

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

2012

No. 6

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SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of November 26, 2012

Dear Sisters,

The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us forever!

On the day after the Solemnity of Christ the King and before the celebrations of November 27th, 28th and 29th and the beginning of the Advent Season, it is a joy to write you to wish you happy Community feasts and to share with you some news of the Company.

Yesterday, in the Gospel of Saint John, we heard Jesus say to us, “...for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” The twenty-seven Spanish Daughters of Charity martyred for the faith (1936), who will be beatified next year together with numerous religious and lay martyrs, followed the example of Jesus. They witnessed “to the truth of the Gospel that had transformed them and made them capable of attaining to the greatest gift of love: the forgiveness of their persecutors.”¹ They confessed their faith fully.

The celebration of their beatification will take place in Tarragona on October 27, 2013. Extensive documentation of their lives has already been assembled and published in Spain. It will be translated and disseminated in the months to come.

1. Porta Fidei, 13



Spiritual Life

Letter of November 26, 2012

Let us give thanks to the Lord for these new beatifications that we will experience in the context of the Year of Faith. Our martyred Sisters *followed and carried on the mission of Christ; they chose to live totally and radically the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience that make us available for the purpose of the Company: the service of Christ in persons who are poor.*² Their lives and their deaths are for each of us a call to fidelity in this service, whatever the difficulties, misunderstandings or opposition that we might encounter.

On this subject, I am sure that you are closely following the events in the Middle East, Syria, the Holy Land and Egypt. Last year, on this same date, I evoked this region of the world. During these last months, the revolts in Syria moved toward a real civil war: our Sisters in Tell Arbouche are now in the capital, Damascus, because their village risked being cut off from the rest of the country. In Damascus, the Sisters at St. Louis Hospital continue to serve the sick from all sides, and those of Bab Douma maintain the operation of the school. All try to make the hospital and school places of peace despite the climate of anxiety and the deep divisions within the population. Before all these events, they could drive by car from Damascus to Beirut in two hours; now this same trip can take up to ten hours.

The Communities of the Holy Land also feel the tension born from the confrontations between Israel and the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip. A Sister who regularly went to distribute aid in Gaza has not been able to get there lately. In addition, in the house in Haifa, where our Sisters serve severely handicapped children, strict security measures had to be put in place because of possible rocket fire.

In Egypt, the peaceful coexistence among diverse religious denominations seems very fragile, and the Sisters fear the impact of any instability on the most deprived.

I do not want to spread gloom and doom in this letter, but I could also bring up the confrontations between Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria, the extreme poverty of refugees wandering between Goma (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Rwanda, etc.

2. Cf. Constitution 8 b

At the heart of these dramatic situations, but also in each of our local communities, may we offer our services to all, be witnesses of peace, work for justice and take up the cause of the most disadvantaged.

Tomorrow, celebrating the Feast of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, we will commemorate the apparition of the Immaculate Virgin Mary to Catherine Labouré. At the Motherhouse, as in several of your houses, we will welcome thousands of pilgrims and offer them a medal, which is a summary of the Gospel, a message of faith, hope and charity, and a catechism within everyone's reach. Let us confide them to the Virgin Mary's protection.

Let us ask the Lord, through the intercession of Saint Catherine, to live *availability to our Sisters and to those who are poor; in an attitude of servant*³, so that the Company may remain faithful to the spirit that Saint Vincent and Saint Louise wished for the first Sisters who gathered in the home of Saint Louise 379 years ago, on November 29, 1633.

May Mary accompany us on our Advent journey. She is the daughter of Israel who, with the prophets, awaited the Messiah: *he shall judge the destitute with justice, and decide aright for the poor of the land*⁴ ... *he will be the messenger of peace.*⁵

With the assurance of my prayer and my devoted affection,

Sister Evelyne FRANCO
Daughter of Charity

3. Cf. Constitution 18 a

4. Cf. Isaiah 11:4

5. Cf. Isaiah 52:7

ADVENT 2012
A journey to Christ and our Charism

“The way of evangelization...is to let the truth become charity in me. Like fire, charity ignites my neighbor. Only in igniting one another through the flame of our charity does evangelization really grow. The presence of the Gospel is no longer just words, but a lived reality.” - Pope Benedict XVI, meditation at the opening of the Synod for New Evangelization (October 8, 2012)

TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

May the grace and peace of Jesus fill your hearts now and always!

I recently served as a delegate to the Synod for New Evangelization, which coincided with the start of the “Year of Faith” to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. The presence of the Gospel that our Holy Father noted above is a gift and challenge for all who follow Christ in the way of St. Vincent de Paul. It is a gift given us by Jesus, the Word made flesh. It is our challenge to make it a ‘lived reality’ in serving our lords and masters, God’s poor. The season of Advent offers us an opportunity to ponder the beauty, mystery, and awesome responsibility of our vocation as Christian disciples who follow the Vincentian charism. Our Advent journey has four distinct movements that mirror this liturgical season as well as stages in Christian discipleship.

A TIME OF ANXIETY AND UNCERTAINTY

The world of today is wrought with anxiety and uncertainty of all stripes: economic, geo-political, ethnic, and social, and personal. Wars, skirmishes, and natural disasters, in turn, beget poverty, famine, hunger, homelessness, and human miseries impossible to catalogue. As alarming and disconcerting as our world is today, the Advent Sunday Scriptures remind us of similar situations in ages past. *“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars, and nations will be in dismay... people will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world”* (Lk 21:25). Our Holy Founders, Saints Vincent and Louise, faced catastrophic challenges in their lives: war, famine, disease, disregard for the poor, and ignorance and indifference to the practice of the Catholic faith among clergy and laity. What was their response to these trials and tribulations?

I believe it can be found in the same Lucan Gospel in the First Sunday of Advent: *“When these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads, because your redemption is at hand... Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy. Be vigilant at all times and pray”* (Lk 21:28, 34-36). In coming to know Jesus more fully by meditating on his Word and receiving him in the Eucharist, Vincent and Louise made Christ the center of their hearts and lives. Jesus calmed their anxieties and moved them to undertake a dynamic and prophetic way of living the Gospel.

Their spiritual journey continues as we put into practice the charism of charity they gave us over 350 years ago. Let this Advent be a time we seek the person of Jesus Christ in Word and sacrament, trusting in God who *“will do what is right and just in the land”* (Jer 23:5). With Emmanuel, God-with-us, as our mainstay, we will *“increase and abound in love for one another and for all...strengthening your hearts to be blameless in holiness before our God”* (1 Thes 3:12-13).

A TIME OF AWARENESS AND ANTICIPATION

Amidst life’s ambiguities, Advent offers growth in awareness and anticipation of the coming of our God among us. Advent is a time of beginnings and endings: a new liturgical year, and the end of the calendar year. But as Christians, we realize that despite this *chronos*

time of endings and beginnings, Advent shows us the true *kairos* moment: in the Incarnation, God is forever with us. The prophet Baruch reminds us to be a people “*rejoicing that they are remembered by God*” (Bar. 5:5). No matter what the year has been for us, through Jesus, God calls us to more abundant love.

The prophetic voice of John the Baptizer brought Israel an awareness and anticipation of God’s coming. John proclaimed a “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... a voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight his paths’*” (Lk 3:2-3). John, prophet of the Reign of God, told of the coming of the Messiah in a life disciplined by asceticism and full focus on Jesus. Advent helps us turn our gaze to God’s only-begotten Son through the beauty of the scripture, readings, and hymns which awaken us to God’s mercy.

A steady gaze toward Jesus as “God-with-us” is the effect of an Advent asceticism, as it was in the lives of Vincent and Louise. For them, Jesus was their “all”. Vincent urged his followers to “*make ourselves interior men so that Jesus Christ may reign in us ... let’s seek the glory of God, the reign of Jesus Christ*” (Coste XII, p. 111). Vincent and Louise advanced the reign of God on earth by serving Christ in the poor. Advent prepares us to do the same.

A CALL TO CONVERSION TO CHRIST AND TO OUR CHARISM

As Advent moves us from anxiety to anticipation, we find openness in our lives and hearts for Jesus to enter. In doing so, we encounter again the mystery of conversion, as Christ gently reveals new ways to live the Gospel truths. The refreshing words of St. Paul acquire new meaning for us: “*Rejoice in the Lord. I say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near*” (Phil 4:4-5). That nearness gives us a taste of what conversion to Christ means. It calls us to a decision: on whom and what do I set my heart?

The ‘Gaudete’ Sunday Gospel portrays the first fervor of those whose hearts were moved to conversion by John the Baptizer. Luke tells us that although the crowds varied from ordinary folk to tax collectors

and soldiers, all had the same question: “*What should we do?*” (Lk 3:10) And John’s response was simple and direct: share all you have with the needy; do not collect more taxes than required; do not extort or falsely accuse anyone; and be satisfied with your wages (cf. Lk 3:11-15). John’s call to conversion was not a jump in the Jordan and a fleeting feeling of relief. It led to Jesus and a new, dynamic relationship with God and neighbor.

Our Holy Founders had their ‘conversion moments’: Louise’s Pentecost Sunday experience, and Vincent’s Chatillon and Folleville encounters. Both discovered following Christ was not to be found in esoteric spiritual exercises or abstract religious doctrines, but in ministering to others as though they were the Lord Jesus himself. Louise wrote, “*I felt a great attraction for the holy humanity of Our Lord and I desired to honor and imitate it insofar as I was able in the person of the poor and all my neighbors*” (Spiritual Writings of St. Louise, A. 26, p. 820).

The Vincentian charism that now inspires and guides us came from our Founders’ conversion to Christ and their willingness to stake their lives on that belief every day. Advent allows us to rekindle our connection to the charism by living it as “*ambassadors for Christ*” (2 Cor 5:20). Vincent reminded his first followers: “*Now, to begin and to succeed well, remember to act in the spirit of Our Lord, unite our actions to His, and give them an utterly noble, divine goal, dedicating them to His greater glory*” (Coste V, pp. 462-463).

A TIME FOR REDEMPTIVE ACTION

Once we allow Advent to renew us in Jesus’ love and mercy, we can give ourselves more fully to the Vincentian charism. In a prior letter to the Vincentian Family, I suggested this theme to enhance collaboration: “Let us work together to share the Good News and to communicate life to those who are poor.” (June, 2012) Like our charism, Vincentian spirituality is practical and applicable. That was the genius of Vincent and Louise: they saw Christ in the poor, and the poor in Christ. We must work together to spread that charism of charity in our modern-day milieu.

Advent, 2012

However, both Vincentian spirituality and Advent remind us that what we seek for ourselves and those we serve is not merely temporary relief, but redemptive action. The Advent scriptures highlight ordinary people in salvation history called by God to play extraordinary roles: John the Baptizer, Mary, Elizabeth, and Joseph. By her openness to God's will, Our Blessed Mother accepted her role in God's redemptive action as Mother of the Lord, showing us a powerful path to faith and fidelity. No wonder Elizabeth would say to Mary upon her visit, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb...blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled*" (Lk 1:39-45). Mary's witness, as well as all the Advent stories, can deepen God's grace in us, as we make their stories of salvation our own.

The Vincentian Family is composed of members with enduring faith who share in the mission to evangelize the poor. All are called to be missionaries who live the Good News. Last summer, I visited the Philippines to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the presence of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity there. The picture that graces the first page of this letter is taken from a play, "*San Vicente: A Zarswela*" produced at Adamson University for this great event. As I enjoyed this spectacular depiction of our history and of the mission in the Philippines, I was filled with gratitude for the many sacrifices made by the first missionaries, the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity who came there from Spain. It was also evident to me this former 'mission territory' has grown into a dynamic faith community with its own missionary outreach.

Advent reminds us that the work of God continues anew each year in all of us, no matter our age or state in life. The new evangelization begins with each one of us! So let us give ourselves to this holy season with open and willing minds and hearts and be lifted from life's worries and anxieties into a deeper communion with Christ and a renewed commitment to the Vincentian charism of charity. In the spirit of Jesus and our Holy Founders, I again ask: "Let us work together to share the Good news and to communicate life to those who are poor."

I pray the Lord Jesus may bless you abundantly in the Advent and Christmas seasons!

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Father Gregory GAY, CM
Superior General

Letter of November 27, 2012

TO ALL THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Dear Sisters and Brothers in St. Vincent:

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us forever!

As the Church rejoices at the start of this “Year of Faith”, I am very pleased to write to you in this month of November as we celebrate the feast of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. This is a time for us to pause and give thanks to the Lord for all the graces we have received through the intercession of Our Blessed Mother.

In light of the “Year of Faith” proclaimed by Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, it is noteworthy that among the various proposals suggested during the recent *Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization for Transmission of the Faith* was one calling for promotion of pilgrimages to different Marian shrines throughout the world. In light of this, I would especially encourage our various shrines throughout the world dedicated to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal to promote pilgrimages throughout this Year of Faith. Hopefully, the local Associations of the Miraculous Medal can be of great assistance in this undertaking.

The Synod of Bishops also encouraged people to celebrate this Year of Faith by studying and deepening their understanding of the documents of Vatican II, in this, its 50th anniversary. These documents continue to be prophetic today, calling us to embrace the world by our own witness of love. The gift of faith given us in baptism and strengthened

by the Word of God and Eucharist makes the transforming love of God our standard in the midst of a secular society.

To assist us in this endeavor, the Synod reminded us of the importance of our Catholic Social Doctrine and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which celebrates 20 years since its publication. Both Catholic Social Doctrine and the Catechism are key instruments for the New Evangelization, and were recommended by Pope Benedict in his opening address.

We are called to proclaim our faith in the risen Lord Jesus, and to show that through expressions of charity to one another, and especially to the poor and marginalized. The fruit of faith and charity is service to the poor; this message was clearly presented by the Pope. As the Association of the Miraculous Medal, we are encouraged to continue to evangelize with renewed enthusiasm. This can be accomplishing through prayer, service, and in the tradition of home visits, which occur over a month. Members go to one another’s homes with an image of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal to pray, share Scripture, and enter into a faith dialogue. The “Year of Faith” provides an opportunity for our Association to continue this tradition or to even start it up. It is a wonderful way for all of us to participate in the New Evangelization.

From November 3-4, the International Council of the Association of the Miraculous Medal met in Havana, Cuba, as mandated in our general statutes. In reports presented by different national councils, we had the opportunity to learn about the work of the Association. We also noted with regret a lack of information from some areas, which deprives us of knowing the wonderful efforts being made by other national councils.

In light of this, I want to encourage all Visitors and Visitatrices to make every effort to accompany this branch of the Vincentian Family by those you have appointed as moderators of the Association of the Miraculous Medal. By their efforts at animation, I am sure they will continue to find creative ways to bring the laity into roles of leadership that will strengthen our Vincentian charism.

Letter of November 22, 2012

This letter will also serve to inform you of the convening of our first General Assembly of the Association of the Miraculous Medal in 2014. Previous meetings held in 2001, 2005, and 2009 were not considered Assemblies, as the statutes of the Association were not fully in place. This First General Assembly will be held in Rome from November 17-24, 2014.

I thank you for your spiritual and material support of the Association of the Miraculous Medal, and in this “Year of Faith” and “New Evangelization”, I urge you to continue to do so. By our prayer and activities, we can continue the work of Jesus and Mary as instruments of evangelization.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Father G. Gregory GAY, CM
Superior General

FATHER P. GRIFFIN, DIRECTOR GENERAL

“An Undivided Heart” A Prophetic Witness

Our Inter-Assemblies Document, “Open to the Transforming Spirit,” has a subtitle which draws our attention to a particular ministry of the Holy Spirit: “Wellspring of prophecy and hope.” Both of these last elements—prophecy and hope—are important in an undivided heart.

In this presentation, I will reflect with you upon the prophetic witness which we need to offer for our world and on behalf of those who are poor.

No one had a more undivided heart than the prophet. No one was more clearly attuned to the will of God than the man or woman called to speak out without compromise or fear of consequences. One can easily make the argument that Vincent and Louise were prophetic witnesses in their time and place. I will organize this presentation around a wonderful description of the prophetic ministry for the consecrated person given to us by Pope John Paul II in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Vita Consecrata” (1996). Of course, the reference here is not (specifically) to the biblical prophets but to the modern prophets for our time who are singled out as the men and women who embrace the consecrated life and bear witness to a different world in this way:

*“True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the **dialogue** of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions,*

“An Undivided Heart” A Prophetic Witness

becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God’s will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God’s Kingdom.” (VC 84)

This is a dense and rich statement which focuses our attention on the characteristics of the prophetic vocation as “a constant and passionate search for God’s will,” as involving “an unfailing communion in the Church,” and as developed in “spiritual discernment and love of the truth.”

In my presentation, I will take three of the elements which are offered as a description of the prophetic role and develop them as central to our call to this ministry for the Church and those who are poor:

- * first, the prophet as one who **listens to God’s word** “in the different circumstances of history”;
- * second, the prophet as one who has a **burning desire for the holiness of God** and hears his word “in the dialogue of prayer”;
- * and third, the prophet as one who **proclaims God’s word** with her life, her lips, and her actions.

Notice that the role of the prophet is all about God’s word, and not just the proclamation of the word. First, he or she must hear it, and then discern what it means in dialogue with the Lord, and only then proclaim that word by what they say and do.

The *Inter-Assemblies Document* is developed along the same dynamic lines as the *Vita Consecrata* description of the prophetic ministry. In our document, we proclaim that Daughters of Charity are called: to be attentive to “the reality of the world in which we live;” to “the appeals launched by the Spirit, which . . . marked the pattern of reflection;” and to recognize the “responses to be made that will motivate and energize our lives” (IAD 3). I think that one could recognize the same

pattern of prophetic analysis around the Medellin and Puebla formula of “see-judge-act” or Vincent’s guide for “nature-motive-means.”

I. A PROPHET LISTENS TO GOD’S WORD IN HISTORY

Sometimes, the prophet is described as someone who predicts the future. That has never been the charism of the biblical prophet. The role of the prophet is first of all to look and to listen. He is invited by the Lord to learn the lessons of the past and then to look and listen carefully to the teachings of the present. Only then can the prophet say something about the future: what will happen if some issues are not addressed; where will we be drawn if some changes are not made.

The first prophet in Israel who makes the transition between a priestly role and a prophetic role is Samuel; we remember how his prophetic call came about:

“Samuel did not yet recognize the Lord, since the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, for the third time. Getting up and going to Eli, he said, “Here I am. You called me.” Then Eli understood that the Lord was calling the youth. So he said to Samuel, “Go to sleep, and if you are called, reply, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” When Samuel went to sleep in his place, the Lord came and stood there, calling out as before: Samuel, Samuel! Samuel answered, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”” (1 Sm 3:7-10)

Learning to recognize the Lord’s voice is key. We can see clearly how the prophetic witness flows from our presentation our need to be listeners. We can get confused and follow other voices—sometimes that inner voice which sounds a lot like our own will, sometimes that convincing voice which sounds like the easy way, sometimes a voice which is simply loud and sounds like authority. But, we need to listen for the Lord’s voice; it sounds a lot like that of the Good Shepherd who knows his own and whose own know him. When we hear that voice, our response is to listen: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

“An Undivided Heart” A Prophetic Witness

That voice comes to us in various ways. Sometimes we hear it through the personal application and recognition of Gospel values in particular circumstances. We see the Gospel story being lived out before our very eyes, and we hear the call. Sometimes, that voice comes through the so-called “signs of the times;” we learn about the circumstance of people and find ourselves caught up in their struggle. Sometimes that voice comes to us through the summons of the Church and/or our Superiors who discern the movement of the Spirit in a particular way in the life of the Company, and we are summoned to obedience and action.

Clearly the prophetic person is called to be someone connected to her time and place. A prophet in our time is someone who reads the newspaper and listens to the news and strives to stay informed about what is happening to the vulnerable people in our countries and in our world.

The Lord is attentive to the needs of his people. **In the Old Testament**, the Lord God reminds the people of Israel that he was attentive to them in their needs and he warns them to treat kindly those who are less fortunate:

“You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you were once aliens residing in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely listen to their cry.” (Ex 22:20-22)

The Lord hears the cries of the oppressed and responds to them—look at Psalm 34:7: *“This poor man cried out and the Lord heard, and from all his distress he saved him.”*

What we need to know is that sometimes the Lord listens with our ears, then speaks with our voices and responds with our arms.

In the New Testament, the story of the Good Samaritan tells us what happens when the priest and the Levite and then the Samaritan passed the injured man:

“A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim...” (Lk 10:31-34)

Notice that they all see the victim, but the first two choose to pass by on the other side. Only the Samaritan chooses to draw near and get involved. He has opened his ears to the cry of the poor in his world. He has recognized his brother in pain and chosen to respond.

Consider the time of **Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac**. How many people saw the children abandoned on the streets and abused by their handlers, and did nothing? How many saw the needs of the sick and dying, and remained unmoved? How many saw the hungry and homeless and did not provide for them? We can describe all these situations and many more and then marvel at the way in which Vincent and Louise kept their ears opened and widened their eyes. They were attentive to the movement of the Spirit who was leading them to respond to the needs of the poor. Vincent and Louise responded to the challenge of their time with hearts and hands ready for action. They heard the prophetic call; they saw the presence of Jesus among the poor. They become our models and guides as people who can hear the cry of the poor and recognize the voice of the Lord. They were ready to respond to this voice despite any personal cost. Listen to Louise:

“Above all, be very gentle and courteous towards your poor. You know that they are our masters and that we must love them tenderly and respect them deeply. It is not enough for these maxims to be in our minds; we must bear witness to them by our gentle and charitable care.” (Spiritual Writings, L. 284b. p. 320-321)

Today, our vocation as Daughters of Charity commits us to giving prophetic witness. We recognize that, first of all, we must be women who are able to listen and recognize God’s voice in the circumstances of our time. (*“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”*) And the listening is done not just with our ears, but our undivided hearts.

II. A PROPHET REFLECTS UPON GOD’S WORD

Recognizing and listening to God’s word is the first step in the prophetic witness. The final step is putting it into action. These two steps seem obvious enough. But, there is a middle step: one which engages us in contemplation and which seeks to know the will of God for us in this situation. That middle step is reflection and prayer.

As *Vita Consecrata* describes it: “Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and . . . [hear] his word in the dialogue of prayer.”

There are two interesting elements in this part of the prophetic witness. First of all, the prophet is granted a blessed insight into the nature and will of God. As he or she looks at the current situation, the prophet recognizes where God is present and how God summons her to act.

Jesus carried out his prophetic witness in this way. He saw what was going on and recognized it as contrary to God’s will for his people. He engaged people in reflection and he challenged them to think differently. The story of the Good Samaritan is one example of this. One could also point to his way of respecting the Sabbath or his willingness to associate with certain classes of people. Jesus was a thinker—and invited others to think—as well as a speaker and a doer. He was a true prophet.

Observe how the true prophet is distinguished from the other prophetic figures of the Old Testament.

- * The “court prophet” was a figure in the royal court. He said what was expected of him by the King and not what the Lord willed.
- * The false prophet, on the other hand, was the one who expressed his own will and way of thinking rather than that of the Lord.
- * The authentic prophet reverences God and seeks to carry out God’s will. The will of God is discerned by listening and reflection.

Note the second part of the description given above. The prophet hears God’s word in the *dialogue of prayer*. The prophet does not simply speak or listen, but is involved in both ends of the conversation. I am captivated by Jeremiah’s sense of being seduced by God and how he brings that complaint before the almighty:

“You seduced me, Lord, and I let myself be seduced; you were too strong for me, and you prevailed. All day long I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I must cry out, violence and outrage I proclaim; the word of the Lord has brought me reproach and derision all day long. I say I will not mention him, I will no longer speak in his name.

But then it is as if fire is burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding back, I cannot!” (Jer.20:7-9)

Jeremiah, as many of the prophets, felt the strain of proclaiming God’s word, but ultimately he needed to make it known. He had no choice.

Vincent and Louise reflected on God’s prophetic message in their times in many different ways. They knew the circumstances of the time, and they knew the call of the Gospel. In letters and conferences, we can find them reflecting out loud about what was going on, what was possible, what would succeed and what would not. Their sense of reflection was frequently taken up with the desire to discern God’s will in the situations with which they were engaged. The success or failure of an enterprise was judged in relation to what they saw as God’s action at this time and place. What God enabled them to do successfully was seen to be in keeping with God’s will. What failed was recognized as not part of God’s plan at this time. Their ability to realize the prophetic call was tied up with their well thought-out response in the practical order.

In our time, we, too, are invited to reflect on contemporary needs. *Our Inter-Assemblies Document* summons us to:

“Commit ourselves to discerning new ways to respond to the appeals that come from today’s realities of poor persons (migration, human

The process of discernment flows from supple but astute hearts which are open to new possibilities: “*Enlarge the space for your tent, spread out your tent cloths, lengthen your ropes and make firm your stakes*” (Is 54:2). The reference to the text from Isaiah is obviously to thinking new thoughts with a broader point-of-view and with an openness to untried possibilities which can make room for creative ways of ministering and being faithful to our charism.

If Daughters of Charity are going to minister to those who are the most abandoned and most vulnerable, they must continually re-evaluate works and resources. Societies catch up with us in some forms of ministry. We need to be ready to move on. This is the response to the prophetic call and an attitude of hearts which are undivided.

A prophet does not make people comfortable nor does she remain comfortable or established herself. The teaching of Jesus has application here: “*Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head*” (Lk 9:58).

III. A PROPHET PROCLAIM GOD’S WORD: LIFE, LIPS AND ACTIONS.

An exciting passage in the book of the prophet **Ezekiel** stands out in my mind as capturing the notion of a prophet acting. It is about the gathering of the people Israel after the Babylonian Captivity. And the Lord promises not only to gather them together once again, but to give them his spirit—his life. All this happens through the word of the prophet. It is literally the work of animation.

“The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he led me out in the spirit of the Lord and set me in the center of the broad valley. It was filled with bones. He made me walk among them in every direction. So many lay on the surface of the valley! How dry they were! He asked me: Son of man, can these bones come back to life? “Lord God,” I answered, “you alone know that.” Then he said to me: Prophecy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the

Lord God to these bones: Listen! I will make breath enter you so you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow over you, cover you with skin, and put breath into you so you may come to life. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I prophesied as I had been commanded. A sound started up, as I was prophesying, rattling like thunder. The bones came together, bone joining to bone. As I watched, sinews appeared on them, flesh grew over them, skin covered them on top, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me: Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man! Say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: From the four winds come, O breath, and breathe into these slain that they may come to life. I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath entered them; they came to life and stood on their feet, a vast army. He said to me: Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel! They are saying, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off.” Therefore, prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: Look! I am going to open your graves; I will make you come up out of your graves, my people, and bring you back to the land of Israel. You shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and make you come up out of them, my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may come to life, and I will settle you in your land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken; I will do it—oracle of the Lord.” (Ez 37:1-14)

We can easily identify the ways in which **Vincent and Louise** brought about these changes in their time and place. With the power of prophets, they promoted change in their society and culture by influencing laws, organizing people, and changing institutions. Was their time any less confusing than our own or more demanding in terms of need for actions and leadership?

Vita Consecrata emphasizes the changes which the prophetic witness of a charism can bring into a society.

“If the consecrated life maintains its prophetic impact, it serves as a Gospel leaven within a culture, purifying and perfecting it. This is demonstrated by the lives of many Saints who in different periods of history were able to immerse themselves in their time without being overcome by it, but opening new paths to the people of their generation.

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The Gospel way of life is an important source for proposing a new cultural model. A great many founders and foundresses perceiving certain needs of their time, with all the limitations which they themselves recognized, have given these needs an answer which has become an innovative cultural proposal.” (VC 80)

Our Constitutions summon us to action:

“The Daughters of Charity are constantly solicitous for the development of every person in all the aspects of their being. That is why they are alert to ways of helping their brothers and sisters to become conscious of their own dignity and agents of their own promotion. They plead the cause of the underprivileged, who do not have the possibility of making their legitimate demands and aspirations heard.” (C. 24e)

Being aware of the needs of those who are most vulnerable and seeking ways to help them promote their own cause is part of the prophetic task for a Daughter of Charity. When this is not possible, the Daughter of Charity seeks to become the voice of those who suffer.

One of the ways in which *Vita Consecrata* suggests that consecrated persons most powerfully carry out prophetic witness in the contemporary world is through **the exercise of the evangelical counsels**.

“The prophetic task of the consecrated life is brought into play by three major challenges addressed to the Church herself: they are the same challenges as ever, posed in new ways, and perhaps more radically, by contemporary society, at least in some parts of the world. These challenges relate directly to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience.” (VC 87)

Poverty, chastity and obedience are effective prophetic signs of other values for our societies and they emphasize the reign of God in our midst. Simply by living these vows faithfully and joyfully, we make an argument against the abuse of a person, the craving for possessions, and the subversion of the rights of another. Or, put more positively, living the evangelical counsels faithfully leads to a deeper

appreciation of the true meaning of love, respect for the created order, and cooperation for worthwhile ends. One of the most powerful prophetic witnesses which we can offer to our time and place is simply being who we profess to be.

The document explains how these challenges are regarded in today’s world.

CHASTITY

“The first challenge is that of a hedonistic culture which separates sexuality from all objective moral norms, often treating it as a mere diversion and a consumer good...The reply of the consecrated life is above all in the joyful living of perfect chastity, as a witness to the power of God’s love manifested in the weakness of the human condition...In Christ it is possible to love God with all one’s heart, putting him above every other love, and thus to love every creature with the freedom of God!...Consecrated chastity thus appears as a joyful and liberating experience.” (VC 88)

Louise writes:

“O my dear Sisters, how the desire to love God and the practice of that love makes all things marvelously sweet! Oh, what a great consolation it is for good souls to have the opportunity to prove the love they bear Him, as you do, by the service that you render to the poor.” (SW, L. 130c. p. 329)

POVERTY

“Another challenge today is that of a materialism which craves possessions, heedless of the needs and sufferings of the weakest, and lacking any concern for the balance of natural resources. The reply of the consecrated life is found in the profession of evangelical poverty, which can be lived in different ways and is often expressed in an active involvement in the promotion of solidarity and charity...God is the true wealth of the human heart...Consecrated persons are therefore asked to bear a renewed and vigorous evangelical witness to self-denial and restraint, in a form of fraternal life inspired by principles

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of simplicity and hospitality...” (VC 89-90)

Vincent writes:

“That’s what poverty does; it makes us think of God and to raise our hearts to him, whereas, if we were comfortable, maybe we’d forget God. That’s why I’m overjoyed that voluntary, real poverty is practiced in all our houses.” (Coste XI, C.64a, p. 72)

OBEDIENCE

“The third challenge comes from those notions of freedom which separate this fundamental human good from its essential relationship to the truth and to moral norms... there is no contradiction between obedience and freedom.” (VC 91)

Our Constitutions teach us that:

“All **obedience** in faith is patterned on the attitude of the Son of God . . . in following Him and under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Daughters of Charity make to God the offering of their freedom . . . [and] commit [themselves] to a common seeking and a humble, loyal acceptance of God’s will, made known to the Company in many ways.” (C. 31a, b)

CONCLUSION

We began this presentation by acknowledging that few individuals had undivided hearts equal to that of the prophets.

We can also hear the heart of a prophet beating in the chests of both Vincent and Louise. They were individuals who saw and reflected and then acted with decisiveness and focus. As their spiritual heirs, we have much to learn from them and much to do in fidelity to our charism as prophetic witnesses on behalf of those who suffer from injustice. Saint Vincent wrote to one of our Sisters:

“O Sister, how consoled you will be at the hour of death for having consumed your life for the same reason for which Jesus gave His—for

charity, for God, for the poor. If you only knew your good fortune, Sister, you would truly be overjoyed; for, in doing what you do, you are fulfilling the law and the prophets, commanding us to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. And what greater act of love can one make than to give oneself, wholly and entirely, in one’s state of life and in one’s duty, for the salvation and relief of the afflicted. It remains for you only to join zeal to action and to conform yourself to God’s good pleasure, doing and bearing with all things for the same intentions Our Lord had and for which he suffered similar things. I pray that he will grant all of us this grace.” (L. 2734—To Sister Anne Hardemont, Sister Servant, in Ussel. Paris, November 24th [1658]. Coste VII, p. 397)

Today, that can also be the prayer of our undivided heart.

Father Patrick GRIFFIN, CM
Director General

Mary in our midst A tutor for a Daughter of Charity

Vincent must have been a great teacher. Look at his methodology. He invites people to share what they know about a subject, he then explains the subject clearly, often repeats what he has said, and then he asks his listeners questions about his presentations. At the end, he usually offers a summary. When speaking about the character of the Daughters of Charity, he gathers his most important points together in one sentence:

“I repeat once again, Sisters, that the spirit of the Company consists in the love of Our Lord, love of the persons who are poor, love of one another, humility and simplicity.” (“The Spirit of the Company.” February 9, 1653. Coste IX, p. 468)

Louise makes a similar statement:

“Humility, simplicity and love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, who is perfect charity, is their [the Daughters of Charity] spirit.” (SW. L.377 “To My Very Dear Sisters.” c. October 1652. p. 406)

In another conference, Vincent tells the Sisters how important it is to know what their special spirit is:

“When God created the Company of the Daughters of Charity, He gave it a spirit of its own. It’s the spirit that animates the body. It’s important for Daughters of Charity to know in what this spirit consists, just as it’s important for a person setting out on a journey to know the route to the place where she wants to go. If Daughters of Charity didn’t know their spirit, to what could they devote themselves in a

particular way?” (C. 50. “The Spirit of the Company.” February 2, 1653. Coste IX, p. 457)

And so, in these, and in many other places, Vincent and Louise speak about the Spirit of the Company and the need to conform to their spirit. I would like to highlight the five elements in my presentation today: love of our Lord, love of persons who are poor, love of one another, humility, and simplicity.

If you have ever had a tutor, you know how helpful they can be. They are experts in a given field, people who know what is most important, people who can give us the most practical advice on how to achieve a goal, people who show us how to do that which we really want to do because they do it themselves. From learning to play the guitar to speaking a new language, a tutor is often necessary. In learning how to be the best Daughter of Charity, there are a number of good sisters whom we could use as our model. Or we could look to Louise or Marguerite or Rosalie, etc. But I would like to hold out to you a more fundamental model who has been the tutor for all these good women in one way or the other.

We will consider Mary as our tutor and we will explore what she can teach us about each of the five elements which we seek in our Spirit as Daughters of Charity.

1. LOVE OF OUR LORD

“Whoever sees the life of Jesus Christ would see far and away the similarity in the life of a Daughter of Charity... What is the spirit of the Daughters of Charity? It’s the love of Our Lord, Sisters... you should know that it operates in two different ways, one affective; the other effective. Affective love is the tender element of love. You must love Our Lord tenderly and affectionately... Affective love must pass to effective love, which is to be engaged in the works of the Charity and the service of poor persons, undertaken with joy, courage, fidelity, and love.” (C. 51 “The Spirit of the Company.” February 9, 1653. Coste IX, p. 466)

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When we speak about love for our Lord, we immediately think about Mary’s love for him, a mother’s love. What could be greater?

When we look to Mary’s love of God, we are drawn to her love for Jesus, who was God in the midst of her family community. This opportunity to love God was genuine and tender in her life. It was as real as sharing a meal, or carrying out some small task together, or sharing the experiences of the day, or praising the Father in daily prayer. She loved God as Jesus dwelt in her home, and, when he was away, there is no doubt but that she thought of him often and prayed that he might accomplish what he had come to do.

Mary loved God in God’s law which she observed with the true devotion of a Daughter of Israel, and she loved God in the intimacy of her family with the devotion of a mother, and she loved God who dwelt within her and gave the gift of life in both the Incarnation and Pentecost. Mary loved God with the entirety of her being, which she willingly offered to God for God’s service and with all the time and dedication that a mother gives to her beloved.

When we speak of the love of God and of a Daughter of Charity’s responsibility to love God, we cannot hope for or search for a better guide than Mary.

- We remember how Mary loved God in God’s law and presence in the history of her people; this dynamic reminds us of our need to love God in the instructions which the Lord gives us in the Scriptures and in the Church.

- We remember how Mary loved God in her home and in her daily tasks; this invites us to see the opportunity to live faithfully and tenderly.

- We remember Mary’s love of God as it touched at the depths of her being and brought forth life; we find the desire to nourish our inner life and find the God dwelling with us whom we can love with all our heart.

Mary teaches us how to love God in the most ordinary way yet one that is open to everyone. Loving God was part of her daily life as it must be part of ours.

2. LOVE OF PERSONS WHO ARE POOR

In the quotation from St. Vincent above on the spirit of a Daughter of Charity, we note this line:

“Affective love must pass to effective love, which is to be engaged in the works of the Charity and the service of poor persons, undertaken with joy, courage, fidelity, and love.” (C.51 “The Spirit of the Company.” February 9, 1653. Coste IX, p. 466)

In the writings of Vincent or Louise, we find great encouragement:

“Above all, be very gentle and courteous toward your poor. You know that they are our masters and that we must love them tenderly and respect them deeply. It is not enough for these maxims to be in our minds; we must bear witness to them by our gentle and charitable care.” (SW. L.284B “To my very dear Sister Cécile Agnès.” May 4, 1650. p. 320-321)

The lessons which Mary can teach us about love of the poor are many. Reading the Gospel, we can first think of her concern for those who are poor, and then we can think of her as among the poor.

Mary’s service to the poor

Several of the New Testament stories suggest to us Mary’s care for those in need. We can look, for example, to her care for Elizabeth. We can place Elizabeth among the poor. She was an aged woman with an aged husband and no children. Now she is pregnant. “How is she going to manage?” is a good question. Mary is the answer. She journeys to her aged kinswoman’s side in the last months of her pregnancy and provides companionship as well as physical labor: both of which are real service to one in need.

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When we think of the wedding feast at Cana, we remember how the wine ran out. Was this because the family had not planned well or because they had reached the extent of their resources? In any case, Mary discovers this need and brings the matter to Jesus who acts as only he can.

We can also look to Mary’s Magnificat, her great psalm, and see the way in which she keeps the poor in the midst of her praise of God’s actions:

“[God has] lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things.” (Lk 1:52-53)

Mary has a genuine love for the needs of her people and especially those who are among the poor.

Mary among the poor

It is also easy to see the place which Mary herself takes among the poor.

Early on in Luke’s Gospel, we see the way in which he introduces us to Mary.

“In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.” (Lk 1:26-27)

The ordinary character of this address is striking. The angel is sent to the insignificant town of Nazareth in humble Galilee; this angel goes to meet a virgin betrothed to a man who is described with no title but by his tribe; and this woman’s name is simply “Mary” - a name which was common enough then as it is now (note, for example, the three Marys at the foot of the cross, Jn 19:25). One may contrast this address to that which we will find a little later:

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and

his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas . . .” (Lk 3:1-2)

Everybody mentioned here is important and has a title. The humble character of Mary is highlighted for us and emphasized by contrast. Yet when God sends his angel, it is not to the great and powerful but to the poor virgin of Nazareth. We appreciate the significance! When we look for Mary, we look among the poor.

The various ways in which Mary is presented to us also places her among the poor at various stages in her life. She is:

- an unwed mother as she says “yes” to the angel and conceives Jesus;
- a refugee as she and her family flee to Egypt where they will not speak the language nor have the stability of her own people;
- a widow who will not have the support of a husband or son in a patriarchal society;
- a mother of a convicted criminal and accused heretic who will suffer the stigma attached to those accusations.

Mary can certainly be described among the poor in many different ways, and she suffers the indignities that those roles can carry in various societies. In my heart, the place where I identify her the most as among the poor is at the foot of the cross. She is never poorer than when she has her son taken from her. She knows the lot of the poor who suffer from violence and abusive authority.

One wonders how much Jesus learned from her in this regard. In his ministry, Jesus often showed particular sympathy for the poor. We can, for example, note how often he was attentive to the needs of widows. Recall the experiences in the story of the widow’s mite, or the widow with the hemorrhage, or the widow of Nain who was burying her son, or the way in which he speaks about how widows’ rights are compromised by the powerful. Recall how he tells the story of the persistent widow who must seek justice on her own. Jesus certainly had sympathy for widows, and perhaps that emerges from the experience which he knew of his mother. We can see how we may

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place Mary among the poor in this way, and she can teach us about the experience of the poor.

When we think about the places where Mary’s apparitions took place, we can note how she appears to those who are poor—like to the humble Catharine Labouré here on the rue du Bac, or to the shepherdess Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes, or the poor peasant Juan Diego in Guadalupe, or to the shepherd children at Fatima, or numerous other encounters. Mary seems to find her place among the poor and often allows them to be her messengers. She is comfortable among them.

We can learn from her in this regard. We need to be comfortable among those who are poor and allow them to be our teachers because they are favored by God. Being among them, of course, will cause us to love them as we come to know them.

3. LOVE OF ONE ANOTHER

The call to love each other is strongly voiced by both Vincent and Louise:

“Physical separation does not prevent spiritual presence among persons whom Our Lord has united by the bonds of His holy love. The stronger this love grows within us, the closer it binds us together.” (SW. L.628B “To my very dear Sister Carcireax.” Sept 15, 1659. p. 647)

The concept of describing a community as a family has certainly been part of our Christian heritage. When Jesus is told that his mother and brothers have arrived, he says that his mother and brothers are those gathered around him who hear the word of God and keep it (Mt 12:46-50; cf. Lk 8:19-21). The close connection between the members of a family, which is defined by a mutual love and a desire to live together in mutual support, offers the ideal for a community of consecrated life.

When we look to Mary, we can see how this love gets expressed for us in simple ways.

Her time with her kinswoman and kinsman Elizabeth and Zechariah is

easily imaginable as a time of companionship and service. The home at Nazareth with Jesus and Joseph must have been a place of intimacy and deep love.

The wedding feast at Cana offers an idea of a wider family community and responsibility.

At the cross, when Jesus wants to make allowances for the care of his mother as well as the community, he uses the imagery of family:

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.” (Jn 19:26-27)

“Mother” and “child”. What could more clearly express the love which should characterize a Christian community, and which should characterize our community?

The presence of Mary with the disciples in the room at Pentecost places her in the midst of this Christian community that will be family to her. We can imagine the ways in which new members of the community would have Mary pointed out to them in hushed tones -“That’s the mother of Jesus” - and with what awe they would approach her to ask about the Jesus whom only she knew. We can imagine how much she was loved by this community, a love that was only exceeded by her love for them and her desire to help them love each other.

And so, does Mary have anything to tell us about loving each other? Certainly she begins by helping us to think about each other as “sisters” in a true family fashion. It is more than a title but a deep description of our connection and care for one another - a description which goes beyond national or cultural backgrounds to the essence of who we are and choose to be in the Company. Mary is mother to us all - as Louise described her, “our only mother” -and thus we are all sisters.

I have been blessed by a large family: I have two sisters and four brothers. Only one of my sisters is older than I am, everybody else is younger. My mother frequently gave us instructions as to how we

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were to act towards each other:

- Listen to your older sister;
- Take care of your younger sister; hold her hand when crossing the street;
- Share with your brother; there is enough for both of you;
- Let your sister play with it; she won't break it;
- Usually followed by: you have to forgive her, she is your sister;
- Help your brother with his homework;
- I am going to leave you two together; no fighting!

You know what I mean. You know what these phrases meant in a loving family. You know that it is the kind of advice which Mary gives to us with appropriate adjustments for age and language. Or maybe she tells us the same things? Can you hear her saying to you:

- Listen to your older sister;
- Take care of your younger sister; hold her hand when crossing the street;
- Share with your brother; there is enough for both of you;
- Let your sister play with it; she won't break it;
- Usually followed by: you have to forgive her, she is your sister;
- Help your brother with his homework;
- I am going to leave you two together; no fighting!

Honestly, I wrote those statements thinking of my family when we were under 10 years of age, but they still seem like good advice - especially as addressed to us by the Blessed Mother!

As we reflect on what that means in concrete terms, we are not burdened but uplifted by the thought of being so great and so reliable a support for one another, the sisters whom we love.

4. HUMILITY

Vincent reminds us that a Daughter of Charity must be humble like Jesus, “*meek and humble of heart*” (Mt 11:29). In one reflection, Louise exalts Mary as she honors “*your great humility which made you ever open to the actions of God in you and to your place in the*

divine plan” (SW, A.4 “Oblation to the Blessed Virgin.” c. 1626. p. 695). We can imagine numerous circumstances in which Mary's humility can be discerned.

1- The first is at the Annunciation. Invited to be the mother of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary describes herself as the humble and obedient servant who will do whatever God asks.

2- In the Visitation, we find a second example. Mary expresses her humility in the words of her Magnificat.

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my savior.
For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness;
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.
The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.”* (Lk 1:46-49)

She praises the marvels of God and celebrates her own lowliness in joyful comparison. It is God who has acted in her life and she lays no claim on whatever wonders result: she has been blessed by God. Her attitude of surrender and recognition of the gifts of God make her a wonderful model for us of humility.

3- The third example is Mary's willingness to concede that she does not know all the answers. As situations emerge which are beyond her ability to comprehend well, rather than being overwhelmed, the Scripture tells us repeatedly that “she pondered these things in her heart.” She is willing to allow God to be God and to be operative in her life in wondrous ways even though she does not fully understand everything that is happening.

The humble character of Mary makes her a wonderful tutor for us.

“...by her great humility which kept ever before her eyes the work which God was accomplishing in her.” (SW, A.32 “On the Virtues of the Most Holy Virgin.” p. 815)

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This is one of those lessons which Mary teaches without even knowing that she is teaching. As we reflect upon her life, her humility is obvious and sincere. It only remains for us to acknowledge and emulate it. We might hear Jesus advise: *“Learn from my mother; she, too, was meek and humble of heart.”*

5. SIMPLICITY

In his book *The Way of Vincent de Paul*, Fr. Maloney discussed the meaning of the virtue of simplicity in a Vincentian context. Among the elements which Fr. Maloney highlighted was Vincent’s deep appreciation of this virtue—calling it the one *“which I love most”* (I, 284)—and describing it most simply in Vincent’s words as *“speaking the truth”*. Louise also is often convincing in her affirmation of this important virtue for a Daughter of Charity.

“Because I am firmly convinced that you love your vocation and are well-rooted in it, I do not hesitate to tell you quite frankly whatever comes to my mind. That is also why I give you all the advice I believe it is my duty to give and which I hope will be beneficial for those sisters whom I foresee God wants to use to maintain the company in the spirit of humility and simplicity of Jesus Christ. If I did not know you well and if I were not convinced that you would accept what I am telling you with forbearance, I would be very careful not to speak to you in this way.” (SW, L.647b To my very dear Sister Carcireux. Dec 30, 1659. pp. 668-669)

Once again, Mary can be a great tutor for us in this aspect of holy living. Simplicity flows from the center of her being like so many other virtues. Let me suggest three situations in which Mary’s simplicity is expressed.

1- At the Annunciation, Mary asks a question in order to better understand God’s request: *“How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?”* (Lk 1:34) Her question is not a disguised prelude to a refusal, but a willingness to give herself more fully through clarity.

2- In the story of the “finding in the Temple,” Mary speaks to Jesus directly and clearly.

“When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.” (Lk 2:48)

The hurt and worry that Mary feels are simply stated. Jesus is on the cusp of adulthood and Mary speaks to him as her child: “Son.” She does not hide her concern or confusion. She says what is on her mind and heart in all openness, and she expects a like response from Jesus; and she receives one.

3- At the wedding feast of Cana (Jn 2:12), Mary speaks twice. To Jesus, she states the fact of the case without embellishment: *“they have no wine.”* We can imagine their eyes meeting and Jesus knowing that she expects something of him, but she will not limit his freedom. Then she speaks again, this time to the servants: *“do whatever he tells you.”* In the English version, she speaks a total of nine words (nine words also in the Greek), and so she is hardly giving detailed instructions, but with a few phrases she communicates everything which needs to be said.

It is the same advice which she gives to us: When you have something to say to God, something to say to Jesus, just say it. Do not strive to detail the way in which God should act in your life or in various circumstances. Simply tell God what is going on, and open yourself to the way in which God chooses to respond. And when you sense the direction of God’s response, however that is made known to you, do whatever God tells you to do.

This seems like simple, easy advice. But perhaps it is not so easy to follow, given our desire to be independent. Perhaps it is not so simple to do when we think that God does not understand. Mary’s words in this story of the wedding feast express great simplicity.

- Her first words to Jesus, *“they have no wine”* say everything which he needs to know. The example of Mary suggests to us the desirability of coming before God and speaking simply and without embellishment. One wonders how often our prayer has this direct and clear character. God does not need a consultant on the ways in which God should act. We can describe before God the nature of our needs and the needs of

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our people, but we need not speculate on how God might choose to act. That can be left safely in God’s hands when we express our needs with simplicity.

- The second statement which Mary makes considers the other side of the situation. Although God does not need our help in determining how to act, we do need to be obedient to the instructions which he gives us. Mary says simply, “*Do whatever he tells you.*” As we discern the will of God - expressed in so many different ways - our responsibility is simple obedience. We do not need complex explanations or justifications for why God has chosen to act in a particular way. What we need is the wisdom and strength to do what is asked of us.

Simplicity is clearly another of Mary’s virtues and one for which she could be a marvelous tutor for the spiritual life.

CONCLUSION

Both Vincent and Louise teach us that we need to know and live the spirit of the Company. Both would also recognize in Mary an excellent teacher for these values. As she helped the child Jesus to grow in “wisdom and age and knowledge,” she can help us as well. The love of God, of the poor, and of one another joined to humility and simplicity can readily be seen in her life and spirituality. As we reflect upon Marian devotion in the Company, we can continue to look to Mary as “our only Mother” and gentle tutor who supports us by both her example and her intercession.

Father Patrick GRIFFIN, CM
Director General

SISTERS’ TESTIMONY

Province of Japan

After the tsunami

Introduction

Last year, on March 11, 2011, an enormous earthquake and tsunami suddenly hit the Tohoku (Northeastern) region of Japan affecting 500km of coastline. Added to this was an accident with nuclear reactors, and this resulted in an unheard-of disaster.

Two months later, guided by the president of the Sendai Saint Vincent de Paul Society, I entered the area affected by the disaster, and I was so shocked by the scene of destruction that I was left speechless. In the sports centers that had become refugee centers, the victims stayed silent in the tense and gloomy atmosphere. On the other hand, from many parts of the world, rescue and support groups of people of good will came to get rid of the rubble and mud, providing warm food, transport and similar amenities, and both those who were volunteering and those who were benefiting from the volunteer work, were touched and weeping.

At that time, we started collaborating with a group from the Catholic Doctors’ Association. Now we are collaborating at the two Support Centers established by the Dioceses.

Here is the account given by one of our Sisters who served as a volunteer.



*News
from the
Provinces*

Sisters' Testimony

The first day that I stood at the entrance to the sports center that was now a refugee center, I didn't know anyone, so I was standing there confused and wondering how I could start to interact with them. Many people were sitting or aimlessly walking around without a smile or a word. Then I noticed one foreign woman standing like a ghost 10m away from me and staring intently at me. When I quietly approached her and made a slight bow, she asked me "Are you a sister?" As soon as I said, "Yes, I am," she suddenly started crying. "I'm from Chile. The tsunami washed away everything. Only my 12-year-old son is left... There were many sisters in Chile. This is the first time I have met a sister in Japan! I'm happy..." she said, and kept on crying. This was the beginning of my connection with the people from the disaster zone. I instinctively felt the hand of God. It was the most fortunate meeting for me, and for Sandra from Chile! Neither of us will ever forget that day. On that same day we contacted the pastor, and very next day, this priest kindly came with consecrated hosts and 100,000 yen (\$1,030) as a subsidy. Afterwards we lit a candle in a corner of the gym where we prayed and fervently received communion.

Catching sight of our coifs, everyone began to call out to us, "Sister, Sister," and gradually started telling us about the horrific events.

One elderly woman told how that day she withdrew 30,000,000 yen (\$375,000) from the bank. When she returned home, the tsunami came. Running away from the tsunami, she left the money on the table. Since then her husband has argued with her about the money, but if she had gone back to collect it, she would surely have lost her life. Finally the husband agreed that his wife's life was more important than the lost money.

An 80 year old woman told me that every night she has the same nightmare: she is being chased by a sea of flaming gas, and she runs away in a confused effort to escape. She says that her body becomes lighter each time she talks to 'Sister' about her fears...and it enables her to sleep at night.

The 12-year-old son of Sandra from Chile was clowning around, trying to put a smile on his despairing mother's face. Not understanding why

he should be doing this, she scolded him. He said to her: "I just wanted to see Mom smile..." Hearing this, she burst into tears but then said, "I won't cry anymore. I will be strong. Crying doesn't help. I will study to become a caregiver!" She now works as a shop assistant and, during her time off, studies hard to be a caregiver.

Conclusion

Throughout this ordeal, the Japanese people have been growing more resilient. The local residents are starting to move towards rebuilding, sharing ideas on what they can do. Also, I am awed at the creativity shown by many kinds of support groups whose solidarity is clearly evident.

Although this earthquake was a very tragic event, we have now begun to understand that, "**a person's happiness does not come from money or objects, but what is truly important is the bond among people**", and now the word "**bond**" has become our slogan.

I would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to all the Sisters, Provinces... and to the Company, for all the prayers and the overwhelming support we have received and continue to receive. We can say that these experiences led us to a greater sense of belonging.

Sister Janet NUNONGAMI
Daughter of Charity

Province of Pamplona

A “Marian Jubilee Year” in Peralta

Introduction

The initiative for this Marian Jubilee Year in Peralta came from Bishop Perez Gonzalez, Archbishop of Pamplona. His suggestion was taken up when, on October 7, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI gave permission to declare the year 2012, a “Marian Year” for the city of Peralta, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the wooden statue of the Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, made in Valencia in 1912 by the Moulet-Berenguer family for the Community of the Daughters of Charity in Peralta.

A Jubilee Year is an invitation to all Christians to renew their faith in Christ. To all those who want to be reconciled with God, the Church grants a plenary indulgence.

Opening celebration for the “Marian Year.”

On Sunday, January 15, 2012, in the church of San Miguel in Peralta, Bishop Perez Gonzalez inaugurated this jubilee year, with many priests, religious of the diocese, the Director and Visitatrix of the Province and many Daughters of Charity from Pamplona, Muruzabal, Ororbia, Viana, Olite, Falces, Tudela, Saragossa and Peralta present.

In his homily, the archbishop said, *“This Jubilee Year may help to bring God and the faithful closer, in this year when Pope Benedict XVI will open the Year of Faith. The crisis that we are experiencing is not only a material one, it is also a consequence of the systematic wish to*

take God out of all social structures. We see the consequences of that: the loss of many values.”

During the celebration, the parish choir of Our Lady of the Snows in Peralta gave a rendering of many popular songs as well as classics, Marian hymns and Gregorian chant.

At the end of the ceremony, the Visitatrix spoke to the assembly, recalling the event and encouraging everyone to take this opportunity to strengthen their faith, to speak about it to those around them without imposing their beliefs but rather by giving witness. The pastor thanked the Archbishop for supporting the creation of this Jubilee Year. He also thanked the Daughters of Charity and all the faithful for their presence.

The celebration ended with a procession headed by the Jubilee Cross, which had a symbol of Jesus Christ on one side and that of the Company of the Daughters of Charity on the other. During the procession, the group “Auroros del Santo Cristo” from the village sang a hymn to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

During this Jubilee Year

The parishes, the various religious movements, congregations, groups, associations, schools and the faithful were invited to come to the Marian shrine to take part in one of the Jubilee Masses, celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation and obtain the plenary indulgence.

The Sisters of Peralta

To which poor people did Vincent go? To which poor people did he send others?

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History
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“Go to the poor”... evangelize the poor... help the poor... Yes, but which poor? This is a question that is often asked and one that is crucial for the daughters and sons of Saint Vincent at a time when there are many options available. In order to try and answer it, we must begin by seeing who the poor people were that Vincent de Paul concerned himself with in his day and try to identify, if possible, the reasons for his choices. Clearly, economic and sociological conditions of poverty have changed considerably since the 17th century, but the reasons for the choices made at that time still remain important for today.

Let us then look at the poor people Monsieur Vincent concerned himself with throughout his life.

Before 1617

We may recall that Vincent de Paul knew from experience what poverty was like in the countryside. We have many texts in which he speaks about his family and its poverty, his modest and poor childhood: “...*Monsieur, how you embarrass the son of a poor plowman, who tended sheep and pigs and is still in ignorance and vice, by asking for his views!*” (Coste II, 5); “...*because I am a poor plowman and a swineherd and, what is worse, the most abominable and detestable of all the sinners in the world, I beg you to take no account at all of what I*

am saying to you, if it does not seem to you in conformity with God’s Will....” (Coste II, 193); “*To speak truly of me, you would have to say that I am a farmer’s son, who tended swine and cows, and add that this is nothing compared to my ignorance and malice*” (Coste IV, 219; Coste VIII, 159; Coste IX, 89).

Between 1610 and 1612, it is very likely that he comes into contact with the sick in the Charity Hospital by going there to distribute the alms that Queen Margot entrusted to him. There is even the matter of a **donation** being made to the hospital on October 20, 1611: “*Before the undersigned Pierre de Briquet and Denis Turgis, notaries and attorneys of our Sire the King at his Chatelet of Paris, was present and appeared in person Messire Vincent de Paul, ... counselor and chaplain of Queen Marguerite, ... he has, of his own free will, donated, given up, transferred, and by these letters donates, gives up, and transfers an outright, real, irrevocable donation... the sum of fifteen thousand livres...*” (Coste XIIIa, 20-21).

“*The Company of the Charity shall be established in the town of ... to assist, corporally and spiritually, the poor persons of the town and the villages dependent on it: spiritually by seeing that they are instructed in doctrine and Christian piety; corporally, by seeing that those who are able to work learn a trade and earn their own living, and by giving others the means of subsistence. It also aims to assist the sick poor of the town,... but in such a way that, to avoid confusion, the ministry will be divided: the men will have the care of healthy persons, and the women will have the care of the sick and everything related to this*” (Coste XIIIb, 79).

Starting from 1622, the poor, for Vincent, represent numerous situations in society: there are the poor people of the countryside, but also those in the cities; there are galley slaves, but also the sick, children, the elderly, beggars, the bashful poor...and Vincent no longer makes a distinction between different categories

Nonetheless, an important distinction arises: there are those who can work and earn a living and those who cannot and will not be able to. The former must be taught a trade; the others must be given what they need.

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However, the motivation seems to remain the same: Vincent regards as poor someone who, whatever their situation, is **abandoned by society and by the Church**, and this give rise to the need to supply the spiritual and material assistance such a person lacks.

1634-1635

Vincent de Paul tackled the problem of the **hospitals**, including that of Hôtel-Dieu, in which he would later found a Confraternity of Charity. In the beginning he is very hesitant because of the complications and inextricable difficulties of administration; he nonetheless makes up his mind to commit his sons and daughters to serving there. For him, it is basically a question of the same charitable ministry as for the Confraternity of Châtillon and those that followed. The Confraternity of Charity is established among the administrators, chaplains, Augustinian religious and the sick because, despite all the civil and religious structures in place at that time, the hospitalized sick remain, in practice, spiritually and corporally abandoned. The Ladies of Charity and then the Daughters of Charity will be those who will remain in direct contact with the sick, catechizing them and providing for their most immediate material needs, and the priests of the Mission will also be involved: *“‘But,’ someone will say to me, ‘why burden ourselves with a hospital? **Look** at the poor people in the Nom-de-Jesus who are **diverting** us from our ministry; we have to go to say Mass for them, to instruct them, to administer the Sacraments, and to supervise the overall care of their lives’ –Eh, Messieurs! Can we find fault with these good works without failing in our duty? If priests devote themselves to the care of the poor, wasn’t that what Our Lord and many great saints did, and they not only recommended poor persons to others, but they themselves consoled, comforted and healed them? Aren’t those who are poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Aren’t they our brothers and sisters? And if priests **abandon** them, who do you think is going to help them?”*

Notice the reference to the corporal care of the poor confided to the priests of the Mission: *“So then, if there are any among us who think they’re in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them*

assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, ‘Come, beloved of my Father...’ (Coste XII, 77).

With the hospitals, as with the galley slaves earlier, Vincent de Paul’s charity was introduced into existing structures. In a way, he went from door-to-door service to institutions, the poor no longer being those that institutions ignored but also those who, within these structures, remained abandoned. Note that it is still a question of spiritual and material **abandonment**, and assistance that is also material and spiritual. Vincent considered these two types of assistance inseparable, as we saw him remind his priests in the quotation above and as he would recall in the instructions that he gave to the Missionaries sent to serve the slaves.

In 1636

A somewhat unexpected yet logical choice emerged, that of the Military Chaplains. Vincent was asked to send twenty chaplains to aid the wounded and dying on the battlefield. Despite the small number of confreres at his disposal at the time, he sent ten. For him, this was a question of truly helping the poor. To Robert de Sergis, one of these chaplains, he wrote on October 19, 1636: *“In the name of God, Monsieur, take every precaution your work will allow, trusting that He Who from all eternity has chosen you to assist the poor in that area will preserve you as the apple of His eye...” (Coste I, 346).* This encouragement was all the more necessary as Vincent seemed rather distressed to learn that Robert de Sergis had been retained by Lord Chancellor Séguier and so had not been able to go on the battlefield to comfort the truly poor.

You know that the Daughters of Charity were also sent by Vincent to the armies: *“What grounds for humbling yourselves when you see that God wants to make use of you for such great things! Ah, Sauveur! Men go to war to kill other men; and you, you go to war to repair the damage they do. What a blessing of God! Men kill the body - and very often the soul when those they kill die in mortal sin - and you go to restore life or, at least, to help to preserve it in those who survive by the care you take of them...” (Coste X, 407).*

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The wounded or dying soldiers, therefore, are also the poor in Vincent's eyes because for the most part they are abandoned. However, in this new experience, an additional factor comes into play when determining who are to be classed as the poor: urgency. There are classes and categories of poor people, which are relatively, and unfortunately, a deeply-rooted feature of society. But there are also the occasional poor; people who are the victims of unexpected events. This is true of these soldiers in wartime; it will be true of all victims of war and refugees, as well as all those who will be struck down by famine or epidemics.

In 1638: The foundlings

An official structure for helping these children already existed in the form of a shelter, the Couche, directed by a member of the bourgeoisie, a treasurer and three women, and this admitted between three and four hundred children a year. But this institution functioned badly, and Vincent decided to entrust help for these children first to the Ladies and then to the Daughters of Charity and even to the priests of the Mission: "*But the Foundlings, why burden ourselves with that? Don't we have enough other things to do?*" *Let us remember, brothers, what Our Lord said to His disciples: 'Let the children come to me,' and be very much on our guard against preventing them from coming to us; otherwise, we'll be opposed to Him... To take care of children is, in a certain sense, to become a child; and to take care of the foundlings is to take the place of their fathers, or, rather, that of God, who has said that, even if a mother should forget her child, He himself wouldn't forget it... We'd be unfaithful to His grace, which has chosen us to run this hospital, if we were to refuse to accept the trouble we have with it*" (Coste XII, 78-79).

The reasons for this new commitment were clear:

1. The situation of these poor children is disastrous;
2. If they abandon them, no one will care for them: "*they will most certainly perish and die*" (Coste XIIIb, 424).

Here, too, we find different Vincentian criteria.

1. Initially oriented toward the poor and sick people of the countryside, Vincent de Paul gradually comes to no longer consider the "rural" dimension of society to be his sole criterion for poverty.

2. He feels called by all who are poor, wherever they are and whatever their form of poverty, and he commits himself and his communities to all of them. From that time onward, he is criticized for wanting to take on too many problem situations and to spread himself thin, with others wanting a sort of specialization so that his activities would be more within his means. Vincent was forced to justify himself more than once on this point; we saw above some examples of his words to the Missioners.

3. If he is interested in the foundlings, it is because these are the poorest of the poor, the least able to save themselves, the most destitute, those who "will most certainly die" if not cared for.

4. In this work, as in the others, Vincent intended to provide both material and spiritual assistance.

In 1639: Aid given to the refugees of Lorraine

As in the case of sending the Missioners and the Daughters of Charity to the armies, this was again Vincent's immediate reaction to an emergency. For him, the poor are no longer just a permanent and designated social class; they are also victims of an event or a cataclysm, in this case, war. Through the intervention of the Ladies of Charity, Vincent gathered aid and money and sent two priests and four students to distribute it in the localities, under the direction of the confreres of Toul, with Brother Mathieu Regnard going back and forth between Paris and Lorraine to secure provisions.

This project was aimed at everyone because all people, rich and poor alike, were ruined and dying of hunger. The Missioners nonetheless always made a list of the poorest people according to information given by the local pastor. The poorest are the most abundantly and best served. But, they also came to the assistance of nuns and priests, rebuilt churches, distributed seeds to peasants, etc.

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Meanwhile, the Missioners preached and catechized. However, they devoted most of their time to providing material assistance, as Jean Midot, Vicar General of Toul, testifies: “*Priests of the Mission living in this city have continued...to help, clothe, feed, and doctor the poor for these past two years. They cared for the sick, sixty of whom they brought to their own house, and a hundred more in the suburbs. Second, they helped by their alms many other poor persons, ashamed of their condition but brought low by a great need, and who fled to this city. In the third place, they accepted into their home or brought to the Hospital of Charity many sick and wounded soldiers of the king, who were fed and cared for...*” (Abelly, Book II, Chapter XI, section 1, p. 318). Many other priests of the Mission were sent to Lorraine to provide the same assistance in Saint-Mihiel, Bar-le-Duc, Pont-à-Mousson, Nancy, Metz, and Verdun.

Furthermore, Vincent organized the reception of many refugees from Lorraine in Paris. The boys were admitted to Saint Lazare and lodged there and the girls at the Foundling Home; an “employment service” found them positions and work. Missions were organized for them in 1639, 1641 and 1642.

Finally, Vincent organized **assistance for the nobles of Lorraine who had lost everything**. For them he set up a Confraternity of Charity, whose members were Parisian nobles (the Baron of Renty and others), to come to the aid of poor and ruined aristocrats...a way of one social class serving members of the same class! This ministry for the Lorraine refugees lasted until 1643, and material assistance continued to be sent until 1649.

* Notice that yet again this is an emergency situation. The poor are not a disadvantaged social class; they can also be victims of circumstances for whom assistance must be provided.

* Vincent does not choose between victims; he helps all of them, including nuns, priests affected by the disaster and nobles who had lost everything.

* The priests of the Mission are clearly engaged in the distribution of material aid.

* The doors of the houses of the Mission are opened to the poor, sick and wounded.

* Vincent concerns himself with refugees, not only in Lorraine, but even in Paris.

* Finally, the assistance that he sends is not just temporary emergency aid; for the more or less able poor, he seeks work and sets up a sort of employment office.

In 1646: the Barbary slaves

Abelly recalls that there were about 20,000 slaves in Algiers and 6,000 in Tunis and that their situation was wretched and hopeless. Louis XIII asked Vincent to take responsibility for them, and the Duchess d’Aiguillon intervened to make the foundation in Marseilles possible for the galley slaves and “poor Christian captives” in Barbary (July 25, 1643). Vincent realized that there was only one way to have his missionaries accepted by the Turks: they would have to be seen as chaplains to the consuls. This was the case for Julien Guérin who arrived in Algiers on November 22, 1645, and who earned the esteem of the Muslims so much that he was able to have Father Jean Le Vacher, along with a Brother, come to Tunis on November 22, 1647. Meanwhile, the Duchess d’Aiguillon purchased the office of the Consulate of Algiers and, with the consent of the King, gave it to the Congregation of the Mission.

Jean Le Vacher had burdensome administrative responsibilities but remained above all a pastor, concerned for the spiritual and material assistance that he was able to give. Listen to Vincent telling about the arrival of a galley ship in the port of Bizerte: “...*He collected all the money he could, took with him an interpreter and another person to assist him, and set off. On his arrival, as soon as he could be seen from the galley from very far off and his clothing was recognized, those poor men began to burst into shouts of joy, crying out: ‘Here comes our liberator, our pastor, our father!’ When he boarded the galley, all those poor slaves threw themselves upon him, weeping with affection and joy at the sight of their corporal and spiritual liberator; they even went so far as to throw themselves on their knees, some catching hold of his cassock, others gripping his greatcoat, with the result that they tore it, so strong was their desire to get near him. It took him more than an hour to move through the galley in order to go to pay his respects to*”

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the Captain, because they were blocking his passage, and he couldn't advance amid all the applause and rejoicing of those poor men. The Captain ordered each one to take his post and welcomed that dear priest very courteously, telling him that he had great respect for the charity of Christians and the way they mutually helped one another in their afflictions. Next, good M. Le Vacher bought three of the fattest bullocks he could find, had them slaughtered, and distributed the meat to them. He also had a large quantity of bread baked and, in this way, gave those poor slaves a treat for their bodies, while he also did all in his power to provide them with food for their souls, which is much more necessary for the glory of God. He taught them the catechism, instructed them in the Mysteries of our most holy Faith, and, in a word, comforted them with the utmost charity. That went on for a week..." (Coste XI, 394).

In 1646

Two other missionaries were sent to Algiers and, very quickly, Saint Lazare became the center for buying back slaves. Abelly speaks of 1,200 slaves ransomed for a sum of 1,200,000 livres; the transactions were made through the intermediary of the priests in Algiers and Tunis.

To conclude this chapter, let us note that:

- * for the first time Vincent sends Missioners overseas;
- * the poor here are slaves, and this shows that he truly wanted to respond to all forms of poverty;
- * in the advice he gives to the missionaries leaving for this country, Vincent declares that they were going to Algiers *"for the corporal and spiritual assistance of all the Christian slaves there"* (Cf. Coste XIIIa, 344-5 and 351).

In 1648: Madagascar

Opportunity: the King granted the East Indies Society a monopoly for trade with Madagascar on condition that it send one or several priests *"to ensure spiritual ministry to the French and announce the Gospel to the infidels."* The Nuncio to Paris asked for the priests of the Mission: Vincent accepted.

Motivations: Vincent accepted, yet again, because it was a question of the poor; however, it was spiritual poverty that seemed to convince him in this case. He wrote to Charles Nacquart on March 22, 1648, *"Your chief concern, after striving to live among those with whom you will have to get along amicably and in an exemplary way, will be to help these poor people, born in the darkness of ignorance of their Creator, to understand the truths of our faith, not by subtle theological reasoning, but by arguments taken from nature"* (Coste III, 280).

However, the Missioners, on the ground, also encountered material suffering and worked to remedy it, caring for the sick and protecting black people from brutal domination by the colonists.

Conclusion: in accepting the Madagascar mission, Vincent again opted in favor of the poor. We find again the same reaction and reasoning as at Gannes-Folleville: just like the poor people of the countryside, the poor people of Madagascar were damned because they were ignorant of the "truths necessary for salvation." Just as Vincent de Paul, at the time of Folleville, said that there were too many priests for the cities and not enough for the country areas, in the same way he thought (and perhaps even had occasion to say) that there were far too many priests in the Kingdom of France and not enough in Madagascar. The people of Madagascar were poor because they were spiritually and materially abandoned; this second dimension of poverty was quickly grasped by the missionaries within a few days of their arrival.

In 1651: Aid provided in Picardy, Champagne and Ile-de-France

We find again the same situation and the same reaction as in the case of Lorraine; once more it is an emergency situation. For Vincent, poverty was not related to a particular social class or another category of people; it covered all social classes that were the victims of war, including the soldiers. Vincent de Paul first of all contributed to the publication of a sort of newspaper, "Christian Charity", which he distributed and had distributed everywhere in order to inform public opinion and attract charitable donations. This newspaper presented information written by the Missioners about the extreme poverty that they were encountering.

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Vincent sent many Missioners to the regions devastated by war: there were thirteen in December 1650, seventeen in 1651, and ten or twelve in May 1652; they were soon followed by the Daughters of Charity. Several interesting letters from priests of the Mission to Vincent relate the circumstances in which so much spiritual and material aid was distributed (Coste V, 136-7, 148, 184).

Let us note in passing the action Vincent took to help abandoned pastors: *“We are sending a priest of our Congregation to visit the poor Pastors and other priests of your diocese in need of assistance. He will try to gather them together, with the permission of the Vicar General, to discuss some means of helping the abandoned parishes and to see that none is left without spiritual assistance. He will then distribute clothing to them and settle on what they will have to be given monthly. He will also check on the state of the poor, especially those in rural areas...”* (Coste V, 79).

One of Vincent’s letters reveals much about this period: about those who were most poor and about a social charity that aimed at leading each person to earn a living or to rebuild his church. This letter from August 9, 1659, was addressed to Brother Jean Parre: *“...a small sum of money will be set aside to help a few poor persons to sow a little patch of land - I mean, the poorest, who would be unable to do so without such assistance... Meanwhile, you are asked to find out in what parts of Champagne and Picardy there are very poor people who may have need of such assistance - I mean, the greatest need. You could recommend to them in passing to prepare a small plot of land, to plough and fertilize it, and to ask God to send them some seed to plant in it. In addition, without making them any promises, give them the hope that God will provide. They would also like to enable all the other poor people who have no land-men as well as women-to earn their own living, by giving the men some tools for working and the girls and women spinning wheels and flax or linen for spinning-but only the poorest”* (Coste VIII, 82-83).

In another letter, Vincent asked for a sort of sociological study to be made in order to determine who are the real poor, the most poor; this letter is to the same Jean Parre: *“The Ladies wanted me to ask*

you, as I now do, to find out discreetly, in every canton and village through which you pass, the number of poor persons who will need to be clothed next winter, in whole or in part... It will be necessary, then, for you to write down the names of those poor people so that when the time for distribution arrives they will get the alms, and not others who can manage without them. Now, to discern this correctly, those poor people should be observed in their own homes so you can see for yourself who are the most needy and who are less so. .. But this information must be obtained without the poor people themselves knowing about the plan; otherwise, those who already have some clothing would hide it so as to appear naked” (Coste VI 388-389).

We can restate the same conclusions as those we explained in the case of Lorraine.

- 1 – Here, poverty is an urgent problem.
- 2 – Vincent himself defined the poor as victims of war, whoever they are.
- 3 – However, as aid was not unlimited, Vincent asked that priority be given to the most poor, that is, those who really could not meet their needs; for example, the sick and the elderly.
- 4 – For the others, charity consisted mostly of distributing clothing and seeds.
- 5 – The perspective of evangelization is never forgotten.
- 6 – The Missioners, during this campaign, were sent as real animators of the diocesan clergy.

CONCLUSION-SYNTHESIS

1 – The first striking factor and the first conclusion that becomes evident is that Vincent de Paul’s thinking with regard to the poor evolved: from evangelization to material assistance, from the “country” to all the suffering of the Kingdom, from the poor of France to those of the Third World (as we would say today).

2 – This evolution was prompted and marked by significant steps: **1617**, with the discovery of the poor people of the country areas and their spiritual poverty (Gannes) and material poverty (Châtillon). Notice that at this time material poverty meant only “the sick”, and

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poverty wasn't a social situation but an accident.

1619, the galley slaves were discovered and helped by Vincent as a social class, a group of people whose condition made them poor. Vincent, who up to then had confined his work to villages and the country areas, no longer continues this form of ministry as his specialty.

1620-1621, the proliferation of the Confraternities, as much in the villages as in the cities, led Vincent to definitively give up his specific specialization with the poor and the sick people in country places (cf. Mâcon). The poor, for Vincent, are now social classes that have been abandoned by the church and by society: beggars, elderly, children...

1634, a new step: Vincent brings the Daughters of Charity and the priests of the Mission into social structures: hospitals, institutions for foundlings...

1639, there are emergency situations: as a result, the poor are defined as victims of war, whoever and wherever they are (in Lorraine, Picardy, Champagne, even Paris).

1646-1648, with the opening of missions in Barbary and then in Madagascar.

3 – This evolution in the Vincentian definition of the poor came from events and not from theoretical reasoning. In 1617, Vincent de Paul seemed to have found his “specialty,” and he formed rural structures (missions and confraternities). However, very quickly, events disrupted his plans, and he adapted to new situations. Today, we would say that his attention to the signs of the times was the impetus for this evolution.

4 – In this period of change, we should note that after having been the creator of structures (Confraternities, Congregation, Company) for the poor, Vincent moved into existing structures to revive them and update them (founding homes, hospitals, military chaplaincies, etc.). His activity was not autonomous or competitive; it aimed, rather, to unite everyone's efforts. Much more than a creator, Vincent seems to

have been an organizer of charity and social action.

5 – With the wars and then, later, the epidemics and famines, Vincentian action showed its “rapid deployment” side. It is the only valid, effective and appropriate way to respond to urgent situations. It is surprising to realize that Vincent was able to cope so quickly and send so many Confreres and Daughters of Charity. At times like these, adaptability had to be quick and wide-spread. Confreres, initially placed elsewhere, left for Lorraine and Picardy. Local communities located in the disaster zones stopped all other work and devoted themselves to the emergency, and their houses were inundated with the poor, the sick or the wounded...

6 - Very early on, Missioners and Daughters of Charity were concerned with providing spiritual and material assistance at the same time. This was true for the galley slaves as well as for aid provided in devastated regions where the Missioners became nurses and grave diggers, and for Algiers and Madagascar.

7 - We must highlight the social concern of Vincent de Paul who was wary of applying a temporary quick fix to problems and preferred, whenever possible, to involve the poor in work so that they could earn their living.

VINCENT'S CRITERIA

We have seen Vincent de Paul progressively extend his charity to many forms of poverty although at the beginning he seemed to want to specialize in serving poor country people. As I have already said, he was reproached for wanting to do too much. In fact, it seems that the criteria of 1617 should logically have led him to that type of versatility.

Remember: he undertook the work of giving missions because the country areas were abandoned by the Church whereas the cities were over-provided for. He started up the Confraternities because there were sick people and poor people incapable of meeting their needs.

Sources and Updates

If for Vincent de Paul someone is poor when abandoned by society and the Church and when destitute to the point of not being able to meet his or her needs, these two criteria are applicable, obviously, for the rural people of the time but also (and reality quickly showed Vincent this) for the galley slaves, for abandoned children, for victims of wars, etc., etc.

From 1617 onward, Vincent de Paul didn't change his criteria, but these criteria defined a much wider world than the one he thought he defined in 1617. No problem! He remained logical and consistent, even if the continual expansion of his field of action led him, in practice, to contradict the precise instructions given to his Communities (the Daughters of Charity and the priests of the Mission). Faithfulness to motivations had to take precedence over faithfulness to the written word. This maxim doesn't seem outdated!

In 1617, as in 1660, the poor person was, for Vincent de Paul, *he who, practically speaking, is abandoned by the Church and by society, with this important sociological nuance: he does not have the means to meet his needs*. Notice that Vincent did not let himself be deluded by structures. There were hospitals; there was an organization that took in abandoned children. However, within these organizations, there were still those "abandoned by the Church and by society." So he judged that the social structures were not necessarily well organized enough for people to think that society cared for all the poor.

How can we apply these criteria today?

What are the categories of poor people to whom the Church is least present? What are the categories of poor people not covered by social safety nets (for example, the marginalized)? What are the urgent situations, that is, the circumstances where people are victims, perhaps on a temporary basis, of society's evolution? Developing countries, the un-evangelized, people who are not cared for or given any consideration...

Father Jean MORIN, CM

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Happy 2013!

January 2013

Dear Sisters,

During the month surrounding Christmas, I have again had the particular pleasure of receiving cards and letters from many of you and your communities. They have arrived by regular post and by e-mail. They have offered me your prayers and best wishes; they have described your communities, your ministries, and your hopes. In each, I have found evidence of your faith and your commitment to our charism. I assure you that I have read each of these communications. Your letters have often formed a kind of spiritual reading for me which teaches me about the situations of those who are poor in our world and invites me to consider how they are served through your efforts. In this experience, I rejoice. You certainly prompt me to think about my role as your Director and what I need to do in order to serve you better. This reflection enriches and humbles me.

In reading your notes, I cannot help but think of the ways in which Vincent and Louise exchanged so many letters with the Sisters of their time. We are blessed to have some of those texts and to see the way in which the situations which are described in them can be similar to our situations. Once again, I feel the strong connection to our roots.

One element which formed a regular theme in your recent writing was that of the “Year of Faith,” as you offered some thoughts on the implications and applications of “Porta Fidei” to your life. Pope Benedict’s letter has also been part of my thinking as I consider the new year which the Lord has given us. Of particular interest to me were the passages from the Pope’s letter which you used as a point for your reflection. You have caused me to go back and read again some of his text. Thank you. Let me share with you one line which has been a special point for my contemplation: “Only

through believing, then, does faith grow and become stronger” (PF 7). This reminder instructs us about the dynamic character of our faith. Belief is not a state but an act. Our profession of faith does not simply express what we hold to be true, but who we are as Christians, to whom we devote our deepest selves, and where we need to grow. This process can be an ongoing one for all of us in this year of faith.

As we end 2012 and begin 2013, the Sisters of the rue du Bac and I have been considering the stories of angels. These privileged witnesses of God’s presence and heralds of God’s goodness emerge most strongly in the readings around Christmas and Easter, but their messages can be profitably considered at any time. One need not look solely in the Scriptures for these stories. I encourage you to be attentive to the signs of God’s presence which surround you in those who are poor as well as in our Sisters and collaborators. Be angels for one another and for those whom you serve!

Sisters, I assure you of my continued prayer and support. I thank you for the ways in which you remember me. I ask, through the intercession of our Blessed Mother and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that the Lord may help me to serve you well.

Peace in Christ,

Fr. Patrick J. GRIFFIN, CM
Director General

