

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, man of strength

It is worth reading slowly the definition of the virtue of fortitude that we find in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and then asking ourselves if this is, in a way, a portrait of our Founder.

Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice his life in defense of a just cause. (1808).



These lines have probably brought to mind rather quickly the difficulties and obstacles that Father Chaminade encountered in his long life, the risks he took, the persecutions he suffered, both from outside the Church and from within, and the constancy and perseverance with which he lived all these difficulties and obstacles.

The French Revolution imposed a 180-degree turn in the life of Blessed Chaminade. Without it he would probably have continued to belong to the Congregation of St. Charles in Mussidan, a science teacher and treasurer of the *collège*-seminary without major disruptions or complications. At the age of thirty, having refused to swear to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, he had leave the school where he had lived for twenty decisive years of his life, move to Bordeaux with his parents, and begin a new stage of an uncertain future. He lived his priesthood in hiding during the worst moments of the Terror, even risking his own life. In 1797, under the rule of the Directory, he was forced into exile abroad, spending three years in Zaragoza. In a letter written to Thérèse de Lamourous shortly before leaving for exile, Father Chaminade expressed himself as follows:

They say, my dear Daughter, that we die only once. Quite true, but what lessons we

receive from **Providence** to forewarn us of the fact and to prepare us for it! And each one of these lessons is **a kind of death**. What is a faithful soul to do in the chaos of events which seem to swallow it up? **Sustain itself calmly by that faith which, while making us adore the eternal plan of God**, assures us that to those who love God all things work together unto good. (Letters, I n. 10)

On his return from exile, he began to be very active and set up a pastoral project of great importance, the Sodality (the foundations of the men's and women's religious congregations, the support of the Miséricorde, normal schools to train teachers...), which involved very intense and continuous work. When it seemed that these projects were consolidating and bearing good fruit, the revolution of 1830 occurred, jeopardizing the continuity of everything that had been built up until then with so much effort. Under the new King Louis Philippe his home next to the Madeleine Chapel was subjected to an exhaustive search by the police.

At the age of 69, he had to get back on track. He spent the next five years quietly in Agen. In letters to Father Lalanne, Father Chaminade described how he was living through that experience:

*We are in the midst of so new a world! I am in France almost like one in a foreign land. I seem not to know any longer what to say or do. For my part, I am awaiting for events to come my way instead of going forward to meet them. I have no other policy than that of **having daily recourse to the Blessed Virgin**.* (Letters, II n. 575)
*It is to be presumed that the further we go, the more our worries will increase. May God be blessed! **Let us do all we can to serve Him well**. Let us try to avoid all imprudences and let us remain quiet. (...) There is somewhere talk about the time of **patience of the saints**. I don't know if that reference is to the present time, but what we do we risk in seeking it that way?* (Letters III, n. 588)

The letter to the retreat preachers of August 1839 represents the overcoming of the crisis. He writes it with the aim that preachers will make the brothers "appreciate the excellence and special character of our divine mission." At the age of 78, Fr. Chaminade is an old man full of strength and enthusiasm and who wants to pass on this feeling to his sons and daughters:

Ours is a great work, a magnificent work. If it is universal, it is because we are

Missionaries of Mary, who has said to us: "Do whatever he tells you". Yes, we are all missionaries: each one of us has received from the Blessed Virgin a commission to work at the salvation of his brothers in the world. (Letters V, n. 1163)



Superior General, Fr. David Fleming, thanks Pope St. John Paul II for the promulgation of the decree of beatification of Fr. Chaminade.

The decade of the 1840s, full of conflicts with the General Council, with various bishops, even with the Holy See, would definitively test the strength of our Founder. It was perhaps the crucible that ended up bringing to light the treasure of his virtues. Let's read directly some of what he wrote in some of his letters about his experience of those difficult years:

My trust is in the Lord and his august Mother, for whom I wish to live and die. (1844, to M. Faye, Letters, VI n. 1.308)

*I am becoming old, my dear Son, and I am aware that soon I shall go to give an account to our Lord Jesus Christ of the mission which is deigned to give me during the course of my life, both before the first Revolution and after. I have survived **my trials** and the greatest was not that of 1793 when only a step separated me from the scaffold: the thickness of a plank. The trials of 1844 are much more serious. **May God be praised! May Mary be glorified!** (1844, to Caillet, Letters, VI n. 1313)*

I have never attacked but I have always resisted, because my conscience as Founder of the Society of Mary, Founder also of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary and of their Third Order (...) had forbidden me to abandon them, which, on my part, would have been a manifest betrayal (1845, to His Holiness Pope Gregory XVI, Letters, VI n. 1369)

Truth and conscience are my only weapons, and I shall be strong enough if it is in the designs of God to preserve the Society of Mary. I can say, in my extreme weakness, in my wretchedness: "In him who is the source of my strength I have strength for everything" (1845, to L. Meyer, Letters, VI n. 1418)

*You speak of peace (...) But in similar circumstances, did our Lord not say: I have come not to bring peace but war? What kind of war? Surely not the war that is rebellion, revolt, anarchy, but rather the war which consists **in absence of attack, but resistance to all evil** (...) The peace of which our Lord speaks: "I give you my peace", is precisely that peace which takes possession of a man's soul when he adheres to his duty in spite of contradictions and persecutions which, far from lessening that peace, increase it.* (1847, to Caillet, Letters VII n. 1480)

These brushstrokes are enough to approach with admiration and gratitude this strong man, who found the source of his strength, not in himself, but in the Lord and in Mary, who had wanted to count on him to carry out their work. Let us ask Blessed William Joseph Chaminade to share with us this virtue that he lived in depth.
