

The Context of the Marianist Educational Charism

By David J. Fleming, SM

Sometimes the Marianist educational charism can sound deceptively simple and light-weight. It might be taken to mean being “nice people,” pleasant participants in an idealistic and clubby community, little more, without any specific commitment or outlook that really makes a difference.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Marianist charism has also become for a small group of people an object of intellectual research and study, almost another academic “industry,” mixing aspects of history, theology, philosophy and social thought, complicated and technical at times, limited to a few specialists. I would like to reflect on one particular point that relates to our identity and the consequences that flow from it: Context: The charism grows out of a history that is still full of implications for us.

The Context of the Marianist Charism: Chaminade viewed education as “mission” and saw it as a challenge special to the modern world.

In the wake of the French Revolution Chaminade viewed education as “mission” and saw it as a challenging response to the needs of people in the new post-revolutionary, post Enlightenment world... to find a new “fulcrum for the levers that move the modern world.”

Chaminade understood education as a key cultural arena, dominated by struggles among ideologies. Toward the end of Chaminade’s long career (September, 1838), he wrote to the Pope about what he called the “battle for dominance in the schools” in his days. Universal education had arrived on the scene during his lifetime as a new ideal and had become a battleground among divergent ideologies: everyone was looking for the youth, to set the tone of coming generations.

Some months later, in communicating to his disciples the Pope’s approbation for the work of his lifetime, Chaminade enthusiastically reiterated his conviction that “we teach in order to educate.”

In a day when the Industrial Revolution was just dawning in France, he was concerned about the best way to reach the masses, whom he characterized as “the most numerous and the most neglected,” without turning the new schools into what he considered to be “teaching factories.”

He recognized the motivations that characterized the educators of his time. For some, it was (as we just noted) a crusade for a doctrine or a philosophy. For many others, the motivation was crassly economic. In his day money was to be made by delivering mass education, in a way similar to the contemporary descriptions of Dickens (cf. *Nicholas Nickleby*). The situation is not so different today, particularly in the mushrooming of all kinds of business schools and technical institutes of dubious standards, especially in the world’s poorer countries. Chaminade knew that motivation made a difference. He aimed to found schools open to the poor but focused on something beyond financial success: forming for the good life rather than simply making money.

All this may seem to be merely of antiquarian interest. Yet, under different guises, it seems to me that most of these issues still persist today.

a. The question about finding the right fulcrum for the “levers that move the modern world” still is relevant. Schools and universities may have more competitors for cultural dominance now than in Chaminade’s day, in our world saturated with media and technology. But the question about the right levers has lost nothing of its relevance and urgency, and educational institutions remain key centers of creating, enhancing and transmitting cultural life.

b. Ideology may sometimes be more subtle, but in our times it still controls, or attempts to control, educational agendas. In America and Europe, education is often dominated by a secular emphasis, by an elitist technocracy that relegates faith and values to the purely private and emotional domains and excludes them from the intellectual and public realms. Alternatively, American education is occasionally controlled today by fundamentalist perspectives, as in prohibitions to teach about evolution as more than a dubious theory.

c. Pedagogical styles are still as crucial today as in the time of Chaminade. I believe that a participative and dialogical style is one of the chief contributions we can make. We have no monopoly on this style, but it is certainly in our genes. It is the dimension of Marianist education that most impresses both our students and faculty, for example at the University of Dayton program in Bangalore and distinguishes us from other institutions there, in a world where education is generally understood to consist in pouring the most comprehensive set of facts possible into blank, absorbent brains, or at least onto the blank notes of listening students.

d. Education for profit is still an issue. The profit motive is not wrong in itself, of course, but it tends to create educational institutions that shift the focus away from the personal, human and holistic growth of the student and that motivate students to get a lucrative job more than become beneficent human beings.

e. Technocracy is more than ever a key focus, so that not a few modern educationists may be accused of being, in the Founder's terms, "technicians of education." Professional education today is especially faced with this danger, at times an example of technocracy gone wild.

f. In general, the integration of faith and culture remains a fundamental focus for us as for Chaminade. We seek still today to help people of good will to turn their convictions into a culture that channels faith energies creatively to all aspects of life, to family and the workplace and civic community, to service to others and to developing knowledge and technology. The Marianist charism always seeks to be at this particular cutting edge, to illuminate culture by faith, to see the signs and vestiges of God at work in the aspirations and accomplishments of contemporary people, to foster the faith-culture dialogue, to sustain an ongoing conversation and interaction between issues of faith and issues of the contemporary world.

I think that Chaminade's convictions about education remain fully valid for all of us. What happens in education is a key, perhaps the key field, for the soul of the contemporary world. His focus on this area for our shared mission has lost none of its validity and force after nearly 200 years.

This article is excerpted from a forthcoming book by David J. Fleming, SM