

## MARIANIST FOUNDERS FACE THE WORLD OF 2011

Dear Friends,

I feel honored to speak with this UD audience tonight, as we inaugurate this Chaminade Year commemorating the 250<sup>th</sup> birthday of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade. I was asked to reflect on how our founder worked together with others, especially with his two principal women associates, in laying the groundwork and how we might still build on that foundation here today.

First of all, it is a daunting task! 250 years is a long stretch of history. It takes us back to the years immediately before the founding of the USA, when our American population was only one percent of its current size, mainly a mixture of British immigrants and African slaves. 250 years ago, in 1761, the world was still in the Age of Absolute rulers. No country was yet governed by elections with universal suffrage. The great majority of people everywhere were still illiterate, and education was reserved to the upper crust, or (as we say in India, where I live most of the time) the “creamy layer.” Colonialism was still a new idea, and “globalization” was an unknown word. In 1761 the Industrial Revolution had not yet begun, though it was just on the horizon with such ingenious inventions as a loom that you could operate by energetic foot-and-leg pumping, like one of those machines to maximize exercise in the Rec-Plex. How many key steps in philosophy and religion, science and technology, economics and politics, business and law, art and music and literature and architecture still lay in the future! Just to conjure up a few names, it was before Napoleon, Queen Victoria and Abraham Lincoln, Hitler and Stalin, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Marx, Freud, Darwin and Mendel, Edison and Einstein....A long time ago indeed!

Contemplating such a long swath of history, we might expect to unearth items of quaint antiquarian interest but nothing that would be of much practical value. Yet we are here tonight to refocus and sharpen our attention on something that we believe is of key importance here in Dayton and even universally for our life in the globalized world of 2011.

We are here because our key Marianist Founder, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, was born 250 years back, in a small city in the Dordogne, deep in the heart of France. His associate, the great urban social-worker Marie-Thérèse de Lamourous, was already seven years old. Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, the younger woman who was to join with Chaminade and take the lead in extending the movement of Marianist life into the countryside, was still a generation in the future.

These founders from a distant past show us a way of living and working that helps in the necessary transformation of society in our own times.

I think most of you associated with UD know some basic outlines, which I will not repeat, of the lives of Blessed Father Chaminade, of Adèle and Marie-Thérèse in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century France. At your tables, a little while ago, you were given some intriguing questions to address. These questions were formulated by Maureen O'Rourke and her wonderful colleagues in the Rector's office. I think that one of them may offer a framework for my own comments to you this evening.

*A few moments ago at your tables you were asked, "If our Founders were alive here in Dayton today, what would they be doing? What would be the key focus of their work: perhaps sustainability? Or Inter-religious dialogue? Or Human rights?"*

It is an impossible but a stimulating question.

One of the most meaningful moments of my own Marianist came when I had to ask the same question on making a totally new foundation in India. This question propels us immediately into the heart of the matter.

I will spend my time this evening trying to answer it, for here in Dayton, today.

You can no doubt say of our founders that they wanted to work for the social good, to transform society for the better. (We hope you can say the same thing of each of us!) To reach toward this overall goal, Chaminade and associates knew that there was no going back to some *ancien régime*, some old social order which they may have loved but which no longer chimed in tune with the aspirations and

awareness, the spirit and needs of a new moment in history. Our founders decidedly did not aim to turn back the clock. Chaminade famously said that “the levers that moved the...world somehow needed a new fulcrum.” He insisted that new methods and new initiatives were necessary. The founders all thought that their movement had to be forward-looking, moving into a new era of society, in accord with a vision of reality that was based on the gospel of Jesus and in solidarity with the little people, the ordinary people of their time, those whom Chaminade called the “most numerous and the most neglected.”

This forward-looking, adaptive, realistic stance, building on strengths rather than bemoaning deficiencies, is not exclusively but it is characteristically Marianist, I think. It is part of a deep faith that God’s Providence is at work here and now, day by day, in our time. God is not the Deist clock-maker who winds up the universe and then walks away. Our human role is that of collaborating in an ongoing building of God’s Kingdom with the people and in the circumstances of our time. We are called to search for answers to real questions that people are asking at every given moment and to meet emerging needs. To use a theological term, this stance is very “incarnational,” a kind of walk with God through history, in which we are very convinced that God is to be found deep in the human experience, individual and social, of our time and place.

In a time of Restoration, such as the France of the 1820’s when our founders were creatively at work, this was by no means a sure or even predominant attitude: at that time, many - maybe most - religious people wanted to turn back the clock completely, to restore the social and ecclesial order exactly as it was before the Revolution and before Napoleon. Today also, here in America and in most parts of the world many religious people turn to fundamentalism, hoping to find a secure and reassuring certitude in a world that lacks stability and direction. It seems easier to close minds and hearts to new ideas and new groups of people rather than to reach out to include them. In contrast to such fundamentalism, a positive, transformative and dialogic stance toward the problems of the time would surely mark our founders if they were alive among us tonight. They would still be seeking, scrutinizing the signs of our times. They wouldn’t have fixed formulas to impose.

Let me sketch a few things I believe our founders would still be about if they were in Dayton in 2011.

I am sure our Founders would still today be about community. They were convinced that social transformation can only happen if groups of people work together, build on one another's strengths, supply weaknesses, offer different but complementary insights and skills. They discovered their emphasis on community in the gospel sources, and they always tried to live the gospel by sharing and participating with others, offering the witness of what Chaminade called "a people of saints," which can accomplish so much more than only individual good deeds. They knew that community was not a given but a project, fostered as people reach beyond their comfort zones and habitual social circles. In Dayton today, they would not be looking for the one perfect leader or model, but fostering a community of people, one in heart and soul but also creatively diverse, who would be committed together to seek a better world.

Another point: if Chaminade, Adèle and Marie-Thérèse were here today, they would still be seeking to integrate faith and today's culture. They would be convinced that lived faith is not only a question of theology but also of social organization and politics, justice and sharing, putting skills at the service of people, reaching out to broaden minds and hearts. They wouldn't think that preaching in the Churches was their only task or even their principal one. They would be deeply interested in communications, education and social service. Again, this is a matter of being incarnational, translating God's word and God's vision for his world into concrete realities.

I believe our founders would still be working creatively at education and the development of human potentials. 200 years ago they were highly interested in non-traditional, non-formal styles and methods, focusing on people in the day-to-day forums where they really lived and worked. Given today's world, I think they would give a special priority to the world of media and communications and instant connectivity, seeking to use it as an instrument for building faith communities. None of our founding trio worked as what today we would call an "academic," but they were all highly intelligent pragmatists who sought to ground

their action in solid right thinking. They would certainly be, today as they were 200-plus years ago, creative educators, aiming at the development of people in all aspects, at the service of a “lived faith expressed in service responsive to the needs of the times” (*Society of Mary Rule of Life*, 63).

I feel sure that our founders in 2011 would be more concerned than ever about poor and marginalized people. In the France of their day, they reached out to such illiterate and underprivileged groups as chimney-sweeps, street-children, , prisoners, women caught in exploitation as sex-workers, rugged peasants and subsistence farmers. In our day in America the faces of poverty and marginalization have changed. You can conjure up your own images, of the desperately needy people whom we see around ourselves in our streets and neighborhoods and even on our TV and internet screens if we only open our eyes. I know that our founders would be devoting their best, most diversified and most creative energies to such marginalized people. They would not be satisfied with a comfortable service within the framework of a cozy and privileged elitist space.

Another point: they would be very concerned about working method, about teamwork, being inclusive, collaborating with others, rather than dominating from above or from outside. We can see already in the 1790’s how Chaminade and Marie-Therese practiced teamwork in their ministry to a Church in distress, broken by schism and cowed by persecution. After 1800 we see Chaminade clearly working together with Adele and Marie-Therese in the founding and development of lay communities, in their care for women’s development, for meeting the needs of the poor and for youth movements.

If they were here today, they would want to involve everyone’s divergent gifts, building creatively on the strengths of each one, sharing leadership tasks with many. They would work together as one Marianist spiritual family, including the simple people and the highly educated, in all kinds of different fields. Their synergy was a collaboration of men and women, clergy and laity, rich and poor, people from the hard-working modest middle class (to which Chaminade belonged from birth) and from the higher echelons of society (represented by Marie-Thérèse and especially by Adèle) as well.

In their time they were unusual because of this inclusive team attitude. There were many dedicated and intrepid churchwomen in 19<sup>th</sup> century France, but many of them clashed with the churchmen of those days. The relationship among Chaminade and Adèle and Marie-Thérèse is exemplary and noteworthy. Chaminade defended the principle of teamwork among the diverse strata of society even long after the Revolution, in a time of Restoration when equality and fraternity were no longer popular or *a la mode*. Our founding trio seemed to have the gift of ignoring all the old distinctions, re-enforced by centuries of breeding and habit, in order to focus together on real and urgent needs.

Our founders saw diversity as a key to mission. They already believed, as we perhaps do, that diversity could stimulate new perspectives and sensitivities. Such synergy amid diversity is still not easy today, even though it now enters much more into our consciousness and our rhetoric. Our danger today in modern America might be more to let it degenerate into a fad, a matter of quotas and appearances more than inclusive inner harmony.

Your table question referred to “Sustainability”? The word had not yet been invented and modern technology was in its infancy; but yes, indeed, I know our founders would today emphasize sustainability. The UD *Ethos Program* sums up the concept nicely: “do more with less; respect the inherent values of culture; spread hope; act in solidarity.” In their day Chaminade and associates spoke and dreamed of keeping the eye on the next generation and beyond, starting where they were but looking to a very long-range goal to move “the levers of the moral world.” They wanted to adapt to real situations and realistic possibilities, rather than imposing any formula, technological or intellectual, from somewhere else. They were thoroughly rooted in local reality and local culture.

And “Inter-religious Dialogue”? Once again, the concept was not yet on the horizon of anyone in the Church of their time. Our founders knew Christians and people totally indifferent or hostile to religion, but I don’t know if they ever met any Muslims, almost surely no Hindus or Buddhists.

(Parenthetically, if today you walk the streets of the neighborhood in Bordeaux where Chaminade and Marie-Thérèse lived, you will find mainly Arabs and

Africans, with a sprinkling of Indians and Vietnamese – more Muslims, no doubt, than Christians. Even in Adèle’s smaller town of Agen, a little more like Dayton, you will find many non-French, non-European immigrants.)

Yet we should remember that in their day Bordeaux was a highly cosmopolitan place. Before the building of the Suez Canal, it was the principal point of embarkation for French ships going to Asia, Africa and America. Marie-Thérèse had an especially interesting connection and an ongoing correspondence with Korea, through Catholic missionaries who visited her and her young women as they waited to embark on the journeys that took them once and for all to their mission and their eventual martyrdom.

Our holy trio, if alive today, would be what today we call “inter-cultural.” They would not turn their backs on people who are different. They would want a dialogue of life and action, faith and cultures, would respect others, want to learn something from them at the same time as they shared their own convictions.

What about the vast area of “human rights”? Though its roots can be found in the scriptures, the concept of “human rights” is entangled at its origin with the thinking of the Enlightenment philosophers from which Chaminade and his associates kept their distance. Yet in fact our founders worked effectively and consciously to make sure that everyone could grow and be recognized, make a contribution as respectable and developing members of society. Marie-Thérèse felt called, despite her initial reluctance, to devote all her life and energy to exploited women. Adèle, also focusing on the needs of women, ignored her polished noble origins and reached out to the rough and tough rustics of her time. Chaminade motivated and worked beside many others to care for street-children and prisoners, people whose rights were callously ignored.

Out of reverence for the sacred and for the value of traditions, our founding trio did not speak much of “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*”, and in any case they were more motivated by the language of the gospel heritage. Yet in fact, following the teaching of Jesus, our Founders worked to liberate the ordinary simple people of their time and to give them a new chance for development and for sharing in a life and mission at the service of others.

To sum it up: contemplating our founders today in Dayton moves us to listen to people, to look beyond ourselves into the larger community, to see, judge and act with our hearts focused on those in greater need. And if they were here in 2011, they would be at our sides to get about the work, to “do whatever He [Christ] tells you.”

Another set of questions at your table asked about *how the pillars of the charism and the characteristics of Marianist education are alive within ourselves and within our organization at UD today.*

Well, this question you will have to answer for yourselves. I am still an outsider who spends most of his time far from Dayton but comes back now and then.

Certainly, some elements of a response are obvious. I think anyone who is here for a week or so can tell that U.D. professes unusual emphasis on the value of community and on a progressive acceptance of modernity. It wants to involve everyone in a process involving “learning, leadership and service.” It calls insistently for diversity and teamwork. It seeks to foster the integration of faith with culture, to favor their communication and inter-penetration, to raise questions of faith and values in today’s secular world.

Most of you know better than I about the dangers and limitations around us today. We might easily become superficial, so that community means little more than just being “nice folks,” hale and hearty on the exterior only. We might settle into a cozy environment, surrounded by many privileges, and forget about those who have much less. Our working processes might become burdensome, impersonal and bureaucratic. In trying to stand firmly in today’s world, we might fall into a “corporate culture” that is at core purely secular and success-oriented, wanting above all to sell ourselves in a competitive market.

Certainly Chaminade and our other founders, if alive in Dayton in 2011, would be very concerned about these dangers, about the media-fed culture of external success. They knew some very similar challenges in their own day, and they worked effectively to struggle against them. These perennial questions need



persistent attention in every era. To ask these questions and reflect on them is a valuable first step.

I have tried to share with you my own answers to some of tonight's provocative questions. You may find other answers. What is most important is that the charism and legacy and heritage given us by Blessed Chaminade and shared by Adèle and Marie-Thérèse continue alive today as a source of creativity and challenge for each of us. We are about to pass the milestone of 250 years since Chaminade's birth. It is now up to us to bring the spirit of the charism he initiated, in a collaborative way, into our world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.