

Blessed Chaminade and the virtue of prudence

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the virtue of prudence as follows (no. 1806): "Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; "the prudent man looks where he is going." (Prov 14:15). "Keep sane and sober for your prayers." (1 Pet 4:7). Prudence is "right reason in action," writes St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle (*S. th. IIa-IIae*, q. 47, a. 2). It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It is called *auriga virtutum* (the charioteer of the virtues); it guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this virtue, we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid."

If we add that: *Prudentia* is etymologically linked to *providentia*, in Latin: "to see ahead", there immediately emerges among the people we know, a responsible man who is not afraid to go forward but who takes his time, who weighs decisions from a distance, who consults God in prayer, who reads the signs of the times in the light of the Holy Spirit: William Joseph Chaminade is that man.

Very early on, at the college-seminary of Mussidan and perhaps already before, the young William Joseph trained in the practice of the virtues. His older brother, Jean-Baptiste, a former Jesuit, accompanied him and taught him discernment. His professional experience in Mussidan as a property manager forced him to have his feet on the ground, good management being essential to the sustainability of the establishment. The trips he made during that period to deepen his knowledge of physics and mathematics helped him to find answers to the fundamental questions he asked himself and to be, for his students, a man fully of his time, open to the ideas of the Enlightenment. However, not everything was good, he knows how to discern it and warn his students.

With the Revolution and the closure of the college-seminary of Mussidan, William Joseph arrived in Bordeaux rich in the practice of virtues that allowed him to be prudent in the face of those who sought him. This prudence also allowed him to slip through the cracks of his pursuers during the Terror.

As soon as he arrived in Bordeaux, he inspired confidence and people such as Mademoiselle de Lamourous put themselves under his direction. This experience of

"accompaniment", as it is called today Father Chaminade exercised with the young people of Mussidan. He is aware that without this virtue of prudence, which gives a fair distance from people, there is always the risk of projecting oneself onto the other, of making the other "one's thing", at least unconsciously, and we unfortunately know the risk of abuse. Accompaniment was one of the great ministries of his life. Many people were directed by him: eminent members of the Marian Sodality including the future Father Lalanne, Adèle de Trenquelléon, priests... They recognized in him a man endowed with the gifts of counsel and discernment of spirits, guided by faith and by the Holy Spirit. As Lalanne wrote: "M. Chaminade was one of those men in whom wisdom and maturity anticipate the years and who seem, from their beginning, born to enlighten and guide other men." Or, as his great-nephew Firmin Delala put it: "He was gifted, by nature, with a rather handsome physiognomy. His almond-shaped eyes were lively, fine, penetrating. His inquiring eye penetrated the thought of your heart: he judged his man and his degree of probity. If he had learned fencing, he would have surpassed St. George."

This trust, this discernment was also recognized by the ecclesiastical authority; thus he was entrusted with the reconciliation of the priests who had taken the oath of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1795, and he was entrusted with the office of administrator of the Diocese of Bazas on his return from exile in Saragossa in 1800.



The Marianist postulator, Father Enrique Torres, SM (second from the right), accompanied by the postulators, before asking Pope Saint John Paul II for the beatification of their respective servants of God (Pius IX, John XXIII, Tommaso Reggio, Fr. Chaminade and Dom Marmion)

This virtue of prudence he exercised in all the foundations he undertook or accompanied; whether with the Marian Solidarity or the Miséricorde of Bordeaux, the Daughters of Mary of Agen or the Society of Mary, he let himself be guided by the Spirit: he listened, he discerned, took a step back, took advice, prayed until everything became clear: only then did he decide in faith and give the green light to move forward and circumvent obstacles to reach the goal. It was no longer his plan, but God's plan. Some of his collaborators reproached him for this slowness in deciding and took initiatives that endangered the Society of Mary, such as David Monier in Saint-Remy or Lalanne in Layrac.

He drew on his experience to help others who sought advice. For example, he gave this directive to Dominique Clouzet, Assistant General for Temporalities and in charge of the work of Saint-Remy: "I surely want you to be prudent, for prudence, is, as it were, the first requisite in a Superior, but I desire that your prudence, in directing itself, make use of the torch of faith, at the same time that it makes use of the lights of human reason. Human views, says the Holy Spirit, are timid and uncertain" (Letter of August 26, 1824).

The model on which he relied for leadership was the Church: "In what concerns the organization and the leadership, I have always in mind approaching as much as possible the organization and leadership of the Catholic Church. The more we will get away from this plan, the less there will be solidarity and stability in the Society" (To M. Clouzet, November 6, 1830).

Father Chaminade was concerned to give the members of his Institutes solid constitutions to grow towards holiness, to be supported, to practice the virtues. As Pope Francis said in one of his catecheses: "God does not want us to be only saints, but intelligent saints, because without prudence it is easy to go astray."

His calmness and serenity came from a keen and supernatural sense of God's presence, as can be seen in this letter he wrote to Father Chevaux to make him understand that, certainly, we are weak, but: "Do you not see that we are really in a supernatural order, although it seems natural, and that precisely for that very reason, in this supernatural order, we all require that Jesus Christ be our strength and our light ? By all humiliations and the avowal of your weakness, you seem to believe that natural

talents would be absolutely necessary to fulfill high functions. This would be true in the civil and administrative order, but in the religious order, where we receive a mission which is divine, all our reasonings lose their fittingness and can not honor the great master whom we serve. God chose what is weak in human reckoning to shame what is strong" (I Cor 1/28)" (17 June 1833).

He was guided as much by criteria of faith as by the demands of his conscience and the law of charity, as demonstrated by his actions during the negotiations with M. Estebenet in 1819 for the purchase of the first Marianist school, and the economic agreement with M. Auguste Brougon-Perrière when the latter left the Society in 1833, showing himself to be very generous and very patient with those two disciples.

The economic situation of the Society of Mary in Father Chaminade's time was more than difficult. The Founder sought benefactors, borrowed, repaid in time, and took on debts caused by imprudence to such an extent that some in Bordeaux thought that he had a large personal fortune. Here is what Father Chevaux wrote about the text of the *Arbitral Judgment* of 1849: "It is known that M. Chaminade passed from hand to hand by way of loans certain notes, which may have earned him a reputation as a big capitalist. The same banknotes, passed through several hands, can be assimilated to as many different banknotes as there are people. It should also be noted that he had the administration, or rather in deposit, of various sums of money from several people who placed their trust in him, but these sums were reimbursed by the Society. All this may have led to the assumption that he had large capital." It was his prudence that gave confidence to those who entrusted him with their money. But how could he live without worldliness and without fear of such transactions? Here is what he replied to Father Caillet, who was worried about the accumulated debts: "You seem affected, my dear Son, by debts which we contract every day, to multiply our Establishments or to sustain or extend the old ones. Pray and pray earnestly, so that the evils you have in mind, may never occur, so that I may never forestall the order of Providence in the works that we believe conform to its views. I was thinking , this morning, about this extraordinary way we are following, and I was, in a way, frightened and a little disconcerted, when the thought that God acted thus, to increase our confidence in Him, and to make us live in entire dependance on His grace. This thought, I say somewhat comforted and strengthened me. What surprise me and sometimes causes trouble, is what St. Paul says: "No man, being a soldier to God, entangle himself with secular business; that he may please him to whom he has committed himself" (2 Tim 2:4). In my position, and in this struggle that I must undergo for God, I often have to enter into negotiations with the world. Might this obligation of mixing in *negotiis saecularibus*,

be a proof that the struggle is not in the designs of God? Herein lies the difficulty, Already since many long years, I have proposed it to myself. I find a little interior peace, only in being careful, when **entering** into these negotiations to do so: 1. Only as a result of affairs that I believe that God is asking for; 2. Only as little as possible; 3. Not to cease elevating myself to God, so that my mind and heart may not be really implicated in these negotiations. If you know of anything, my dear Son, to be added or of anything better tell me, don't hesitate to speak. "(16 June 1824).

We know the hardships he had to go through at the end of his life. His attitude towards his opponents showed a wisdom and prudence that was recognized by the various referees on financial issues. It was also prudence that made him go to the end (which may have passed for stubbornness in the eyes of some) because it was not his work that he was defending, but because it was the work that God had entrusted to him, that he was responsible for it and that it should not drift or become bastardized.