

In the Footsteps of William Joseph Chaminade

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To walk the pathways once walked by an historical figure such as William Joseph Chaminade, to enter and exit his former spaces, to see and touch and honor the artifacts of his life, is to take the measure of the man.

That is what a group of twelve Marianist Educational Associates (MEAs) – faculty, staff, administrators - from Chaminade, St. Mary's and Dayton universities, guided by Fr. Bernard Lee, SM, Vice-President of Mission and Identity at St. Mary's University, did this summer on a fourteen day pilgrimage to Paris and Bordeaux, France and Zaragoza, Spain.

The purpose of the pilgrimage was to learn about and come to understand the origins of the Marianist Family through the places and historical events that shaped Chaminade's life and vision. Fr. Chaminade, like all transformational historical figures, was shaped by and then lived on to shape his day and age.

The MEA pilgrims came to know and understand Chaminade as an ordinary person of extraordinary vision who reacted to the convulsing world around him and did what he both had to do and was called to do in the circumstances of his life. This Chaminade is not the Chaminade of statues, portraits and holy cards, but the Chaminade that was confused, disenchanted and fearful at times as well as determined, hopeful and courageous.

Fr. Chaminade's mission was formed in the crucible of the French Revolution, where anti-Christian forces attempted to so thoroughly secularize French society that religious people, particularly clergy, were under constant threat of death. What made that point material for the MEAs was that on a walking tour of Bordeaux they could see and feel the physical closeness of the guillotine station at the town square to La Madeleine Chapel where Chaminade and other priests served.

"Here is where it all began" said Fr. Bernard Lee, SM as the Marianist Educational Associates stepped into the Chapel of The Madeleine in Bordeaux. It is a sober, prayerful place, with ancient grey stone walls and low lighting providing an atmosphere encouraging prayer. It was here that William Joseph Chaminade began his work and began building the Marianist Family after his return from exile in Zaragoza.

In the sacristy, the first candidates of the Society of Mary pronounced their first private vows in the hands of Fr. Chaminade, on December 11, 1817.

Within the Chapel of The Madeleine is the smaller Chaminade Chapel. At the entrance sits a bust of Fr. Chaminade carved by Marianist artist Henri Vabre. Near the small, modernist altar is positioned a crucifix symbolizing both death and resurrection. Christ,

raised on the cross, lifts his arms toward heaven as a sign of victory. Enclosed within the altar itself is a relic of Chaminade- his skull – removed from his burial spot and placed in the altar at the time of his beatification.

There was consensus among the MEAs that the most moving event of the pilgrimage was when we celebrated Eucharist together in the room of Fr. Chaminade and Fr. Lee presided. In that room, where Chaminade worked and slept from 1820-1850, is, among other artifacts of his life, a table which served as an altar for Fr. Chaminade during the French Revolution. A former kitchen table from the home of Mlle de Lamourous at Pian-Medoc, during the French Revolution an altar stone was inserted and Fr. Chaminade said Mass on it in secret. The lectern near the table is made of wood panels from Fr. Chaminade's wardrobe and was used during his life at the noviate for reading during meals.

After visiting Chaminade's tomb on the outskirts of Bordeaux, the MEAs were guided by Fr. Robert Witwicki, SM, a local Marianist priest, to the nearby towns of Perigeux, Mussidan and Agen. Chaminade was born in Perigeux and although the original site no longer exists, the pilgrims got a feeling for the town and its geographic context. At Mussidan, Fr. Chaminade attended school and later became priest and teacher at that school. Agen is the ancestral home of Adele de Batz de Trenquellion. The MEAs were honored with a tour of the rural Chateau where Adele grew-up and is still occupied by descendants of Adele. Later, they visited the tomb of Adele at the nearby convent where the hospitality by the Marianist sisters was warm and gracious.

The next major stop on the pilgrimage was Zaragoza, Spain where Chaminade and some fellow priests went into exile from 1797-1800 to escape religious persecution in revolutionary France.

Central to understanding Chaminade's exile and inspiration in Zaragoza is the dramatic, ten-spired Cathedral of Our Lady of the Pilar. Within this ancient site of pilgrimage is the actual statue of Our Lady of the Pilar, only about twelve inches tall. This statue served as the spiritual, meditative focal point for Fr. Chaminade. It was in the prayerful times before this statue that Fr. Chaminade gained insight, wisdom and courage.

Important for the MEAs as community was that we were able to celebrate Eucharist together in a side chapel, the rococo Chapel of San Antonio, with Fr. Gene Contadino, from the University of Dayton, presiding.

Time in Zaragoza was also spent with Fr. Eduardo Benlloch, SM, author of Chaminade's Message Today. In his teaching and scholarly writing, Fr. Benlloch has been instrumental in promoting the idea that Chaminade's central mission was the formation of lay communities and lay leadership, communities always as communities-in-permanent-mission, and the religious orders grew out of that same commitment, religious orders who promote lay leadership and community.

The remaining time in Zaragoza was spent visiting the Marianist communities at a grade school and a high school. Once again, the hospitality was warm and gracious – very Marianist.

The leadership genius of Fr. Chaminade was that from the crucible of social revolution he envisioned and actualized a new apostolic model of Christian leadership and organization based on lay leadership and community. For the twelve Marianist Educational Associates, this walk with Fr. Chaminade educated, inspired and animated their commitment to promoting the mission and identity of their respective universities and established a model of lay leadership for all three Marianist universities.

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