumes, Dayton: Marianist Resources Commission/NACMS, 1976-2004, volume 4, letter 1076, September 16, 1838.

⁵ Chaminade, *Letters*, volume 1, letter 110, January 18, 1819.

copied many sections of Olier's writings into his draft for a manual of direction in these years.

Where Olier speaks of those people adept at living the virtues becoming models for others, Chaminade uses the expression, contagion of good example. Chaminade also thought Olier needed some development especially for those not yet ready to follow Christ in faith – thus his concern for instruction at the beginning to draw people into the following of Christ.

Chaminade was developing groups. When people were in need of a way to pray he developed a method; when the religious groups needed novice masters/mistresses he wrote up notes for them in the form of letters or in the form of his many rough drafts for a manual of direction to help in their formation.

This points to one of the great difficulties in the study of Father Chaminade. The texts we have are letters, notes of talks and conferences he gave, notes for, or rather of, retreat conferences (notes taken by the retreatants which we have preserved), rough drafts of his many attempts at a manual of direction and so on. In other words, we have very sketchy texts. The approach of those who have done serious study of his writings and teaching – and of this we have quite a bit – has been to study texts and interpret them within the context of his activity.

He has a tendency to copy long sections of text from other authors in his writings. Much of this borrowing and from whom he borrowed, has been worked out, especially regarding his writings on direction (for him this can mean spiritual direction, leadership within a community or the whole congregation, formation), Mary and prayer. These studies are found mainly as introductions to the compilations of his writings on these topics and in a few very well done doctoral dissertations by Marianists in the 1950's.

There is an extensive use of others, but as Marianist scholars judge it, a use which served essentially as a good way of expressing his own thought on a topic. He picks and chooses, even when he uses whole chapters of a work.

What I am talking about would be similar to your asking me for some advice about prayer and my writing back to you saying, yes, prayer is very important, and it is important how you go about it – I have found Basil Pennington very helpful and he says this, – and I really believe it but I also think it is good to add these ideas which I found in.... This author expresses it so much better than I can..... But I also say you need....

With Father Chaminade, after quoting an author, he often develops the thought in his own way – this is true especially regarding Mary – far beyond what any of his authors have to say.

Mission

When I was teaching Marianist history and the life of Father Chaminade to the novices in Nairobi, I was pretty sure that I wanted to talk about the French School of

Spirituality. At the very least it is an important influence in the France of the 17th century and the entire period leading up to the French Revolution, thus it forms part of Father Chaminade's background. Our Marianist traditions also assign the spirituality of the French School an important place in our own spiritual life. However what was most amazing and a real eye-opener was the apostolic, missionary activity of the masters of the French School. After reading and discussing and praying over the insights of the mystics of the Rhineland and Flanders, Catherine of Genoa and St. Teresa of Avila, what did the great masters and movers in the French School do? They founded seminaries to train priests, they gave missions, and they founded religious groups to carry on the work. Without getting to the point of the congregations he founded, what did Father Chaminade do? He started out with his brothers as a member of a small missionary band in the tradition of the Mission of Périgueux founded in the previous century and ran a small seminary – what we might call today a kind of minor seminary. Father Verrier, the Marianist historian, makes reference to their missionary activity, though I am not sure what it was. In any case there was a notable connection to the tradition of the Masters of the French School. Besides, one of the patrons of the seminary and its congregation of St. Charles (Borromeo) was St. Vincent de Paul. There also is some evidence that Father Chaminade had planned to found a group of missionaries in Bordeaux after the Revolution.

I fear making too much out of this link. In the France of the 17th century many groups were also involved in giving missions, notably the Capuchins (thanks to Father Joseph perhaps) and the Jesuits. And various groups, notably the Jesuits again, also ran seminaries along with the Oratorians, the Eudists, the Sulpicians, Vincentians and diocesan priests. At the time Father Chaminade was born, the Jesuits were on the verge of being suppressed in France (1762-64), and by the time Father Chaminade was ready to study theology, they had been suppressed in the entire Church as well (in 1773). Father Chaminade's brother, Jean Baptiste, the former Jesuit, also was a member of the congregation of St. Charles, but he had joined an already existing group and had not been the founder of it. One can imagine a number of interesting possibilities in the interactions involved.

Raymond Deville in his book on the French School⁶ traces out an interesting development in the apostolic activity of the founders of the French School. As the founders wanted to renew the Church and developed groups which gave missions and helped in the training of priests, they recognized more and more the need of follow-up of their missions, one time revival events, with well-trained leaders, pastors of the people, well-trained priests who knew how to continue and maintain the good that had been achieved by the missionaries. Deville notes the development of centers of formation. It is an easy step to the development of schools just as it had been an easy step to the development of seminaries. No matter in which direction you started one concern fed into the other – to renew the faithful with missions, well-trained missionaries were needed and to continue, well-trained pastors were necessary. If you had well-formed priests, it was important to think about what it was they were to do or it was a necessary consequence that they would have some zeal for the renewal of the Church in the same way that they had been renewed.

⁶ Raymond Deville, *The French School of Spirituality: An Introduction and Reader*, trans. Agnes Cunningham, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994, p. 112-113.

Father Chaminade takes this line of development a step further and develops the Christian community as the means of Christian formation, bringing together the intensity of the mission-revival and the on-going formative value of the Christian community. He called his communities permanent missions. The first mention I have seen of others using the term is quoted in Berthelot du Chesnay's *The Missions of St. Jean Eudes*, "The Superior of Saint-Lazare [very likely St. Vincent de Paul himself] was not out of his element. 'One provides in the seminary,' he wrote 'something like a perpetual mission and one sees in it proportionately the same fruits as one sees in the missions in the countryside and in the towns. For example, some holders of benefices and some priests, after having lived for a long time in dissoluteness are converted (...). If they have inveterate enmities among themselves, they reconcile with one another with letters full of humility. They restore large sums to the Church or to those to whom they belong. The holy fathers of the first and of the most recent centuries, cited in canon law, often call clerics incorrigible; but thanks to God, their improvement is normal in the Seminaries where they have been.'"⁷ Other uses more directly of "permanent mission" do not go into detail but leave a similar impression of the meaning.

In the history of the Diocese of Bordeaux Raymond Darricau says:

"Jesuits, Capuchins, Franciscan Recollects, Vincentians, were the developers of these missions. The first center was the Collège of the Madeleine and its influence extended from Saintonge to Béarn by means of permanent missions such as that of Sainte-Foy-la-Grande.

In the protestant region of Sainte-Foy, at the time part of the diocese of Agen, there was a permanent mission of Franciscan Recollects from 1623 [in the period preceding 1719]."⁸

It is not obvious or clear what the meaning of the term "permanent mission" is, but it does seem to have the sense of a group of missionaries involved in an on-going mission activity similar to the missions preached at the time in various parts of France.

Louis Châtellier, in *La religion des pauvres: Les sources du christianisme moderne XVIe-XIXe siècles*, which has been translated into English, says

"Thus the special event which was a mission, had just blended into daily parish life until it became part of its substance. With the Redemptorists the distinction between mission and pastoral work ended up disappearing.

⁷ Charles Berthelot du Chesnay, *Les Missions de saint Jean Eudes: Contribution à l'histoire des missions en France au XVIIe siècle*, Paris: Procure des Eudistes, 1967, p. 186. The reference for the citation is found in footnote 109: Abelly, *La vie du vénérable*, livre II, p. 301. There is no lack of reproach of the first seminaries for having remained too missionary. But ought they not to have begun by adjusting themselves to the average member of the clergy? By aiming higher they would have been without doubt more admired and less effective. See the critique of the "foyers of spiritual reformation" by A-G Martimort, *Le gallicanisme de Bossuet*, Paris, 1953, p. 183-201.

⁸ Raymond Darricau, "Les temps modernes" in J.R. Palanque and B. Plongeron, *Histoire des diocèses de France*, volume 2 *Le Diocèse de Bordeaux*, (sous la direction de Bernard Guillemain) Paris: Beauchesne, 1974, p. 128-129.

Clement Marie Hofbauer, at Warsaw from 1787 to 1808 and then at Vienna from 1808 to 1820, succeeded in making the church or the chapel of which he was in charge, a place of permanent mission both for those who lived nearby and for those faithful who came from very far to hear him”.⁹

The form this activity took with Father Chaminade is described by Father Armbruster as “of the socio-religious order where Brothers and Sisters and priests can be active: schools, orphanages, catechesis, Christian exhortation, Marian sodalities, individual and group retreats, in short education in the faith which can take myriad forms.” He notes that this is not the form of apostolate taken by the Clerics Regular, such as the Jesuits, which was more priestly. This way of talking is familiar among Marianists and the permanent mission is associated more with a permanence of the activity and commitment to the people involved in various aspects of their lives. However, I think that there is more emphasis to be put on the line of development from the missions preached throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and into the nineteenth, which gives a particular character to the missionary activity more in line with a revival of Christian fervor and formation.

One of the characteristic features of the French School which Chaminade preserves is the emphasis on deep spirituality and theology in the midst of an intense activity. This is characteristic of his works and something that has always been noted by those studying or teaching these things.

The communities of faith are Marian. Chaminade puts his emphasis on the mystery of Jesus, Son of Mary, in which he finds everything summed up. Mary is associated in all the mysteries of Christ and forms Christ. She continues this role even today forming the believers who are to become Christ, to be conformed to Christ. The community is one mode of this formation – communities in the spirit of Mary the Mother of Christ who continues to act as mother. This puts a particular character on missionary zeal, a zeal which acts as Mary would act. One is formed by Mary into Christ and at the same time acts as Mary’s agent, imitating her action in the formation of others. The Son of Mary is one who goes on mission, preaching and praying and healing.

What can we say about Father Chaminade’s thought in relation to the French School?

There is a way in which Father Chaminade is very much a man of his times. We can chart the influences on him and we find him doing things and saying things that people of his times did and said. He willed his belongings at his death to the local hospital (a cross between a hospital as we know it and a charitable undertaking for the poor) just like any good *Ancien Régime* Christian would have done. He says many things about the world and human nature that many of his contemporaries also said. For example, he talks of the clouds of pestilential smoke belching forth from the abyss and so on. He is very obedient and deferential to the hierarchy. But he also surprises; he

⁹ Louis Châtellier, *La religion des pauvres: Les sources du christianisme moderne XVIe-XIXe siècles*, Collection “Histoire,” Paris: Aubiers, 1993. The quotations are found on pages 251-252.

develops things in his own way, for example, his view of the Sodality more along the lines of a mass movement in which the members take responsibility for the mission or his bringing together all classes in one organization rather than in many. There is as well, his development of Olier or the other authors he uses, his bringing together Jesuit insights into prayer and the Sulpician method. There is an originality to him.

I will try to point out these tendencies by considering his writings on direction, prayer (really mental prayer) and Mary.

What Chaminade writes on direction is generally written with the formation of Marianist novice masters and mistresses in mind, or for the Constitutions of the religious congregations. At the time of the foundation of the religious congregations Chaminade was 56 years old, having had a long and varied experience – twenty years as student, teacher and business manager at a school, ten years of clandestine ministry during the Revolution, fifteen years forming and directing lay communities of faith. Most of his writings on direction date from around ten years later – 1828 and later – when he is sixty-seven. The members of the religious congregations for the most part are much younger than he is. He is a man of considerable experience.

He writes letters to particular individuals who have been named novice master but who need advice and training. He is not on the scene or wants something more permanent and writes with a larger audience in mind as well – this person, but all the other novice masters too. He also tries to write a Manual of Direction for the Institute. When we look at these writings we find that he borrows significantly from French School writers.

For example, when he wrote a series of ten letters to a new novice master, Father Metzger, at Ebersmunster in Alsace, Father Chaminade borrowed heavily from other authors. Bernardin de Picquigny, a Capuchin Franciscan, was one of these. The Marianist Father Armbruster identifies him as a French School author of the second rank. He used material for two of his letters from Picquigny's *Efficacious Practice for Living and Dying Well*, a book of retreat exercises. The sections he uses deal with the religious state and union with Jesus in praising and adoring God. And he is only one of a number he makes use of. Others include Henri-Marie Boudon, Archdeacon of Evreux and the most widely read spiritual writer of the 17th century, Luc Vaubert, SJ, Jean-Paul de Sault, OSB.¹⁰

Then there is Olier. In 1829 the works of Olier were republished in France and sometime after that Chaminade, writing drafts for the Manual of Direction and advising novice masters makes a number of statements like the following:

“I am very glad that you like the doctrine of Father Olier in his *Introduction [to the Christian Life and Virtues]* and his *Little Catechism*. I should not want us to have another doctrine.”¹¹

¹⁰ See the introduction and notes concerning the Letters to a Novice-Master in William Joseph Chaminade, *Écrits de direction*, J.B. Armbruster, ed., in volume 2. This is published in English as *Marianist Direction*

¹¹ Chaminade, *Letters*, addressed to Father Chevaux, August 30, 1833, volume 3, no. 701.

“Here I cannot help citing for you a counsel, however long it may be, of Father Olier to the young men of his seminary. He seems to include his whole doctrine which is also ours.”¹²

“I left with Father Chevaux a very precious little pamphlet by Father Olier. It is called *Introduction to Christian Life and Virtues*. He needs to learn it well and, so to say, make himself a master of it, both for himself and for others.”¹³

Father Chaminade is inspired by or copies whole sections of text from Olier, particularly the *Introduction to the Christian Life and Virtues*, while at the same time noting that Olier needs some development on some points. These have to do it seems with problems neophytes would have if they had not had a good foundation yet or if they had been badly directed earlier. But it is also clear that he goes beyond Olier especially when it comes to Mary.

(L466) “Our Lord Jesus Christ came into this world in order to bring to it respect and love for his Father, and to establish his kingdom and his religion.

During the 33 years that Jesus Christ lived on earth, he took root in the minds and hearts of the faithful whom he foresaw ere ordained to be those in whom he should diffuse his own religion, in order to honor his Father in them, just as he did in himself.

(L467) Mary was the first one to be conceived in Jesus Christ according to the spirit, as Jesus Christ was himself conceived according to nature in her virginal womb. Mary, that is, was formed interiorly to resemble Jesus Christ, her adorable son, and was associated from then on in all his mysteries, both in their exterior and their interior aspects; so that her conformity might be the most perfect possible, or rather, that there might be as much *uniformity* as possible.

Thus Jesus Christ is the first of the predestined. Thus there will be no predestined except those who are conformable to Jesus Christ, and all the predestined will be conceived and formed in Mary. “*Your womb is a heap of wheat*” (Song 8:3).

At the moment of the incarnation, faith in the Son of God becoming man was in Mary as a grain of wheat sown in her soul, which made her conceive Jesus Christ and all the predestined by the operation of the Holy Spirit.

(L468) Our Lord continued after his death to obtain for men by all the devices of his love that virtue of religion toward God; and he gave them his spirit, which is the spirit of God living in him, to establish in them the very attitudes of his own soul; so that, communicating thus his holy virtue of religion, he formed God’s one and only religious, composed of himself and all Christians.

¹² Chaminade, *Letters*, addressed to Father Chevaux, March 11, 1834; volume 3, no. 728.

¹³ Chaminade, *Letters*, addressed to Brother Clouzet, December 3-5, 1831; volume 3, no. 611.

Reigning in Heaven, he lives in the hearts and the pens of the Evangelists, in the hearts and mouths of his Apostles, to establish everywhere contempt for the creature and respect for God alone. The spirit of god continues in priests what it did in Jesus Christ.”¹⁴

In this quotation paragraphs 466 and 468 come from Olier’s *Introduction* chapter one on the virtue of religion. Paragraph 467 is Chaminade’s. However, as Fr. Ron Bagley pointed out in the discussion, it is also very French School in its mode of expression, especially when talking about the exterior and interior dimensions of mysteries.

Much of what Chaminade borrows from Olier concerns conformity with Christ. Before this time he tended to focus on the ascetical method, now the emphasis is more on conformity with Christ.

How does the Christian arrive at conformity with Christ? Chaminade says,

“Mary cared for the Infant Jesus and was associated in all the states of His life, death and resurrection. The elect arrive at the fullness of the perfect age, a St. Paul says, only insofar as Mary is for them what she was for Christ.”¹⁵

And so we have moved easily into the topic of Mary. Most of what follows here comes from the research of Father Thomas Stanley, SM, which is found in his doctoral dissertation *The Mystical Body of Christ According to the Writings of Father William Joseph Chaminade*.¹⁶

For Father Chaminade the focal mystery of Christ to be entered into is that of Jesus Christ the Son of God who became the son of Mary. The most significant thing about Jesus is that he is the Son of Mary. And it is the way salvation came about. Various members of the French School emphasized one or the other mystery, but certainly the Incarnation was central – the Son of God became a human person for the salvation of humanity. It is the sum of all Spirituality. For Father Chaminade He became Son of Mary.

Mary is to perform for all believers, the body of which Christ is the head, what she did for Jesus – she was mother, forming him as all mothers do. Following Bossuet, Chaminade notes that “God having once willed to give us Jesus Christ by the Blessed Virgin, His decree never changes ‘for the gifts and call of God are without repentance’ (Rom 11:29).”¹⁷

“Mary has really nourished and educated the Son of God. She accompanied Him on his journeys, in his disgraces, and even in His death. Mary

¹⁴ William Joseph Chaminade, *Écrits de direction*, J.B. Armbruster, SM, ed., volume 2, published in English as *Marianist Direction*, volume 3, nos. 466-468.

¹⁵ Chaminade, *Retreat of 1827*.

¹⁶ Thomas Stanley, SM, *The Mystical Body of Christ According to the Writings of Father William Joseph Chaminade: A Study of his Spiritual Doctrine*, Fribourg: St. Paul’s Press, 1952.

¹⁷ William Joseph Chaminade, *Écrits marials*, 2 vols., J. B. Armbruster, SM, ed., translated into English as *Marian Writings*, 2 vols., Dayton: Marianist Resources Commission, 1980, vol. 1, no. 359.

has also nourished, strengthened, protected, and accompanied all the saints in their difficulties and their work.”¹⁸

Father Stanley in his dissertation makes a comparison of Chaminade’s view of Mary and Grignon de Montfort’s view.¹⁹ Stanley’s view is that Chaminade moves beyond the interest of the masters of the French School in their contemplation of the infant Jesus, so humbled, to the contemplation and imitation of the adult son of Mary who went on mission, preaching, praying, and working signs.

Besides Mary the Mother, he will speak of Mary the Promised Woman, taking off from Genesis 3:15 and picking up the theme of Mary’s role at the end of time. He believes in a permanent role of Mary in the life of the Church.

In Chaminade’s writings on mental prayer we have a similar approach – he cites authors who can express his viewpoint, but his viewpoint seems to be much more synthetic. There is a strong Jesuit influence. The traditions of the Marianists say that William Joseph’s brother Jean-Baptiste, the former Jesuit, introduced him to and taught him mental prayer. The textual evidence is also strong. Father Jacques Nouet, a Jesuit, wrote a book called *L’homme d’oraison* (The Man of Prayer), which we are told Chaminade kept at his bedside and read every evening. It is also clear from the texts that Chaminade takes the Sulpician method of mental prayer and adapts it by making use of Jesuit insights on prayer. What the Marianist scholars who study this question tell us is that Father Chaminade gives prayer a particular orientation which moves it beyond both the Sulpician and Jesuit influences so that it becomes something uniquely his (and they would suggest uniquely able to help his followers carry out their mission). It resulted in a method of prayer on the Creed.

How did Chaminade come to know the Sulpician method? He did study, at least briefly, at the Seminary of Laon, a Sulpician house in Paris. The method had been worked out by Olier and by Father Lantages, spiritual director and superior of the seminary at Le Puy, and had been included in a work by Father Letourneau, *La Méthode d’Oraison Mentale du Séminaire de Saint-Sulpice* (The Method of Mental Prayer of the Seminary of St. Sulpice). Perhaps Father Chaminade had kept a copy of the book. It was also a method rather widely used and diffused throughout France in the eighteenth century. In any case its influence is found in the very first method of mental prayer composed for the new Society of Mary by the first head of Zeal, Jean Lalanne, who probably knew the method from his first retreat under Father Chaminade’s direction. Lalanne’s method is worked out according to the plan of the Sulpician method.

¹⁸ William Joseph Chaminade, Retreat of 1827, notes of Fr. Chevaux, p. 21, in Stanley, p. 133.

¹⁹ Stanley, p. 148ff. Many have noted a great similarity between the Marian thought of Grignon de Montfort and Father Chaminade. Father Ron Bagley raised the question whether there is any link with the Marian thought of Saint John Eudes. For both Montfort and John Eudes, there is no evidence (yet discovered) of a dependence on the part of Chaminade on either of them. Though Father Chaminade knew Montfort’s congregation by 1832, the similarity of thought is explained as a parallel development based on the same earlier sources. I know of no study on a relationship with the thought of John Eudes.

There is an interesting set of notes which supposedly could come either from the Sulpician method or from Father Nouet, but which proclaim Chaminade's "pet idea" that the life of the religious is but an extension of his prayer or of its preparation.²⁰

There are a number of historical questions one could ask, but it is clear that there was a strong Sulpician influence on Father Chaminade's view and development of mental prayer, just as there was a strong Jesuit influence, all of which resulted in something new.

It would be worth mentioning in passing Chaminade's great emphasis on Baptism, another of the favorite themes of the French School, and on faith. When it came to faith he proposed putting before our eyes what we believed, to see in faith Jesus Christ, and to consider the events of our life in the light of faith. His prayer of faith worked at developing this habit. He once remarked that if we were to be conformed to Christ, to become like Him, we really ought to put Him before our eyes to see who He is and what He is like.

What conclusions would I draw about William Joseph Chaminade's connection to the French School of Spirituality?

It seems to me fairly clear that he was strongly influenced by this spirituality. Given the strong influence of the French School in general and St. Sulpice in particular in the seminary formation in France in the eighteenth century, it would be easy to imagine Father Chaminade's formation following those lines. His use of and enthusiasm for Olier suggests that he found in Olier someone who expressed well his own well formed and well founded convictions. One could ask where this affinity comes from – is it a general sense? – or is it more specific? Chaminade's main interest in Olier has to do with conformity with Christ. Chaminade also is fond of the Johannine and Pauline texts so much favored by the French School authors

It also seems fairly well established that Father Chaminade was an original thinker as well and made judgments about what he would use and what he would not. This suggests that he develops French School thought or perhaps takes aspects of this thought in a new direction.

Finally what he does is to find ways of directing persons and groups based on the principles he learned and discovered. He was excellent at moving people to take up the challenge of showing that Christianity was livable and even attractive and enjoyable to an unbelieving public which believed that Christianity was superstitious and a real block to true human development.

His focus on living the mysteries of Jesus, led him to the mystery of the Son of God who became the Son of Mary, and I would say from this flowed his activity – communities of faith with a Marian spirit and a Marian way of acting.

²⁰ See William Joseph Chaminade, *Écrits d'oraison*, R. Halter, SM, ed., published in English as *Writings on Mental Prayer*, Dayton: Marianist Resources Commission, 1979, section 128* and the different introductory notes.

To conclude I would like to quote Brother Hugh Bihl regarding the Marianist debt to the French School:

“The Marianist linkage to the French School of Spirituality ...opens us to a spiritual path that is strongly contemplative, even mystical, in its orientation, one that is concentrated on savoring the mystery of Christ in all its depth and allowing this mystery to captivate us in the totality of our life. In this instance, I am using the word “mystical” in a fairly broad sense – meaning an opening to the mystical, a desire to be nourished by it and a willingness to dispose oneself to receive whatever mystical grace may come. No spiritual path can be mystical in the strict sense, since the mystical is by definition beyond all known paths.

This mystical legacy comes to us especially in the Chaminadean teaching that Mary shares in all the mysteries of Christ, that we are to be “nursed and reared” by her as Jesus was, that her maternal task is to initiate and confirm us in the living out of all these mysteries. (See Constitutions of 1839, art. 5; 1891 Rule, art. 4.)”²¹

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²¹ Hugh Bihl, SM, *The Marianist Person at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century*, Modern Theology and Marianist Spirituality, 5, (Rome: General Administration, Society of Mary, 2001), p.100.