

(Note: this text may have some typos because of scanning)

Paris, January 1, 1968

My very dear Sisters,
The grace of our Lord be with us forever!

May God reanimate in us the fire of our faith! I can find no other prayer to address to Him for you this morning, my very dear Sisters, than this urgent request offered "by Jesus Christ, His Son our Lord" during the Holy Mass. And it seems to me that, across the oceans and around the entire world, your prayer will be united with mine in perfect unanimity, inspired and guided as we are by the ardent words of the Holy Father, reaching us almost every week to repeat his former appeals: "Christian sons and daughters, We recall the birth of this, our Church, nurtured by the teaching of the Apostles and by their very blood, and We celebrate it by an act of faith, explicit, firm and heartfelt. Throughout a whole year, let this thought and resolution fill our hearts. This will be a year of faith." (Paul VI, June 29, 1967)

Therefore, I will commence this circular by the brief exhortation of the Apostle Paul: "*Examine yourselves, see if you have faith!*" (Cor. 13, 5)

Faith is the very base of all spiritual life, essentially of all religious life; it is the root of our contacts with God, and the source of that charity to which we aspire. On the strength and enlightenment of our faith depend the sincerity and the vitality of our personal conversion, and of that renewal of the Company which is the purpose of the coming General Assembly. Faith should be our guide along the road of charity, and that is why it is so important to examine ourselves on this essential point. To help us to do this, we shall recall the wish expressed for us by our Most Honored Father last July 19 and meditate upon its application to ourselves: "May our faith be like that of Saint Vincent, simple, enlightened, humble, strong, serene and active." (Reply to the wishes for the twentieth anniversary of his election.)

TO HAVE FAITH

A simple faith

We can commence to meditate on faith by affirming quite simply that we must believe in the faith given to us by our Baptism. This is not in the form of some rich gift external to ourselves, but as an integral part of our spiritual being, a gracious gift that God confers on us with divine filiation. Just as natural conception implants in us the germs of qualities and gifts characteristic of our nature and our human race, so in the same way spiritual birth, imprinting on us the character of "Sons of God" implants in us the germs of faith, hope and charity. "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3, 26) This should suffice to fill our hearts with joy and gratitude, and also with confidence in the combats we have to sustain in order to progress in faith. As a wellborn man draws an assurance of prestige from his knowledge of the qualities of his race, so our confidence is strengthened by this gift of faith which we receive at Baptism.

Whether we received it at an early age in the bosom of a Christian family, before we could be conscious of this gift, or whether it was bestowed on us after the struggles of a personal conversion, in full maturity, it is the initial gift on which all the others depend. In imitation of our sainted Mother who had the devotion of celebrating the anniversary of her baptism, let us love to commemorate this day in thanksgiving, in meditation on the fundamental benefit of the theological life, and by a serious examination on the way in which we have put it into practice. If our faith is clear and unclouded, let us thank the Lord for sparing us those

struggles which are the most painful of the spiritual life, and let us make use of our simple and lucid faith to lighten the way of those who, less privileged than we, know the pain of doubt and anguish.

An enlightened faith

Let us understand in every way the demands that this gift of faith makes upon us. It is not something entrusted to us which is inert and incapable of development, which we have but to preserve intact by sheltering it. It is a supernatural power, capable of unforeseeable development. Perfect in itself, its dominion over us will only reach perfection little by little; and this will be when the purpose of our faith becomes clear to us, when it has enlightened our spirit and conquered our heart, and dominates every sphere of our life. This conquest of faith over us will be the result of grace joined to our constant efforts. Just as the gift of music or of poetry, though part of the nature of the artist, hardly develops if it remains neglected, so the precious talent of faith cannot become fruitful in our life if it is not cultivated. In this lies our responsibility and also our liberty. Faith is a gift, but it is also a duty, and it entails duties. "The will cooperates with grace in acts of faith. (Paul VI, June 21, 1967)

I will then, in the first place, readily say - let us examine our state with regard to faith! Let us not remain in calm ignorance on this point, for all spiritual progress to which we aspire can only be the fruit of our progress in faith. Let us have a sincere and fervent desire to be warmed and enlightened by the fire of faith, and let this desire become a firm determination, shown by continual prayer and an assiduous and fervent sacramental life, for the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist, received in good dispositions, increase in us the faith, hope and charity that we ask for after each of our Communions. Prayer and the sacraments are the permanent sources from which we must nourish our theological life.

In the second place, we should enlighten our faith by means of reading and study. When we speak of a simple faith, we do not by any means mean a blind faith. In an age when the truths of the Catholic faith are so little known and are the subject of so much controversy, we have a serious duty to deepen our knowledge of them, to understand them as fully as possible according to the official teaching of the Church. In this way we shall be able to nourish our own interior life with them and be more qualified to render them accessible to those around us, and to those perhaps of whom we have charge.

Let us also be alive to the repeated invitations of the Church, calling on religious Institutes to intensify the doctrinal and spiritual formation of their members, and let us be prepared to put these directions into practice, even at the price of real sacrifices. According to "Perfectae Caritatis" the most opportune time for this formation is in the Juniorate, now obligatory for all young Sisters coming from the Seminary. In all our Provinces, the organization of these Juniorates imposes heavy sacrifices, the recall of qualified Sisters from other works to direct them, and our Houses deprived of necessary additional help for an initial period of some years. I value as it deserves the great effort demanded of you at a time when the shortage of personnel is severely felt in most of our Houses, but I ask you urgently, my very dear Sisters, to cooperate cheerfully by your good spirit in this work of the first importance for the formation of the young Sisters, which is in consequence a work which will affect the future of the Company and the value of what it does for the service of God and of the Church.

Furthermore, I note with joy that in various places the initiative has been taken in various ways: Sessions, Courses and Conferences have been arranged to meet the needs of older Sisters who had not, in their day, the benefit of a complete doctrinal formation; and also to

extend and bring up-to-date their knowledge of the teachings of the Council. The benefit envisaged for the Sisters must not, however, be purely intellectual; it should be a means of enlightening their very lives. To teach the truths of faith, to form to the personal reading of the Holy Scriptures as a permanent source of spiritual support, to inculcate living by faith - this is the aim of this work of formation which we must establish. This effort does not concern the Superiors only, who have the responsibility of organizing it; it concerns all the Sisters. Each in her turn will participate in it, by organizing an office or a House in order to make this work possible, by replacing those who have been called away from their office for a longer or shorter time.

TO LIVE BY OUR FAITH

"We must accustom ourselves to follow the light of faith always and in all things," said our holy Founder.

Faith is not only an act of the intelligence; it is the adherence of the heart and the source of life. An ardent and convinced faith animates all the thoughts of our mind, influences the decisions of heart and determines the acts of our will. Such a faith throws us constantly upon God, makes us live in His sight, in dependence on Him, with a constant desire to serve Him, to make Him known and loved, to make ourselves like unto Him, conforming to His plans for us. After so many years of religious life, faced with our life still so mediocre, should we not ask ourselves plainly: How is it that my life, pledged to live by faith ever since I gave myself to God, should still be so little in conformity with that faith, with the Gospel, with Christ?"

There is in this a sad mystery of human weakness and of the inconstancy of our spirit. A *humble, strong and tranquil faith* should progressively invade our entire life, establishing between God and ourselves a permanent contact, making clear to us His plans concerning people, events and ourselves, and causing us to cling to His Divine Will, even though His ways seem sometimes disconcerting to us. It is not the most learned nor the most intelligent Sisters whose lives are most strongly influenced by their faith, but those who, by humility of heart and mind, keep themselves docile to the Holy Spirit. If we wish to see an illustration of this life of faith so lived, let us re-read the lives of our first Sisters, so humble, so strong and so tranquil in their faith that they aroused the admiration of Saint Vincent, and wrote those pages of our history which show forth most vividly the spirit of the Gospel. If the little Company has been blessed with superabundant graces of prosperity, do not let us seek the reason elsewhere than in the great purity of faith of those who were its foundation stones: our Founders and their first Daughters, Let us note in passing that Saint Vincent's vocation to charity, and that of Saint Louise, were both marked in the beginning by a violent temptation against the faith; they were delivered from this, one by a vow to consecrate himself to the service of the poor, and the other by an assurance coming from Heaven that "the time would come when she would be in a place to serve the neighbor."

Faith and Charity are closely bound together; neither can grow save in and by the other, so that to live in charity enlivens our faith, and whatever reanimates our faith, sets aglow our charity. That is why we must live each day in a continual search for the God of Love, which guides us to Him.

We have thus commenced the way of our life "with Christ with a gift of ourselves truly and deeply sincere, and which, in all good faith, we believe to be a total gift. But we rapidly discover, with the passing of time and changing circumstances, that the offering we made of

ourselves is very imperfect, weakened as it is by our innate egotism, our unconscious pride, our foolish over-estimation of ourselves, the attraction of creatures, and so many other purely natural interests. After the years of the Seminary and the preparation for the Holy Vows, the plunge into a materialistic world with professional preoccupations, apostolic responsibilities or those of an office, brings a great risk of causing stagnation or even regression in our life of union with Christ by faith and charity. It is exactly at this point, nearly always, that a religious life turns toward sanctity or falls back into tepidity and mediocrity. In the same way, each consecrated life knows the hour of the definite second conversion to the faith, when, having left the illusions inseparable from every beginning, and in full possession of her human and religious maturity, she is invited by God, now that she sees all so clearly, to choose to live by faith and charity. Happy are those who respond to this appeal; may all the Daughters of Charity be among them!

A humble faith

The grace of faith is safeguarded only in those humble hearts who are firmly convinced of their weakness, and because of this, expect all things from God. Their humility is an irresistible attraction to the Lord Who is pleased to communicate Himself to them, and to respond to their desires.

May our faith be humble and simple, received with great gratitude as a benefit we are unable to appreciate as it deserves, and a gift of which we must make the fullest use. May a humble knowledge of ourselves keep us in a state of constant prayer for the increase of our faith. May it lead us to found our faith on the official teaching of the Church, the word of the Pope, the Episcopacy, of authorized organizations and the teaching of Superiors. Thus, our knowledge of doctrine will remain sound, and we shall not allow ourselves to be seduced by the current opinions of any one individual, whether he be a priest or even a bishop. At this time when there is much confusion and excitability in the minds of many, we have need to remain firm in the faith by means of humility and obedience.

A strong faith

Do not let us think that humility and obedience in matters of faith signify the abandonment of responsibility and personal engagement. Life lived according to the faith is a continual combat which demands great courage; we do not know how far God will lead us if we are faithful, and our initial act of faith implied that we accepted this uncertainty, and engaged ourselves to follow Christ without being able to foresee the future. "You must live your whole life according to the Christ you have received—Jesus the Lord; you must be rooted in Him and built on Him and held firm by the faith you have been taught, and full of thanksgiving." (Col. 2, 6)

God has foreseen for each one of us the spiritual route by which He wills to lead us to Him, and "His ways are not our ways;" along this road, faith is our only assurance.

May the light of faith then, become truly the habitual rule of our judgments and of our conduct. My very dear Sisters, let us be very clear-sighted with regard to ourselves, and discover how much we are influenced by the materialistic and rationalistic environment into which we are plunged. We judge everything according to short-term efficacy; we put all our confidence in plans and methods dependent on human techniques; we think we have done everything when we have prepared statistics and estimates for the future. Far from me is the thought of criticizing anything which forms part of the modern workshop of charity; not to make use of these things would be to tempt God. But let us understand well, that when all is

accomplished, we have done nothing if faith and charity have not been at the source of our work. And God, whose judgment differs from ours, will often act in such a way as to interfere with our plans, in order to test, to stabilize and to purify our faith and our charity. The smallest act of faith and adherence to God's Will made in suffering and obscurity is more supernaturally fruitful than the fulfillment of all our purely human desires. "God wills to exercise us in faith during this life; our salvation depends on the acceptance of his religious plan." (Paul VI, March 15, 1967)

Would it not be a privileged communal act to study together in each of our Houses those occasions when the hand of the Lord has been felt modifying and guiding what we had planned to do? We should discover these occasions not only in spectacular trials, but in a number of little daily events, and in contacts with people around us. How good it would be for the Sisters to get together from time to time for the purpose of considering the invitations which the Lord addresses to us, what He expects of us, and what He is accomplishing through others. This would be a vertible school of contemplation, of that authentic contemplation of God in us and in our brothers which is specifically Vincentian, and which should impregnate our life. We should mutually aid one another to live by faith.

Let us be strong in our faith, in remaining firmly attached to the truth such as it is professed by the Church. Let us not vacillate on essential points such as faith in the Eucharist as it is taught to us in "*Mysterium Fidei*" and devotion to Our Lady as the Holy Father recommends it to us in the Encyclical "*Signum Magnum*". A vigorous faith and a strong fire of charity are necessary, above all in certain countries, to resist the blind impulses of those seduced by novelty.

Let us be strong in our faith, even if we feel ourselves plunged in doubt and obscurity. "The first weakness of Peter and of whoever is called to follow the Master, the weakness of all, is doubt" said Paul VI on April 12, recalling at the same time words of the Master: "Man of little faith, why have you doubted?" Let us understand well that victory over doubt does not come from human reasoning, but from God Who accords it to prayer. If we are in a night of darkness and doubt, let us throw ourselves on God by a desperate act of faith. *Let us be strong in our faith* in not demanding from God an account of His conduct towards us. We have given ourselves to Him, and yet we wish to keep for ourselves the arrangement of our lives. If our Superiors do not lead us according to our human views, we fall into temptation and we doubt God's love. If we keep ourselves in the certainty that God loves us and guides us, we shall experience an unalterable joy in the midst of even the greatest difficulties and in the absence of all human succor.

What we lack is the true knowledge of God. Unconsciously, we conceive Him according to our own image, and we apply to Him our dispositions and our human infidelities. Faith should lead us little by little to such a certitude of His presence, His action and His love for us, that everything appears to us in this light, and we accept in confidence and in peace all that He wills and permits.

A tranquil faith

"May God increase the number of those whose faith is strong and serene!" (Paul VI, June 14, 1967)

The faith of Daughters of Charity is often such as this, we can say! Their life, filled with God because vowed to charity, hardly feels the touch of temptation against the faith. They live in

the continual presence of God Whom they discover and serve in the person of the poor; they "see" God in some way, and give Him to others incessantly. This calm and simple faith seems clearly to be one of the special graces which God has bestowed on the Company; let us pray that we may always keep it.

The exercise of fraternal charity maintains the vitality of faith, and causes it to be natural to us. Charity is the fruit of faith, and also its most pure and certain expression. Since the birth of the Church, charity amongst brethren has been the sign of faith.

WITNESSING OUR FAITH

An active faith.

The gift of faith, like all other gifts, has not been given to us solely to help us in our own efforts to contact God. In us, faith has been given to the Church for the salvation of all, and we are responsible to our brothers for the faith which must be extended to them by us. This obligation is common to all Christians, but for us, Daughters of Charity, is added the additional obligation, which we have freely taken upon ourselves, to "employ ourselves in the corporal and spiritual service of the poor;" and what more urgent service are they asking of us than that of handing on to them the gift of faith?

We can see clearly all the influences being brought to bear today on those around us, and we see how the face of the true God is veiled from them by the multitude of false gods adored by the modern world: the god of money, the god of power, the god of well-being, the god of science. Sorrow is in the heart of the Pope, and he fears for his sheep: "The religious life of the next generation will be severely tried if it is not sustained by a strong and authentic faith." (June 14, 1967)

The teaching of the faith should be one of our most pressing duties. We have been accustomed to be much occupied with bringing about moral conversion, but if we look carefully around us, we shall see how little the faith is regarded, how vacillating and unenlightened, even among those who claim to be "believers". They all need to see and hear Jesus Christ by means of our words and our life.

Let us remember the promise made to Saint Catherine, a promise which refers to ourselves, that "God will make use of the two families to reanimate the faith." Let us recall also, that from the time of our origin, the "teaching of the faith" was considered as a duty inseparable from all charitable action. Let us draw from this an important lesson for the present time: every Daughter of Charity must be, there where God has placed her, a catechist of the faith, not only among the poor, but among all those with whom she works, or whom she contacts. This obviously demands a preliminary formation in the type of catechesis suitable for the work in question, and for the persons for whom it is intended. This is an urgent duty.

But to become an instrument of God to bring about the dawn of faith in souls demands much more than knowledge and methods. We must put all our life into this work: our words, actions, prayers.

Speak of what we believe.

Even outside all teaching properly so called, we must bring God to others by our words. This must be done with tact and discretion, taking account of the dispositions of those who listen to us, but all the same without human respect. If we have faith, we know that God speaks

interiorly to every man, and that our spoken words are added to those which He utters in the heart of each. We do not sufficiently believe in this action of God, in His mercy and His presence, and that is why we are so cowardly, making concessions to the ideas outwardly paraded by those who speak to us; whereas, under the mysterious workings of God, their entire being is waiting in darkness for our help to enable them to reach the truth. This is true, not only for people in the world, but also for the interior of our communities, where, by a culpable shyness, we are not outspoken enough about our life of faith. How we need to ask the Holy Spirit to inspire us, so that we may know when to be silent and when to speak, impelled by His grace. If we are humble and sincere, we shall know how to speak of God without long discourses, simply because we live in His presence and His name comes to our lips as naturally as we breathe the air that is necessary for our life, without even noticing it.

Putting our faith into practice.

Practice is the sign which proves the truth of the word. The faith which animates our life must reveal itself and become visible in the general conduct of our life, as well as in the details of our behavior day by day. It is not enough to declare ourselves Christians, but we must also live as Christians, that is to say, in truth, justice and charity; only in this way can we truly announce to others the message of salvation that we have received. The great scandal given to the little and the weak, is it not this: "They speak, but they do not act according to their words?" May God give us the light and the strength to act according to our faith, so that all may be brought to believe.

May truth and justice be the foundation of our charity. May the radiating joy of our life show forth the sovereign goodness of the Fatherhood of God. May our serenity and our obedience in time of trial prove our unshakable hope. May all our way of living prove that we sincerely believe in the Gospel as it has been taught and lived by Jesus, according to the Beatitudes.

Finally, what is the crowning aim of the coming General Assembly, and of the tremendous work which we have all undertaken in order that it may be fruitful? Nothing else but this: that the Company of the Daughters of Charity, having examined anew their way of life in the light of the teachings of the Gospel, should make the necessary readjustments in order to resemble more closely their Divine Master, Christ; and that the Company should thus become, by each of its members and each of its Houses, a sign of God among the Poor, bearing true witness of faith by charity.

To give the supreme witness

The supreme witness is martyrdom. Let us listen to the touching words of Paul VI on Saint Peter and Saint Paul in his discourse made at the opening of the year of faith: "And in order that there might remain no doubt of the certitude of their new teaching, so wonderful and so demanding, after the example of their Master and assured of final victory, they sealed their witness by their blood. They gave this witness with an heroic simplicity, for our certitude, for our unity, for our peace, for our salvation and for that of all our brothers who follow Christ - for all humanity."

The witness of martyrdom by blood will doubtless not be asked of us; but there are martyrdoms of another kind, and if we are faithful the Lord will give us the opportunity of giving him the ultimate homage by the martyrdom of our body, our heart, our will, our mind. If this cross is presented to us, let us not be scandalized as are those who have not faith. In the adversity which crushes us, whether it comes from unhappy circumstances, or from the will of others which is contrary to our own, even from the will of Superiors, let us recognize the

passing of the Lord and enter into joy, because this is the true encounter, the vital union with Christ, the moment of irrefutable witness. It is the hour of spiritual fecundity and of birth in the faith.

Who then will guide us and sustain us along this rough way of the faith if not Mary, whom the Council salutes as "a supereminent member of the Church, its admirable model and example in faith and in charity." (L.G. 53)

All her life is marked by silent acts of faith, entire, reasoned, of perfect adherence to God that astounds us. Let us look at the life of Our Lady and we shall learn what faith is when it dominates an existence free from sin, and completely docile to the Holy Spirit. When we wish, at any moment of our life, we can draw light, comfort and example for our faith, near the Virgin in the Temple, vowing to God her virginity contrary to the convictions and customs of her people; near the Virgin of the Annunciation, accepting the Divine Maternity while retaining her virginity, but believing in the power of God; near the silent Virgin, relying on God for her honor before men; or yet near the Virgin of Nazareth, during the incomprehensible length of the hidden life and during the Passion; and near the Virgin of Calvary!

Let us read with the eyes of faith the life of Mary, and let us ask her urgently to obtain for us the gift of a faith like hers; "simple, enlightened, humble, strong, serene and active".

To the Immaculate Virgin let us confide, my dear Sisters, the General Assembly which is now very near. Let us ask her to preside over its works and to direct them towards the renewal of faith in the Little Company, and the accomplishment of the Will of God in our regard. Let us ask her to inspire us and be our guide in the revision of our Constitution. It seems to me that I can say that all human means have been brought into use for the perfection of this Assembly; now it remains for us to put all our confidence in the means of faith. You have already been praying for several months, saying the "*Veni Creator*" each day as our Most Honored Father requested. Let me beg you to say this prayer with still greater urgency, and to add to it the offering of fasts and mortifications. It is still sovereignly true that grace is accorded to prayer and fasting; let us employ these "means of faith". Let each one impose on herself some personal effort, according as the Lord inspires her, but also in our Houses let us offer together in a common accord among the Sisters, some days of penance and some offering of prayer.

Let us also confide this work of study and renewal in each one of us and in all the Community to the intercession of our dear deceased Sisters, whose lives we shall read after the "Tour of the Horizon" of the Community.

Let us recommend to them also the intentions of our Most Honored Father, who conducts in the spirit of Saint Vincent the double family of which he has charge, those of our respected Director General, Father Jamet, and of our venerated Father Castelin, without forgetting the devoted missionaries, so zealous for the good of our souls and of our works.

United to our Venerated Mothers Blanchot and Lepicard, to our Sister Councillors, Econome General, Secretary General and Secretaries, I again assure you of my entire devotedness, and remain in the love of Jesus and Mary Immaculate, My very dear Sisters,

Your very humble and affectionate,
Sister Suzanne Guillemin, U.d.o.c.s.o.t.s.p.