

## **Reflections from the Spirit of Saragossa Retreat: Mary -- the Untier of Knots and the Marianist Charism**

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Through my own reflection and conversation with others, I thought that it would be good to take a short sabbatical during the summer 2014. So I began to explore options. I started by eliminating a few options. I thought going to study would not be much different from my normal University setting. Given my character, I would strive to do well in my studies and this would not give me the psychic distance I needed from the University. Given my connection to several projects in Dayton, I decided that my sabbatical should be away from Dayton – I needed to be disconnected from Dayton for a while. I finally decided that a fairly intense spiritual retreat would serve me best – a 30 day retreat. After investigating several possibilities, I decided to do the Spirit of Saragossa Retreat – a retreat specifically designed for Marianist women and men religious making their perpetual vows. Through the generosity of the University, the Marianist Province of the United States and Bro. Thomas Redmond, S.M., I was able to make the Spirit of Saragossa Retreat in Cupertino, California from June 15<sup>th</sup> to July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014. The Spirit of Saragossa Retreat is designed to help the participant experience the many facets of the Marianist charism through reading, multiple periods of prayerful reflection during the day, and daily conversations with a retreat director. The retreat was conducted mostly in silence, but that was not too difficult for my introverted personality.

As I entered into the retreat, my spiritual journey was focused on “missionary discipleship”, a phrase made popular by Pope Francis in several of his writings and homilies. This focus on missionary discipleship matched well with our goal as a Marianist religious.

In calling us to be Marianist,  
God asks us to follow in a special way  
Jesus Christ, Son of God, become Son of Mary  
for the salvation of all.  
Our goal is to be transformed into his likeness  
and to work for the coming of his kingdom.  
(Society of Mary, *Rule of Life*, Art. 2)

Blessed Father Chaminade, founder of the Society of Mary, put a special emphasis on the phrase “born of Mary.” Through his reflection, prayer and preaching, he shared with the early members of the Marianist Family the important role that Mary has in the history of salvation. She joins Christ in conquering the evil of sin; she is our mother in forming us in the likeness of Christ; and we join with her in the mission of bringing Christ into the world.

As I entered into the retreat, I was challenged to ponder more deeply Blessed Chaminade’s Marian spirit. To be honest, I was a bit put off by some of the language Blessed Father Chaminade used to explain this Marian spirit. Yet, I knew there was something deeper that I needed to discover. The purpose of this reflection is to share an image, Mary the Untier of Knots, that is helping me ponder and bring into my own life Chaminade’s Marian spirit in spirituality, building community and advancing justice in

our world. The reflection is in two parts: (1) some background on the image of Mary the Untier of Knots and (2) some preliminary thoughts about how Mary, the Untier of Knots, provided a lens for me on our Marianist charism.

### **Father Chaminade and Mary as the New Eve**

Blessed Father Chaminade produced many sermons, conference notes and small monographs on the Marian spirit in our Marianist charism. In his letter to the retreat masters in August 1839, he stated in very stark terms the role that Mary would have in overcoming the heresy of religious indifference that plagued France in the time immediately after the French Revolution. Utilizing the reflections of the early Church Fathers, Blessed Father Chaminade would often refer to Mary as the new Eve, the woman will crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15) and be the “Mother of all the living.” The disobedience of Adam and Eve, the original sin, brought chaos, greed and violence into our personal lives and into our relationships with one another. In God’s Providence, Jesus was to be the new Adam and Mary the new Eve that would bring liberation to the human race by overcoming the influence of the devil and his ways of evil. In *Circular to the Retreat Masters* he wrote:

My dear son, we who have come to understand this providential design, we have freely offered our feeble services to Mary in order to labor under her direction and to combat at our side. We have enlisted under her banner as her soldiers and her ministers, and we have bound ourselves by a special vow of stability to assist her with all our strength until the end of our life, in the noble struggle against the powers of hell.

This image of Mary, as the new Eve, and the urgency of Blessed Father Chaminade’s call to be in mission with her in overcoming the power of evil in our world made great intellectual sense to me. Yet seeing the Marianist Family, lay and religious, as a special militia of Mary gave me pause. There is much truth in this image, and I for one would like to keep it as an important part of our Marianist tradition. Yet in our world today, I believe there is an over emphasis on combating evil and injustice with violence. Perhaps one of the gifts of the Marianist Family in this age is to be witness to an approach that confronts evil and injustice with non-violence, dialogue and negotiation.

During my Spirit of Saragossa retreat, I found the image, Mary the Untier of Knots, as another helpful image for my own understanding of Mary in my life and in our Marianist charism. I believe this image came to me through the happy coincidence of two sources of reflection. The first was a biography that I had read during the winter by Paul Valley, entitled *Pope Francis: The Untying of the Knots*. This biography related an incident where Jorge Bergoglio, after stepping down as Provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina, went to study theology in Austria. During this time Bergoglio was facing a personal crisis and as he reflected on this crisis he found solace and resolution in contemplating the Baroque painting of Mary Untier of Knots that is in the Church of St. Peter in Augsburg, Germany.<sup>1</sup> Jorge Bergoglio took this devotion back to Argentina where it flourished. Since Bergoglio was elected as Pope Francis, the devotion to Mary Untier of Knots has seen a growth across the global Catholic Church.

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<sup>1</sup> A short explanation of Mary Untier of Knots and a picture of this image is given in Appendix B.

The second source was my reading during retreat of Chapter VIII of the *Lumen Gentium*, “The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.” I read this chapter several times as a good source for reflection on what the Catholic tradition has said about Mary. I was struck by the quote from St. Irenaeus, “... the knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.”<sup>2</sup> This was the quote that inspired the painting of Mary Untier of Knots in the Augsburg Church. This image of Mary created by the disobedience of Eve was important to many of the Church Fathers.

### **Mary the Untier of Knots and the Marianist Charism<sup>3</sup>**

The image of Mary Untier of Knots helped me deepen my own appreciation of the many dimensions of our Marianist charism. In this section I share some of these insights. Perhaps these insights might be helpful to others.

#### **Untying the Knots of Self**

During the retreat, I read Jean Vanier’s little book *Becoming Human*. In this book Vanier’s reflected on his experience with people with intellectual disabilities, among the most weak and vulnerable of persons, and drew lessons on how we can break down isolation and loneliness and free ourselves to love more fully. In the first two chapters, he identifies the fears and different forms of egoism that keep us from loving fully. In the final two chapters, he outlines the path to freedom we must travel to be people who can love fully. To travel the path to freedom we must accept our vulnerabilities and weaknesses as well as our own gifts so that we can reach out in love and become builders of community. Vanier’s reflection put in stark terms the knots I must untie if I want to be a person who can love fully and, in our Marianist language, be transformed into the likeness of Christ and to work at the coming of his kingdom. This reflection by Vanier gave me a deeper understanding of Blessed Father Chaminade’s desire for Marianist, both lay and vowed, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and Mary, to put off the old self – the ego self – with its many fears, anxieties and compulsions and be transformed into a new self in the likeness of Christ. In my prayer, I ask Mary to help me untie the knots that I have developed within myself. I ask her help in coming to appreciate my vulnerabilities and weaknesses as well as the gifts I bring to our Marianist mission. During the retreat, I became more deeply aware of how I hide my vulnerabilities and weakness through fairly sophisticated defenses and personas. I was also challenged in prayer to be bolder in utilizing my gifts for the sake of our Marianist mission.

The retreat provided me an opportunity to listen to the call of becoming a person of the beatitudes -- striving for a deeper poverty of spirit, one who grows in mercy and forgiveness, one who thirsts for justice, one who grows in purity of heart, and one who strives to be a peacemaker. Becoming a person of the beatitudes, I need to understand the different conflicts that are part of my ministry and realize that some of these conflicts come from my sinfulness and others come because I am asking the right

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 22

<sup>3</sup> I am working on a second reflection on insights from the Spirit of Saragossa Retreat that have to do with our Marianist Missionary Charism -- “The Family of Mary and the New Normal.”

questions that disturb the way things are. The call to “be salt and light” is important if I want to help form a new generation of missionary disciples.

Slowing down during the retreat helped me realize that I am on the eve of my departure from the earthly phase of my life. I was able to ponder what is important for me during these final years. I need to graciously accept and respect the physical limitations of aging – I don’t have the energy that I once did. “Advancing justice” will not be as important as “sharing with the next generation what I have learned through advancing justice.” I have a limited time to complete my reflections on the Marianist Movement and the difference that it can make in our contemporary world. This an important task for me in this time in my life. I pray that Mary can help untie the knots of my denial of aging and my inability to focus on what is really important.

### **Untying the Knots of Relationships and Community**

The history of Mary Untier of Knots in Appendix B indicates that the devotion to Mary under this title came about as a prayer to heal the knots of a marriage. As the devotion spread across Latin American, it became popular with “people with small problems,” i.e. problems of relationships. As I entered into the Retreat, I was coming out of a situation in my ministry where there were great problems in relationships and in our functioning as an educational community. Communication had broken down and among many there was mistrust and alienation. This situation gave me opportunity to reflect on the knots in our interpersonal relationships, in the relationships within our faith communities, and the relationships within our organizations of ministry. How could Mary Untier of Knots be helpful to me in understanding the knots I create in my relationships and in the way I build community? How could I educate people and groups to untie the knots in personal relationships and in the way we come together in community?

In my reflection over the years, it seems to me that one of the most critical knots in my relationships is how I frame my interpersonal interactions. It has been helpful for me to reflect on when I use a “closed frame” and when I use a “learning frame” in my interactions. When I am using a closed frame in my interpersonal interactions, I am convinced that I know all of the facts of the situation, I know what outcomes are appropriate, and I know the right actions to accomplish these outcomes. All I need to do is convince others of the rightness of my perspective. When I lay out the closed frame this concretely, I am often tempted to say “I hardly ever use the closed frame in my interactions.” But upon prayerful reflection on my daily actions, I see that when I am in a hurry, or need to be in control, or I am insensitive to others involved in the situation, I use the closed frame.

Ideally, I would like to use a learning frame for interpersonal interaction. In the learning frame, I realize that I have only some of the facts of the situation, but there are other facts that will be important. Usually, I have made a judgment on what outcomes are appropriate in this situation, but I need to realize that others may have some different perspectives on the outcomes. Usually, I don’t lack for ideas on how to accomplish the outcomes, but I need to realize others may have different and perhaps better ideas how to accomplish outcomes. When I am using the learning frame, I can enter into constructive conversations with others where we develop a shared appreciation on the facts of the situation, develop a consensus on the outcomes that we

would like to accomplish, deliberate on the options we have for realizing the outcomes, decide on the option that we will be implementing, and then go ahead and implement this option. Sometimes interpersonal situations require formal approaches to identifying and addressing issues, and other times less formal approaches can be used. What is important for me is to always endeavor to use the learning frame for my interactions with others.

In my reflections on my life, I can ask Mary Untier of Knots to help me honestly confront when I am using the closed frame to tie knots in my relationships and in the way I build community. I can also ask for her to advocate for the grace I need to continually utilize the learning frame in my interactions with others.

Another way I create knots in my interpersonal relations is the way I deal with criticism of my behavior and, even more importantly, criticism of beliefs and convictions that I hold as central to my life journey. During the retreat, I was struck with Mary's ability to ponder and how it is important to develop the skills of pondering in the face of criticism. It seems to me criticism can have two forms. The first type of criticism commentary is made to point out how my actions are not consistent with my own beliefs and convictions or the beliefs and convictions of a community in which I have a strong commitment. These comments can help me learn to have greater integrity and transparency in my life. Sometimes, I find this type of criticism difficult because I often make its meaning more dramatic than I should -- I create knots in my understanding. For example, when people criticize me for being insensitive in a situation, I have a tendency to over generalize and believe people are telling me I am an insensitive person -- which touches the core of my identity and makes me defensive. What the persons are in fact telling me is that they judged that I was insensitive in a particular situation. I need to learn how to appropriately read this type of criticism and use it to bring greater integrity between my actions and my beliefs and convictions.

A second form of criticism that I sometimes experience is commentary that is made, either directly or more often indirectly, that critiques my actions in what I believe is an unfair or unjust manner. Sometimes people make judgments about my actions that aren't warranted by the facts or they don't know all of the circumstances that are involved in a decision or a set of actions. Sometimes these comments are not only unfair but become mean, bitter and full of anger. I often want to respond in a like manner -- with meanness, bitterness and lots of anger. If I respond in this manner, I create very difficult knots in my relationships, my communities and in my ministry situations.

Reflecting on Mary at the foot of the cross, I see a woman who through her pondering was able to shape a response that transforms meanness into care, bitterness into compassion, and violence into peacemaking. I need to learn from Mary how to ponder this type of criticism so that I can respond with care, compassion and efforts to build true peace. I can be in alliance with Mary in helping students and colleagues untie the knots of meanness, bitterness and violence by learning the skills of pondering so they can respond with care, compassion and peacemaking. Such pondering is an important part of community building.

### **Untying the Knots of Social Structures and Culture**

As mentioned above, the devotion to Mary the Untier of Knots became popular because it was very meaningful for people experiencing crisis in relationships -- interpersonal

knots. Based on my experience in the ministry of social justice, as both a teacher and a citizen in my community of Dayton, Ohio, I can see that injustice is often caused by structural sin – knots in the social structures and culture of our communities. Among the many injustices in the world are the huge gap between the rich and poor that cuts off opportunities for the poor, the lack of opportunity for children and families in poverty, an economy that does not generate meaningful work for those seeking it, and the continuing hostilities and violence between national, ethnic and religious groups. The personal and interpersonal knots of sin and evil have created situations where we produce knots in the structural and cultural dimensions of our society that are barriers to human flourishing of many people and groups. We also have structural and cultural knots within our Church which keep us from being a witness of people alive in Christ. During the retreat, I came to realize that an important part of my Marianist vocation is to be in alliance with Mary to help untie these structural and cultural knots so that all persons and groups can realize their full human flourishing. I pray daily that my efforts in teaching and learning will help students and fellow citizens to see the injustices caused by the structural and cultural knots of our societies, build consensus on how these knots might be untied, and organize to loosen these knots of injustice.

During the retreat, the image of Mary Untier of Knots helped me deepen my awareness of the centrality of advancing justice in my Marianist vocation. Seeing this connection between Mary Untier of Knots and the work of advancing justice helps me realize that there is a Marian style of working at the transformation of structures and culture. This Marian style emphasizes gifts of people, the importance of relationships of care and hospitality, a continual openness to learning, an ability to ponder in the midst of ambiguity, complexity, and conflict, and a dialogical approach to developing a shared vision of the future and working to realize that future.

### **Untying the Knots in Our Relationship with God**

Most importantly, the Spirit of Saragossa Retreat allowed me to reflect on the knots that I had in my relationship with God. As I examined my prayer life, it seemed that I was focusing only on what I came to call a “prayer of discernment.” In periods of praying, I would bring the many challenges of my ministry to God and would ask for the grace of discernment. How should I act in addressing a particular conflict? Which option for action is the right one in this circumstance? There was always an action dimension to my prayer. All of these questions are important to bring to prayer so that the Lord can guide me in being a missionary disciple. Yet it occurred to me that I was neglecting a very important dimension of prayer and in my relationship with God.

The missing dimension of prayer for me was contemplation. I was not spending much time in reflecting and praying over the mystery of God and God’s creation and the gracious love that God has for me, for others, and for our communities. While I am always interested in reading theology and exploring the intellectual dimensions of the mystery of God, I don’t stop and become silent in the presence of God and let God touch me with God’s great love. So clearly a knot in my relationship with God was my inability to stop and be silent in the presence of God and to ponder the mystery of God.

During the retreat, I was able to stop and be present to God. It was a struggle not to bring action into the prayer, but there were times when I was able just to be still and listen to God. Before the retreat, I had finished Karl Kasper’s book, *Mercy: The Essence*

*of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*. This book was a wonderful systematic reflection on God as mercy and God's wonderful gift of mercy. In some ways this book prepared me for one of the most important graces of the retreat. During my rather clumsy attempts at a more contemplative prayer style, I was able to appreciate the depth of my own sinfulness and in that experience to be touched by God's merciful love for me. In spite of all that had happened in my life, God loves me and will continue to love me.

I am asking Mary to untie the knot of my extreme activism and help me develop a more contemplative style of prayer. I must learn more about contemplation, and even more importantly, develop a contemplative practice in my prayer.

### **Reflections on the Image and Chaminade's Marianist Spirit**

It seems to me that Mary Untier of Knots is very compatible with Father Chaminade's image of Mary as the woman (the New Eve) of Genesis who will crush the head of the snake – image of the devil and evil within the world. Mary Untier of Knots is crushing the head of the knotted snake as she is untying knots. Chaminade insisted that we Marianists, both lay and religious, are in alliance with Mary (as her militia) in crushing the head of the snake – the devil and the evil and alienation that the devil brings to our world. Perhaps another way to express this insight of Chaminade is to say that “we are *in mission* with Mary in untying the knots of the world.”

Chaminade had a great devotion to the Immaculate Conception of Mary, (Mary conceived without original sin), before it was declared a doctrine of the Church. His early retreats and manuals of organization for the Bordeaux sodality strongly emphasized this devotion. I have often been somewhat puzzled by his insistence on the devotion to the Immaculate Conception. Mary Untier of Knots helped me understand his insistence on the Immaculate Conception – it is only fitting that the Woman who was called by God to untie the knots of evil and sin in our world be without sin (knots) from her conception. Faith in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception gives us confidence that Mary is efficacious in her mission of untying knots (sin and evil) in our personal life, our relationships and community, the structures and culture of our society, and in our relationship with God.

### **Conclusion – A Prayer for the Graces of the Retreat**

One of the most helpful activities of the Spirit of Saragossa Retreat was for the retreatants to compose our own personal acts of dedication to Mary that capture some of the highlights of the Retreat for us. While such acts of dedication are intended to be fairly short, I decided to write a Prayer to be Faithful to the Graces of the Retreat in which I didn't have to worry about length. I have include this prayer in Appendix A. You will see that Mary Untier of Knots is an important part of this prayer. Mary Untier of Knots has become a very helpful way for me to appreciate the Marian spirit that Blessed Father Chaminade was convinced that was at center of our Marianist charism. It has also been an image that allowed me to deepen my appreciation of my Marianist vocation.



## Appendix A:

### Prayer to be Faithful to the Graces of the Spirit of Saragossa Retreat: *Mary the Untier of Knots*

Lord God, creator of all that was, is and will be.  
You who are faithful and merciful  
I praise and thank you.

I give thanks for the many graces of my Saragossa  
experience. Give me the wisdom and courage  
to be faithful to these graces.

Put within me a strong desire to be more  
contemplative – to ponder the mystery of your  
love and creation.

Allow me daily to say with joy,  
“God I love you with my whole heart and with  
my whole being and with my whole strength.”

In your Providence, you brought into the world  
your only Son, the eternal Word – Jesus  
Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus  
was enfleshed in the womb of the humble  
Virgin Mary.

You deemed that Jesus, in mission with his Mother,  
would bring reconciliation and freedom to  
people and our world by *untying the knots of  
sin, evil and alienation* that came into the  
world by the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

Be with me as I continue my pilgrimage of  
becoming a missionary disciple – following  
Jesus Christ, Son of God, become Son of Mary  
for the salvation of all.

In my pilgrimage, let me be accompanied by the  
Holy Spirit and Mary, my Mother, so that I  
may put off the old man by *untying my  
personal knots* of the ego self – with its many  
fears, anxieties and compulsions, and be  
transformed into the new self in the likeness  
of Christ.

I give thanks for the life, death, and resurrection of  
Jesus. Help me to live Jesus’ call to be a  
person of the beatitudes and to be salt and  
light in the world. I ask mercy and  
forgiveness of my sins and infidelities that  
caused Jesus to suffer and die.

In the last moments of his earthly life, Jesus said to  
Mary “behold your son” and to the beloved  
disciple “behold your Mother.” In these  
words, Mary became my Mother and the  
Mother of the Church.

Allow me to ponder the mysteries of Christ as Mary  
did and let me imitate her faith in your  
promises, her welcoming spirit, openness of  
heart, and docility to the Spirit.

Let Jesus teach me to know, love and be in mission  
with Mary, my mother and mother of the  
Church.

Deepen my appreciation that, as a Marianist, my  
pilgrimage is a commitment to join Mary in  
her mission of bringing Christ into the World.

Help me collaborate with Mary in *untying the knots  
of our relationships* so that the gifts of others  
may be manifested through blessings and  
affirmations.

Help me be Mary’s collaborator in *untying the  
knots of the structures and culture of our  
society* so that the hungry are fed, the naked  
clothed, the homeless sheltered, children are  
loved and educated, our economy serves the  
common good and provides meaningful work,  
our instruments of war are converted into  
instruments of peace, and our environment is  
treasured as a gift for future generations.

Bring in our day a new energy to the Marianist  
charism by continuing the development of the  
Marianist Family.

Let our Marianist Family be a dynamic movement  
within the Church that *witnesses* to the  
vitality of Christianity in today’s world, *forms*  
people and communities in a lived apostolic  
faith, and *transforms*, in a Marian style, our  
Church and society so there is great justice,  
peace and reconciliation.

Ground my zeal for our Marianist charism in  
contemplation and purify and intensify this  
zeal by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that I  
might partner with others to bring about a  
new growth and dynamism in the Marianist  
Family.

Lord, given that I am in the eve of my departure  
from the earthly phase of my pilgrimage, let  
me share the gifts you have given me by  
mentoring the next generation of lay and  
vowed Marianists.

In your goodness, transform our little Society of  
Mary so that we have a new vitality in our  
missionary charism that attracts young men  
to say “yes” to Mary’s mission of bringing  
Christ into the world and *untying the knots of  
sin and evil*.

May the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit be  
glorified in all places through the Immaculate  
Virgin Mary. Amen.



**Appendix B**  
**Mary Untier of Knots: Image and Background**



## Background<sup>4</sup>

### Explanation of the Image

The painting, executed in the Baroque style by Johann Georg Melchior Schmidtner (1625 – 1707), shows the Blessed Virgin Mary standing on the crescent moon (the usual way of depicting Mary under her title of the Immaculate Conception), surrounded by angels and with the Holy Spirit Dove hovering above her circle of stars as she unties knots into a long strip and at the same time rests her foot on the head of a "knotted" snake. The serpent represents the Devil, and her treatment of him fulfills the prophecy in Genesis 3:15: "[thy seed] shall bruise the serpent's head."

Below are shown a human figure and his dog accompanying a much smaller angel. This scene is often interpreted as Tobias with his dog and the Archangel Raphael traveling to ask Sara to be his wife.

The concept of Mary untying knots is derived from a work by St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses (Against Heresies)*. In Book III, Chapter 22, he presents a parallel between Eve and Mary, describing how "the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith."<sup>[2]</sup>

The two small figures have also been interpreted as a representation of Wolfgang Langenmantel, the grandfather of the benefactor, guided in his distress by a guardian angel to Father Jakob Rem in Ingolstadt.



St. Peter's Church with the Perlach-Tower

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<sup>4</sup> This background explanation is taken freely from Mary Untier of Knots, Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Untier\\_of\\_Knots](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Untier_of_Knots)

## History

The painting was donated around 1700 by Hieronymus Ambrosius Langenmantel (1641 – 1718), a canon of the Monastery of Saint Peter in Augsburg. The donation is said to be connected with an event in his family. His grandfather, Wolfgang Langenmantel (1586 – 1637), was on the verge of the separation from his wife, Sophia Rentz (1590 – 1649), and therefore sought help from Jakob Rem, the Jesuit priest in Ingolstadt. Father Rem prayed to the Blessed Virgin Mary and said: “*In diesem religiösen Akt erhebe ich das Band der Ehe, löse alle Knoten und glätte es* [In this religious act, I raise the bonds of matrimony, to untie all knots and smoothen them]”. Immediately, peace was restored between the husband and wife, and the separation did not happen. In the memory of this event, their grandson commissioned the painting of the “Untier of Knots.”