

## Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, faithful to his conscience

*As the Founder of the work, I have an obligation to make it just as God asks of me. If I do not oppose it with all my might, the work will be vitiated. I will do it until my last breath. My **conscience** will not rest until I see the work as it should be, as God showed it to me, as I have had it approved by the Holy See. Only God and His **Vicar** on earth can free me from this duty.*

This is how Father Chaminade expressed himself in a letter of March 31, 1845, written to the Vicar General of Albi. The context, as we know, is all the controversy of the last ten years of his life. It was precisely at this stage that this theme of the necessary and inescapable fidelity to one's conscience appears most clearly and forcefully in his letters.

However, the theme of conscience is already present very early in the teachings of Father Chaminade to the sodalists of Bordeaux, first, and then to the religious. We have some examples of this. One is a retreat from 1809, collected by a 14-year-old adolescent Lalanne, in which Father Chaminade gave guidance on the correct formation of conscience and avoiding its falsifications. Another interesting one is a lecture in which he affirms: "We must necessarily form ourselves a conscience, for "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin": *Omne quod non este ex fide, peccatum est* (Rom 14:23). And he adds this interpretation of the Pauline text: "By the term *fide*, St. Paul means the conscience and not simply faith; or, if you will, he was reducing practical faith to conscience. That is, there must be a conscience if there is not to be sin, and whoever acts without conscience, or against this conscience, whatever he does, even a good work, commits sin as he performs it." (*Writings on Faith*, 527) He also explains that conscience must be properly formed because there are corrupt consciences that lead to sin.



**The moment the tapestry with the effigy of Blessed Chaminade is unveiled during the beatification.**

In the paragraph we quoted at the beginning, almost as if in a tight synthesis, we see that fidelity to conscience is not for the Founder a solipsism, a life closed in on oneself. For him, conscience is the place where God is listened to, and from that listening comes the deep conviction of having received a mission that, in conscience, can never be renounced. Conscience is not formed simply as fidelity to oneself, to one's own ideas and projects, but to the voice and will of the Other. Moreover, conscience is linked to obedience to ecclesial mediation, represented

in this case by the Vicar of Christ. From this awareness strongly anchored in this way, springs a great strength to work and be faithful "until the last breath of life."

Fidelity to his conscience allowed Father Chaminade to move with coherence and audacity in the turbulent moments of the political revolutions and the great social and cultural changes he experienced. He handled himself with proper criteria and never lost the right orientation. It was clear to him, for example, that he should not swear to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, despite the consequences that this had for him and for his priestly ministry. In the great crisis of the 1830s, he never gave up carrying out the missionary project that God had inspired in him. Indeed, for the last ten years of his life, he clung to his conscience like a solid rock in the midst of the storm.

In this final stage, the conviction that he was acting in conscience and, therefore, his claim to be right appears very frequently in his letters. In an 1845 letter to Father Meyer he made forceful statements in this regard: "I do not intend to follow anything but the truth and my **conscience**... My **conscience** keeps screaming: the Society is being betrayed... My **conscience** as Founder and Superior of the Society does not allow me to close my eyes to the effects of a hypocritical game which would distort the Society of Mary and cover its early years with an ignominy that would prevent it from growing forever."

Fidelity to conscience allowed Father Chaminade to act with great freedom, even before the very authorities of the Church with whom he clearly disagreed and whose abuses he denounced when he considered it necessary. His confrontation with the then Archbishop of Bordeaux is well known. In a letter of July 20, 1847, in this case addressed to the nuncio, he wrote: "I take the liberty, Your Excellency, to open my entire soul to you. It seems to me the moment has come to end all scandals... On the other hand, the Archbishop of Bordeaux abuses and continues to abuse his episcopal authority in the spiritual order which the government recognizes; on the other hand, **my conscience** does not allow me to suffer the disorders that flow from this abuse of authority or other abuses which follow in the wake of this abuse of authority."

Today, as the spiritual children of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, drawing closer to him, we are called to be men who form their consciences in attentive listening to the Lord and his Church, and to act with the freedom of spirit of those who seek only the truth in the fulfilment of God's will. This is a path of holiness.