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In the Footsteps of a Spiritual Giant

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Thursday June 7, 2018

By Eric F. Spina

First, they studied the history of the Marianist founders. Now, faculty and staff have embarked on an extraordinary pilgrimage to be part of that history.

On Sunday, as many in the great UD family pause and reflect on Blessed Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon's remarkable life, she will be beatified in her hometown of Agen, France, with a University of Dayton contingent celebrating in the joy of that moment.

This year's Chaminade Seminar participants are walking in the footsteps of the Marianist founders in France and Spain during a two-week journey of faith designed to deepen their understanding of and commitment to the Marianist mission.

The beatification ceremony is a bonus for this year's pilgrims who, in preparation for the trip, spent the spring in class learning about social and religious change against the backdrop of the French Revolution more than 200 years ago.

It's a fascinating piece of history. At the age of 19, in the aftermath of the bloody upheaval in France, Adèle set aside an aristocratic upbringing, engaged a middle-aged priest, and together they, and others, dedicated their lives to shining light on Mary's special role of bringing others to Christ.

"Two spiritual giants." That's how Father Tom Schroer, S.M., has described Adèle, who started the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and Father William Joseph Chaminade, who founded the Society of Mary. Both survived exile and societal turmoil to imagine a new way forward — in collaboration with small faith communities of lay people.

In 2000, Father Chaminade was beatified in the Catholic tradition. This weekend, Mother Adèle joins him. For both, it's a formal recognition of the way they led their lives with "a heroic degree of holiness."

I'm thrilled that Marianist sisters Leanne Jablonski and Laura Leming will join the UD pilgrims and Marianist priests Joseph Kozar and David Fleming at a ceremony that places Blessed Adèle one step closer to sainthood.

As the Hanley Sustainability Institute's Scholar for Faith and Environment, Sister Leanne blends faith and science in her work with students on protecting the environment. As an associate professor of sociology, Sister Laura asks students to ponder these questions, "How do we leverage transformation of the society for God's vision for the world? For God's people — which is everybody, not just the Catholics, not just the poor?"

The Marianist sisters on our campus daily model Blessed Adèle's faith and respect for inclusivity. "Marianist sisters today live Adele's spirit by collaborating...to address justice concerns, including the needs of women, children, the environment, and those in poverty," says Sister Leanne. "In Pope Francis' spirit of hope, mercy, and care, we are joyfully building a church and world where no one is left out."

Blessed Adèle is part of the inaugural class of "Women of UD: Trailblazers," a display honoring 15 women who have led the way to make our campus more inclusive and equitable. We have also named our soon-to-open residence facility on Lowes Street the Adèle Center. Beyond apartments for students, it will include worship and gathering spaces.

As students stroll through the halls of the Adèle Center, I hope they come to realize they are walking in the footsteps of a spiritual giant, someone who models faith, community, and service — the best of who we are as a Catholic, Marianist university.