

SATURDAY, JANUARY 22, 2011
OPENING OF THE CHAMINADE YEAR

With the Catholic Church throughout the world, we celebrate today the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. Although the readings are from the Sunday celebration, they are very appropriate for our celebration of Chaminade Day, the anniversary of Chaminade's death and his entrance into the fullness of life. That the readings are appropriate should not surprise us since Chaminade has been declared blessed by the Church indicating that he is a model for us of living the Gospel.

Isaiah the prophet proclaims: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. He proclaims to a people in exile words of release and return. Blessed William Joseph Chaminade would have found resonance in those words. He too lived in a time of darkness; he too experienced exile.

During the past few years, I have come to a greater understanding of the darkness of the times in which Fr. Chaminade lived. As the great English novelist, Charles Dickens, has written in the *Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

Chaminade saw the promise of the French revolution—liberty, equality, and fraternity—degenerate into a time of chaos and violence. In my mind a great symbol of this chaos is the guillotine. People who know me well, know I do not like to watch violence in movies or on TV. I sometimes have to walk out of the room. I think there is enough violence in life that I do not need to see it portrayed over and over again. Every time I see the guillotine graphically depicted, I come to better understanding of Chaminade's experience of the violence of the French Revolution and am given a new

appreciation of what it meant for Chaminade to live under its threat—to see his fellow Christians subjected to this torture. No wonder he could write about the darkness. Just one example:

“In our own day, the great prevailing heresy is religious indifference, which numbs souls and reduces them to a state of torpid egoism and moral degeneration. The depths of the abyss send forth dense clouds of black and pestilential smoke (Revelations 9:2) threatening to engulf the whole earth in a murky night, devoid of every good, filled with every evil, and impenetrable to the life giving rays of the Sun of justice.”

But Chaminade did not curse the darkness. Instead he became a source of light. Those who knew Chaminade could repeat with the prophet Isaiah: a people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

What was that light? For Chaminade, it was to create communities of faith that would transform society—that would show that the Gospel could be lived in all of his letter and spirit in his day, in his age.

As we heard in today’s Gospel, Jesus called the apostles to a mission of teaching the good news of the kingdom through word and action. And the people Jesus called to be disciples and to carry on this task were ordinary people. They were called while fishing.

This should not surprise us. God often calls very ordinary people to do extraordinary things. In the Old Testament we have the call of the prophet Elisha while he was plowing in the field; we have the prophet Amos called while “dressing” sycamore trees (I am not sure exactly what that was); we have Moses called while he was tending sheep. God called very ordinary people in the midst of very ordinary tasks.

Chaminade believed that the Marianist family is also called to an apostolic vocation. We are called to do the same. We are called by our baptismal

grace to be participants in the proclamation of God's kingdom—the good news of the Gospel. We are called to be a light in the darkness.

The letter to the Corinthians gives us a concrete example of what that good news means. It is interesting that the apostles in the gospel are called while mending their nets because mending will be an important part of their ministry. It certainly was part of Paul's role as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Corinth was a very multiethnic/multicultural society and divisions develop. Paul proclaims to the Corinthians that there is to be unity among Christians. Paul asks for no divisions among the people; they are to have the same mind; the same purpose.

Paul heard the divisions: "I belong to Cephas, I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Christ." Personal loyalties divided the community. Was Christ divided? In Paul's mind, the people were asking the wrong question: Who is the most important? Building one's ego can do that. Paul challenges the Corinthians and us. Ego is not a justification for division; should not be the cause of division. We are to have unity in essentials, respect for diversity; charity in all things

Chaminade too was convinced that the communities of the Marianist family were to be without division. We have often heard the phrases from his teaching—unity without confusion, one mind and one heart.

I think Paul and Chaminade would ask us today: Are we committed to building unity? Do we let our egos get in the way of unity? How do I build unity? How do I mend relationships?

Earlier this week, we celebrated the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. He had a dream of unity. He had a dream of "the great world house." Let me quote him:

"We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house,' in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner,

Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, cultures, and interests, who because we can never live again apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

The challenge of unity was the challenge of the early church, was the challenge of the French revolution, and is still the challenge of our day. Why? Because it seems we as humans have not learned to discipline our egos. We must learn to promote the common good over personal gain and reputation. King believed the great threats to human community are racism, poverty, and war. I find his diagnosis hard to challenge. We are called to meet this challenge in our day.

We come together today to celebrate the opening of the Chaminade Year. We come to honor a man who lived the Gospel in his day and age with imagination and grace. But our celebration will become empty if we do not let his vision and his life challenge us to live the Gospel in our day.

More specifically our readings today call us:

- To be a light that shatters the darkness;
- To be disciples who take seriously our baptism call to proclaim the reign of God
- To build communities of faith that strive for the common good—for justice for all
- To build communities of faith that are sources of reconciliation and healing.

Chaminade was a holy man. Our Marianist vocation is a magnificent call. May we be as faithful to the challenge in our day and age as Blessed Chaminade was faithful in his day and age.

Amen.