

Walking with Adele on a University Campus: A Testimony

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Blessed William Joseph Chaminade was a man dedicated to Mary. He had a passion for educating in faith and for developing lay communities, all with unwavering courage and determination for mission. But did you also know he had a keen insight for partnering with women and trusting a woman's intuition? Let me introduce you to The Venerable Mother Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, F.M.I., (1789–1828), the founder of the Marianist Sisters. Events in her early life led her to dedicate herself to helping women and the poor and have influenced my life as a campus minister at St. Mary's University.

Trenquelléon was born into an aristocratic family. Her mother taught her to live a life of faith, even in the most trying times. The baroness helped the poor and sick by sharing food and clothing, selling her own jewelry to fund these efforts. During the French Revolution, Trenquelléon's family experienced exile and later amnesty. While enjoying the benefits of wealth and education, her family's influence led her to identify with the poor and the injustices they experienced. She is often known as an "aristocrat for the poor."

Trenquelléon, living out her baptismal commitment, was 15-years-old when she formed a network of friends called The Association. The group of lay women wanted to carry on good deeds as well as sustain one another in prayer. By 1808 there were approximately sixty members and, by 1814, there were 200. If she lived today, I am sure she would have enjoyed the benefits of e-mail!

Trenquelléon was put into contact with William Joseph Chaminade, the director of the Sodality in Bordeaux, France. They began corresponding regularly and saw common concerns and commitments. Chaminade recognized her dedication to God, spiritual maturity, leadership and determination to reconstruct the faith of France. By 1816 the Marianist Sisters were born, preceding the foundation of the Marianist Brothers by a year.

I have been at St. Mary's University for 31 years in campus ministry, so I may not have the youth that Trenquelléon had, but I do have her enthusiasm for the mission. I served for 11 years in undergraduate campus ministry and more than 20 years as the full-time campus minister at our law school. My mission is to provide law students, faculty and staff with an experience of an educational community, support for faith development and service to the community.

In this setting I have seen the subtle influence of Trenquelléon in my life. I relate to her in her creativity for serving the needs of her neighbors and for developing community throughout the countryside. As Charles Cantú, Dean of the School of Law, publicly describes me, I am one who not only feeds the hungry law students with my infamous table of peanut butter and jelly but also attends to their spiritual hungers.

Trenquelléon could have enjoyed the "good life." Instead, she chose to cast her lot with the poor, identifying with those most marginalized. Much like her, I have resources and education. Fortunately, I am in a profession that encourages outreach to the underserved and those with low income. Through our pro bono and clinical programs at the Center for Legal and Social Justice, our students work with low-income clients, many of whom are homeless. This experience not only helps the student consider the legal obstacles but also the emotional, spiritual and economic challenges their clients face.

In addition, law ministry offers opportunities to work in the San Antonio community. Mentoring mock trials for high schools students, a Halloween party for children from the area shelters, and collecting toys for our University Police toy drive are part of this ministry. I have also coordinated the Spring Break service trips to three cities in Texas and New Orleans for the last nine years. I have played a major role in the funding, planning, and organization of many of these service opportunities.

I have worked with the students as we hear firsthand the stories of poverty and the attempts of those families to overcome these obstacles. The pro bono program of the law ministry has received recognition by winning the National Catholic Campus Ministry Association's "Educating for Justice Award," and from several San Antonio legal organizations that work with our law school in providing legal assistance for the poor ... echoes of Trenquelléon.

As a Marianist Sister in North America I have grown into my awareness that I am a steward of her special gifts to the Church. I appreciate the many collaborative opportunities within our Marianist family. I organized the St. Mary's "Blessing of Women" held on the Feast of the Annunciation, part of Women's History Month activities, as a means of sharing Trenquelléon's story.

In the same spirit of Trenquelléon, I have risked new ideas, changed a plan, or adapted to needs as I've shared the Gospel message and supported the mission of St. Mary's. As she says in one of her letters that now gives me pause for reflection: "We shall not be working alone. The Lord will be working with us; and with him ... what can we not do?" (Letter of Adele 273.5)

While her life is not as well known in the Marianist family, in the past 10 years the spirit of Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon has begun moving among the young people in the Marianist family. Because of her youth, vibrant personality and interest in responding to the needs of the poor, young people are relating to her with new interest having experienced Marianist ministry, having learned the power of community and being involved in the concerns for building a just world.

Mother Trenquelléon relational style along with her traits of openness and listening were complementary to Chaminade's gift of strategizing. He trusted her intuition and insights, and she trusted his spiritual guidance. We can celebrate and learn much from Trenquelléon and Chaminade about the collaborative nature of our mission on Marianist university campuses.

Upcoming:

The Adele Social Justice Project is hosting a "Walk with Adele" in San Antonio on Saturday, March 22, 2014 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., beginning at the Sisters' House located at 235 Ligustrum Ave.

A Marianist Women's Summit will be held at the University of Dayton Oct. 17-19, 2014.