

Chaminade: A Leadership Profile

Jessica Gonzalez Uhlig

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For almost twenty years, my career in higher education has evolved from employment to vocation. Through the even flows of life, ups and downs, blessings and challenges, role models and leaders proved to be beacons of light and guidance. The Marianists and the educational philosophy that promotes learning, leading and serving have provided the fire that inspires my vocation and the vocation and leadership development of so many others, following the same inspired life of Marianist educators from long ago. This essay explores aspects of the life of founder, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade using contemporary leadership resources.

There are certain people that may look, act, and be different everyone else, as they stand out in a sea of faces, by their mere presence, not necessarily by how loud their voice is, or what title they have as part of their occupation. These people are often called leaders. What makes leadership interesting is that the word can surely describe the person leading an organization, a project, a family, or a country. A leader can be the middle sibling in a family of six, or the new student that joins the class mid-year. Skills, personality, confidence, empathy and the ability to listen to others, while conveying a vision to strive for, are some of the traits that make an effective leader. Ulrich, Smallwood, and Sweetman (2008) indicate that an effective leader strategizes, takes action, identifies talent, develops others, and is a continuous learner. These are the characteristics that represent the founder of the Society of Mary, Fr. Chaminade.

Fr. Chaminade was born in Mussidan, France, in 1751. William Joseph became a priest during the years that tumultuously led France to the revolution. Having lived through the pivotal era of Revolution, Fr. Chaminade exemplified traits that make him an effective leader. Fleming (2014) describes Fr. Chaminade as someone who recognized the need for moderate changes, and had to face the reality of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, a Gallicanist decision that confronted all priests with stark choices between a comfortable life in subservience to a state we now call totalitarian, or a risky and uncertain future in fidelity to the Catholic tradition (p.3). The state of living in the 1790s brought forth the destruction of parishes, convent, schools and seminaries, the execution and exile of many priests, yet

through it all, Chaminade carried on “clandestine ministry to faithful Catholics in the city of Bordeaux”(p.3), risking his own life. He was eventually caught by the authorities and by not signing the decree to resign his priestly rights, he was exiled to Spain. Throughout out all this lived experience, he never lost his faith.

According to Fleming (2014) while in Spain, Chaminade pondered on an uncertain future, yet “looked ahead to the new mission he hoped to undertake in order to rekindle faith back in their homeland” (p.4), dreaming of founding a “Society of Mary”. He believed Mary embodied the gospel values and was the model of Christian discipleship. Upon returning to France, he put his vision to the test while witnessing the struggle for the soul of his nation.

As a leader, Fr. Chaminade has shown to be a visionary, and someone who took action in times of need. During the years he formulated what would become the Society of Mary, and reflecting on his clandestine ministries during the Revolution, he formed faith groups, or communities, he called Sodalities. He invited others to participate and established trust, and a renewal of faith. He gathered a group of men and women to form a community of Christian outreach and support. He thought the community would attract others to follow Christ and would revive the religious spirit in France. From these groups, men decided to commit their lives and thus, with Fr. Chaminade as the founder, the men’s religious organization, the Society of Mary, the Marianists, was founded. The year was 1817. Chaminade recognized talent, as Ulrich, Smallwood, and Sweetman (2008) remind us, by surrounding himself with men also looking to do the good work needed, while becoming continuous learners and using education as a platform for spiritual development.

As an organization the Marianists grew and Fr. Chaminade was, in a way, its president and CEO, while humbly embracing his brothers, equally. In effort to bring Fr. Chaminade’s leadership style to 2017, Fleming (2014) invites us to see Chaminade as one who would involve all in the mission to form others, believers who would form others in faith, thus multiplying Christians and contributing to the positive transformation of society (p.6).

Cooper & Nirenberg (2004) state that leadership effectiveness is subject to a diversity of objectives. Chaminade's version of this notion is, not only evangelizing through his fellow religious brothers, but including the development of external relationships with key stakeholders. Fr. Chaminade, in collaboration with lay people, continued his ministry through education, with students, who as adults joined the order, parents, and others. The vision was becoming reality, by including others inviting them to join in the mission. All of this suggests that leadership effectiveness includes a dimension associated not only with just one's followers but also with one's colleagues (Cooper & Nirenberg, 2004). There is sense of collaboration that lives as part of today's Marianist family, due to Fr. Chaminade's leadership trait of working with others, peers, and acquaintances alike.

According to Benloch (nd), Marianist history is not simply a collection of facts or anecdotes. It has to do with the evolution of people, above all Blessed Chaminade. He states (nd), "to have life, we must be rooted. To be grafted into a tradition does not mean we keep looking to the past; on the contrary, I want to help all to be well-rooted so they can look to the future with hope". That vision and hope for the future, with the acute awareness of the current societal issues at the time in France, the very aspect of his leadership that continues to echoes and places Fr. Chaminade in our lives. He was then, yet still today, can be appreciated as a faith-filled leader, who looked to the future by reading the signs of the times.

According to Northouse (2016), emotional intelligence is an important construct of leadership and it suggests that people who are "more sensitive to their emotions and the impact of their emotions on others will be leaders who are more effective" (p.27). In this regard, what we have learned from Fr. Chaminade is that he was empathetic as well as sympathetic. Based on his life experience, to be as pastoral, and yet, strategic in forming his communities of faith, with a vision to re-evangelize France, he must have used emotional intelligence to navigate the challenges he faced working with his brothers.

By the end of his life there were clouds that "formed and hung over members of the religious institutes he founded" (Vasey, n.d.). Fr. Chaminde, like many leaders, considered passed his prime, was casted during his last years as a victim of senility. Vasey (1969) tells us that for a half century,

Chaminade was relegated to little more than a footnote in the annals of SM history. It was laid out that there were complicated legal issues that resulted in lawsuits against the Society and eventually, the resignation of Father Chaminade as Superior General. However, and also according to Vasey (1969), we must consider circumstances of the time, as well as history. We can defend Fr. Chaminade as the visionary and great leader he was, appreciating the pain of his final days, inviting everyone to understand relay his complete story. Through it all, the founder always showed courage, genius, and holiness.

Fr. William Joseph Chaminade was beatified by Pope John Paul II on September 3, 2000. Blessed Chaminade's feast day is celebrated on January 22, the day of his death. Today, two hundred years later, high schools, universities around the world, bare his name. Many men and women have been formed, educated and inspired by the courageous leader, who firmly, yet at times, prayerfully quiet, envisioned a better world for us to live in. A true leader not only can be measured by his own accomplishments, but by the collective contribution of those who live out his legacy. As one someone who said "yes" to do my part in carrying on his legacy, I invite others to remember his words when life, or work, proves to be challenging... ". . . I am like a brook that makes no effort to overcome obstacles in its way. All the obstacles can do is hold me up for a while, as a brook is held up; but during that time it grows broader and deeper and after a while it overflows the obstruction and flows along again. That is how I am going to work." - Father William Joseph Chaminade

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