

Contents

Spiritual Life

- 99 Letter of 2nd February 2004
Mother Évelyne Franc, Superioress General
- 105 Lent 2004
Father Robert P. Maloney, Superior General
- 110 Installation of Father Javier Alvarez as
Director General of the Daughters of Charity
- 112 Some aspects of the Director General's mission
Father Maloney, Superior General
- 116 Greetings and thanks
Father Javier Alvarez, Director General
- 118 Thank you and "goodbye"
Father Fernando Quintano, CM
- 121 Our Heartfelt thanks
Sister Évelyne Franc, Superioress General
- 123 Experiencing God
Conference in preparation for the Renovation: 22.03.2004
Father Javier Alvarez, Director General
- 135 Five faces of Giuseppina Nicoli
Mother House, 25.03.2004
Father Robert P. Maloney, Superior General

News from the Provinces

Nominations

- 145 Visitatrices and Provincial Directors

Visit of Superiors

- 147 Mother Évelyne Franc: Visit to the Province of Romania
Sister Germaine Price, Daughter of Charity
- 150 Mother Évelyne Franc and Sister Margaret Barrett, Assistant
General: Visit to the Province of Albany, New York
Sister Maura Hobart, Daughter of Charity

Testimonies given by the Sisters

- 151 Province of Los Altos Hills: the Vows, icons of our "yes"
Sister Margaret O'Dwyer, Daughter of Charity, Evansville Province

- 158 Province of Australia: Love is the most important gift you can give to the
poor
Sister Marie Cantwell, Daughter of Charity
- 161 Province of Slovenia: Families, how can we help you?
Sister Cvela Jost, Echoes correspondent
- 163 Province of the Near-East: Telling the most deprived people that God loves
them (Extract from Peoples of the World, May 2003)

Lessons from the Poor

- 168 Province of France-South: The civilization of love
Community of Lyon Saint Jean

Newsbriefs

- 172 *11th Assembly of the Union of Conferences of European Major Superiors
(Province of Slovenia)
- *Blessed Sister Rosalie Rendu brings together the “Paris of Charity”.
(Province of France-North)

Vincentian Family

- 173 The role of Counsellor to groups belonging to the Vincentian Family
Father Jose Antonio Ubillus Lamadrid, CM
- 185 10th Encounter for those in charge of the International Vincentian Family
Mother House, 20th-22nd February 2004

History of the Company

Source material and news

- 186 The Mother House’s Vincentian Heritage: The Mission
Courtyard
Sister Anne Bergeron, Daughter of Charity

Spiritual Life

MOTHER E FRANC, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

To all Daughters of Charity,
Paris, 2nd February 2004

Circular of Mother Évelyne Franc

My dear Sisters,

This year, for the first time, it was my privilege and responsibility to present our Renovation requests to our Superior General. I did this with much joy and great confidence. My joy is rooted both in our sincere desire for fidelity and also in our clear acknowledgment of our failings, as expressed by each one of us when we made our Renovation request. My confidence is based on God's loving kindness and the beautiful tradition that Saint Louise desired so much. I shared this joy and confidence with Father Maloney who grants us the grace of renewing our Vows on 25th March 2004, the Feast of the Annunciation. Let us give thanks to God and prepare our hearts.

After prayer and reflection I have decided to put before you in this 2nd February letter, just a few brief thoughts on the first action line: mission. I am thinking about writing to you on a regular basis but my letters will be relatively short. I presume that you have already received the document concerning action lines. Its objective is to mark out our journey from now till 2009, in line with the directives of the 2003 General Assembly.

These action lines were designed to be concise and that is their strength. So I am not going to weaken them by going into specific details, for this task is something that you must carry out individually, as a local community, and at Provincial level. I would like to add that the way these action lines are implemented will differ according to the various Provinces. This will be a great asset and an indication that delegation, subsidiarity and consciousness of our diversity are very much in operation. I would just like to emphasise the dynamism underlying these action lines and to mention the implications it has for the first action line, Mission.

The expressions **going beyond, going further, higher than ever before**, that we find in the text, are based primarily on the human and biblical dynamic of overcoming self, of altruism and of giving. Just to quote from the New Testament, it is the **duc in altum**, "*launch out into the deep*" of Luke 5.4 quoted by John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, and it is also the impassioned phrase used by Saint Paul in Ph 3, 13-14, "*I strain*

ahead for what is still to come,for the prize to which God calls us.” It also sums up the **even more**, the expression attributed to Saint Vincent in the film *Monsieur Vincent*, when, towards the end of his life, the saint expresses his regret for not having sent his Daughters and Sons to other shores. The same impetus is seen in the expression that Saint Louise uses at the end of her letters, *“the love of Jesus crucified”*, and the first page of our Constitutions states explicitly that this is what *“animates and sets afire the heart of the Daughter of Charity, urges her to hasten to the relief of every type of human misery.”*

The “not so young” Sisters among us have this passion for serving Christ in those who are absolutely destitute. They have already had wide experience of the joy that comes from serving. *“To wear oneself out for God, to have possessions and strength only to consume them for God, this is doing what Our Lord Himself did, who exhausted himself for love of his Father.”* (Coste XIII, p.179). Our younger Sisters often express this strong desire to do more; they have just given themselves to Christ and they want to plunge right into serving; they have a strong sense of mission, they recognise new calls and they want to move into action.

“The great cry of the poor” which was the determining factor in the life of Saint Vincent, is heard more urgently than ever in our society, and all of us, no matter what our age is, are challenged to heed:

- The cry of the hungry, the unemployed, the chronically ill, persons with AIDS, those who suffer from various forms of addiction; the cry of the marginalised, prisoners, the homeless, street children, young people who have no guidelines for their lives, and women who are abused.
- The cry of displaced people and war refugees; the cry of immigrants whose poverty forces them into exile; oppressed indigenous peoples deprived of their most basic human rights; the silent cry of abused men and women never mentioned in the media.
- Cries born out of the different ways that human life is not respected, from the time of conception until death: abortion, and domestic violence against women and children, the cries of those elderly people, the terminally ill and the disabled who are attacked, sometimes with the connivance of civil law.
- The cry of those who are victims of economic policies that generate scandalous inequality.

The Company has already responded to these cries of suffering and despair in a wonderful way. We live these responses: we read about them in the testimonies published in the Echoes of the Company and on the web site, but we need to do even more because the charity of Jesus crucified urges us!

Can we increase our prayers for those who make this great cry and examine our own responsibility in this culture of death?

Can we do **more**, can we **go further along the path we have already taken?**

Prompted by the Holy Spirit, we are to move out into deep waters, cast off our moorings and leave behind whatever encumbers us.

Our “moorings” may be what we would only describe as being realistic. This realism makes us curb and repress our dreams and how we imagine charity might be. In fact, true realism is not contrary to the desire to take further steps, but it takes the reality as its starting point and builds on this to attain the ideal.

Let us look at the suggestions for the action line on Mission:

New responses to appeals, coming from “here and there”, revision of our apostolic works, and collaboration with the laity and with the Vincentian Family in concrete and long-term projects with and for the poor...

Being realistic, we know that all this involves choices – closures and painful changes of mission. These are quite likely to happen but they should not deter us. If, from time to time, we were to ask our collaborators to evaluate the service we offer, we would be surprised at the changes they would recommend. Our youngest Sisters, too, often have a different outlook with regard to our services and they see what we can no longer see.

Vincentian fearlessness, together with Vincentian wisdom, will allow us to set these changes in motion and to explain the reasons for them. Leaving a work in a way that is fitting, giving due notice to those in partnership with us, and taking the time for the Sisters to accept the decision, is a delicate task. Some Sisters often spend the rest of their days in regrets that are neither healthy nor holy if they have not understood or accepted the need for such a change. It is also most important to think of ways of maintaining contact with people we have left. These small deaths can lead to rebirth, to new life.

On 30th August 1656, Saint Vincent wrote to two Sisters who were being sent to Arras, *“Sisters, you no longer belong to yourselves, you belong to God...you have been chosen to go, Sisters, for God has selected you for this purpose. He has not chosen that Sister there, but you, and not someone else.”* (Coste X, p.225). When I read about such Sisters having a change of mission, I often think of the works and the people that the Sisters had to leave.

Another “mooring” to be cast off is individualism. **Going a step further** demands a concerted effort, solidarity in making the decision and in starting up the new project. Referring back to the community and mutual sharing of information are vital. They are also the way of judging the success of a work, which sometimes involves only one Sister, but a work that the entire local community, and indeed the Province, also participate in.

Forgive me for stressing these “moorings” but mobility of heart and spirit are something that is prepared for in prayer and in everyday choices. In this sense, the demands of service are the pathway to spiritual conversion. *“The humble are all the more courageous when they recognise their own powerlessness. And the more lowly they consider themselves, the more fearless they become because all their trust is in God”*:

words attributed to Saint Francis de Sales.

These reflections on the action lines do not distract us from the main reason for this letter, the immediate preparation for the Renovation of our Vows. Let us live this time of preparation as a time of grace, as a further stage in our journey, as yet another “something more” in the unconditional love and the radicality of our gift to God, for the poor, in community.

Let us place this Renovation under the patronage of Sister Rosalie. She inspires us by her attentive listening to the poor and her generous response to the cries of the people in the Mouffetard district. Let us also follow the example of Mary “who, in order not to be discouraged, followed in the footsteps of her Son” (Marian commentary). She is the model for those who desire to launch out into the deep and head towards the Lord. May she help us in this time of grace for the Company!

I would like to thank all our elderly Sisters for their prayers; we greatly need the support they give and I entrust to them very specially our efforts to **advance further**.

Many important changes have already taken place in 2004 and others are in preparation. I know I speak for everyone in thanking Father Quintano for his conscientious, efficacious and discreet presence for the General Council, for each Province and for each Sister. He carried out his responsibilities as Director General with generosity, kindness and wisdom. Our prayers and our gratitude will be with him in his new service. On 22nd February, Father Javier Alvarez, whom we welcome in faith and joy, will officially succeed him.

I have also promised our prayers to Father Maloney for the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission. I expressed our gratitude to him for the inspiration he has given us and for the dynamism he has shared with us over the years. With cordial and respectful gratitude, I also greet Father Richard McCullen, Sister Anne Duzan and Sister Juana Elizondo who are very close to us.

With affectionate devotion and the assurance of my prayers for each one of you,

Sister Évelyne Franc,
Superioress General

FR R. MALONEY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

To the Daughters of Charity throughout the world

Lent 2004

My very dear Sisters,

May the pardon and peace of our Lord be with you in abundance at this time of Lent!

All four gospels paint the same stark picture of Jesus' death: he dies crucified between two criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. But whereas Mark, Matthew and John say almost nothing about the two criminals, Luke gives them speaking-roles in a dramatic episode. In fact, this scene is the longest and most important Lucan difference in the crucifixion story. We usually refer to the main character as "the good thief", though Luke does not call him either "good" or a "thief." While Mark and Matthew describe both men crucified with Jesus as "bandits", Luke refers to them simply as "wrongdoers", perhaps because, being the evangelist who most emphasises gentleness, he wants to avoid placing Jesus in violent company at his death.

Later tradition gave various names to both wrongdoers (Joathas and Maggattras, Zoatham and Camma, Titus and Dumachus, Dysmas and Gestas). Today most of these names are forgotten but some readers may still think of the good thief as "Dysmas." It was under this name that the Roman liturgical calendar assigned him a feast day, March 25th, formerly regarded as the day of Jesus' crucifixion but now celebrated as the feast of his incarnation. A charming legend found in one of the apocryphal gospels, relates that when the Holy Family went down into Egypt, two robbers set upon them. One, however, immediately stopped when he saw the tears that welled up in Mary's eyes. It was the same robbers (now caught plying their trade in Jerusalem!) – so the story goes – who were crucified with Jesus. The one moved by Mary's tears was the good thief crucified on Jesus' right.

But the gospels are silent about the wrongdoers' past history and their personal lives. At first reading, the dialogue in the Lucan story seems simple and direct: in fact, it is filled with subtle overtones. One of the wrongdoers, according to the evangelist, joins his voice to those blaspheming Jesus: "*Aren't you the Messiah? Then save yourself and us.*" But the other "wrongdoer" (Luke never refers to him in any other terms) rebukes his companion: "Have you no fear of God, seeing that you are under the same sentence? We deserve it, after all. We are only paying the price for what we've done, but this man has done nothing wrong." Notice that in Luke's account of the crucifixion scene, the role of

the good thief is to witness to Jesus' innocence. Later, a second witness, the centurion, will confirm the good thief's judgment and will testify: "*Surely this was an innocent man*" (Lk 23,47).

The drama is now heightened when the good thief speaks directly to the crucified Lord: "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" "Jesus"! This intimate form of address is startling. Nowhere else in the four gospels does anyone address Jesus simply by name and without any further reverential qualification. Luke is applying an artistic touch to convey the genuineness of the wrongdoer's request. But note the irony, too, for Luke, the first person with the confidence to speak in such a familiar way to the Lord is a convicted criminal who is also the last person to speak to Jesus before his death. He makes his plea in terms of "remembrance", a favourite word for Luke and one that is found on ancient Jewish gravestones, "Remember me." Contrary to all expectations, this wrongdoer who has heard Jesus being mocked as "*King of the Jews*", and has concluded that an injustice is being done, believes that Jesus really will rule over a kingdom and humbly asks to be remembered.

Jesus replies with the solemn words, "*Amen, I say to you.*" This is the only time that Luke uses this expression in his account of the passion and it is also the sixth and last time that he uses it in his gospel. Here the solemn formula is an introduction to the bestowal of the free gift of God's forgiveness. Jesus' reassurance goes beyond anything the wrongdoer (or the reader) could have anticipated: "*Amen, I say to you, this day you shall be with me in paradise.*" Much more is granted than was asked. The response includes not just forgiveness, but intimacy: you will be "*with me.*" In the company of Jesus, the good thief will enjoy the fullness of happiness with God.

Let me offer you two brief reflections on this wonderful story that is so characteristic of Luke.

1. We believe that grace is pure gift. God bestows it freely and abundantly. We do not earn it, we only respond to it. At the deepest level, grace is God's presence, God's offer of personal love, the gift of God himself. The gift and the giver are one. God touches our hearts and stirs up, even creates, a response within us. But it is important to note that this gift is not merely an unseen reality; rather, it takes very concrete forms. The gospels remind us of this over and over again. For the good thief in Luke's story, Jesus is grace. One can almost imagine "this other wrongdoer" studying Jesus and slowly coming to the conclusion that the man beside him is not only innocent of a major crime but that he is fundamentally good. In fact – and this little detail often goes unnoticed – Luke gives the good thief more time to observe Jesus than any of the other evangelists do, since in his gospel (unlike that of Mark, Matthew or John) the two wrongdoers walk the entire way of the cross with Jesus before dying with him (Lk 23,32). The goodness that he recognises in the person of Jesus touches the heart of the good thief and evokes a response, "*Jesus, remember me.*" Isn't that how grace often works in us, too? It enters our lives through the faithful witness of others such as our parents, a self-

giving servant of the poor, a sick person who bears illness with courageous faith, or through the life of a saint or the death of a martyr whom we read about? The signs of God's love – what we call “grace” – are visible all round us. What is remarkable in the story of the good thief is that he does not turn in on himself in what must surely have been a desperately grim moment when his life was draining away. Instead of sinking into depression or despair, he sees goodness itself in the person of Jesus and makes the hopeful plea, “*Jesus, remember me.*” He sees grace personified and he responds.

2. My second reflection is also very Lucan in character. There is something remarkably humble about that “other wrongdoer.” Unlike his companion, he recognises the true reality of his situation. His sober analysis was, I suspect, something that shocked the first wrongdoer and the bystanders: “*We have been justly condemned. We are paying the price for what we have done but this man has done nothing wrong.*”

Thomas Merton once wrote, “It is by speaking the truth that we become authentic”. Truth lies at the heart of our being, straining to be released. When we speak the truth we begin to build our true self. So it was for the good thief. Attracted by the Lord's innocence and goodness he recognised his own emptiness, and it was precisely in doing this that he was able to see, to hear, to receive, to be filled. There is a humble and at the same time affectionate ring to the good thief's plea, “*Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.*” And the warm response made by Jesus is a further testimony by Luke that the humble are exalted: “*Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” As Saint Vincent reminded his followers, the humble person can be given all good things but the proud will always be left empty.

As we enter upon our Lenten journey, I invite you to reflect with me on this beautiful scene from Luke's gospel. At a time when there is so much war, so much terrorism, so much hunger, so much disease and so many senseless deaths, I encourage you to see the abundant signs of God's merciful love, even in the midst of suffering, as the good thief did. I also pray, with you, that all of us in the Vincentian Family will know how to stand before the Lord, before each other, and before the poor, with great truthfulness and humility. Humility will help us to see our companions on the journey as a grace in our lives, as visible signs of God's presence and love.

As he drew near to the place of execution, the “good thief” must surely have felt that this was his darkest hour. But for him, light shone in the darkness. He experienced something that the psalmist loved to proclaim (139,12): “*Even darkness is not dark for you, and night is as clear as the day.*” If we stand humbly before God during this Lenten season I am confident that we, too, will rejoice in the light of the Lord.

Robert P. Maloney CM
Superior General

INSTALLATION OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

Mother House, 22nd February 2004

Installation of the Director General of the Daughters of Charity

Sunday, 22nd February 2004 was an important day in the life of the Company! The Sisters in the Mother House, together with a good number of Sisters from the Province of France-North, from Spain and Italy, and some priests of the Mission – including the Visitor of Madrid and the Provincial Director of France-North, assembled in the conference room for the installation of the new Director General.

The celebration opened with a hymn to the Holy Spirit and this was followed by an extract from a letter that Saint Louise wrote to Monsieur Vincent on “*the need for the Daughters of Charity to be always and without any break in continuity, under the guidance that Divine Providence has given them, both for spiritual and temporal matters. I think I have understood that it would be more favourable for his glory if the Company were to be a complete failure than to be under any other form of guidance, since that would seem contrary to God’s will.*”(November 1647). Then Father Maloney began his address by developing some of the aspects of the mission entrusted to the Director General of the Daughters of Charity. In compliance with the Church’s request to superiors of religious and clerical institutes and to priestly societies of apostolic life, Father Alvarez made his profession of faith. Then he thanked the Superior General for his confidence in him by appointing him Director General, and the Superioress General and her Council for their welcome. After this, Father Quintano and Mother Évelyne Franc both expressed their gratitude and their confidence in him. The ceremony ended with prayers from the psalms, intercessions and the Magnificat to Our Lady who accompanies us on our “pilgrimage of faith.”

INSTALLATION OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

Mother House, 22nd February 2004

Some of the main functions of the Director General of the Daughters of Charity

Talk given by Father Robert P. Maloney, CM
Superior General

In a conference that he gave in 1650, Antoine Portail said that he felt honoured to have been called to serve the Daughters of Charity (SV IX, 507). Today, Father Javier Alvarez joins the long list of Directors General who, in succession to Monsieur Portail, have been called to this service. This evening I would like to reflect briefly with you on what this service implies.

Your Constitutions say that he is the permanent representative of the Superior General with regard to the Daughters of Charity. In juridical terms, he has “ordinary vicarial authority.” In other words, he can do what the Superior General does. His remit is a very wide one. Because the scope of this is so wide I would like, today, to focus on some of his main functions, the ones that I consider to be the most important.

1. His service is to animate the Company and to strive to preserve the vitality of its charism.

In the name of the Superior General, and acting in his place, the Director General keeps alive, like a lighthouse whose light is never extinguished, the Company’s particular spirit and its apostolic mission. By his writings and his conferences and by the advice he gives to the General Council, he exhorts the Company to continue to be simple, humble and deeply loving and he helps it to express in concrete ways what this means for us in 2004. Together with the General Council, he strives to find contemporary ways of updating the Company’s mission of serving the poor. At every era in history, a *fire* must burn in the heart of the Company. This fire is crucial in our apostolate. This fire is crucial in promoting vocations ministry. Fire is crucial in our prayer life. Fire is of vital importance in creating warm relationships within the community. There is always the danger that the fire that burns within the Company could diminish. The challenge facing the Director, and in fact facing all of us, is to keep this fire burning and the charism alive, continually adapting and renewing ourselves in the service of the poor. A Director General will have given good service if, through his influence, the Company has this fire and becomes more simple, more humble and more loving in its service of the poor.

2. He coordinates and directs the work of the Provincial Directors

In doing this, the Director General has to know how to listen attentively. In his conversations with the Provincial Directors he must listen to the needs of the Provinces. We might say, he has to listen to the heartbeat of the Company. In listening, he strives to practise discernment, making a distinction between trends that tend to build up the Company and those which could weaken it. Saint Vincent encouraged all superiors to be the first to listen. (SV IX, 526). As the Superior General's Representative for the Daughters of Charity, the Director General has to listen attentively and creatively so that he can reflect back to the Company what he hears. From the time that Father Javier takes up office as Director General, it will be necessary to revise the *Directory for Directors* in the light of modifications approved by the Holy See after the last General Assembly. This will entail widespread consultation and his listening to this will certainly play an important part in the revision.

3. He is a Counsellor to the General Council as well as to the Sisters

The Director General attends the meetings of the General Council. He listens to the opinions of others and gives his own views simply, and out of love for the Company. In concrete terms, this means that he works in close collaboration with the Mother General and the members of her Council.

The Director General will also meet the Sisters individually and will receive the Visitatrices. In difficult matters he will sometimes need the Wisdom of Solomon if he is to give sound advice. Saint Vincent tells us that we should all ask advice (SV IV, 35-36), knowing that God usually speaks to us through the words of others. I would ask the Company to regard the Director General as one of its principal advisers.

4. He “re-presents” the Superior General

Saint Vincent soon realised he could not do everything as Superior General of the Daughters of Charity. When they requested his presence he often called on other people – Father Portail, Father Lambert aux Couteaux and Father Alméras – to represent him. The one who follows in the footsteps of Saint Vincent is also quick to realise that he cannot be with the Daughters of Charity on all the occasions that they invite him, or even on many occasions when the Constitutions of the Company *require* him to be present. The Director General is, so to speak, his “presence”, his deputy. To fulfil this role he often meets Sisters individually and as a group. He sometimes visits the Provinces. He plays a very active part in formation sessions here in Paris. He frequently writes articles for the Echoes, he gives conferences and he preaches. So he is called on to speak as the Superior General's representative.

Today I welcome Father Javier to his new ministry. He joins the ranks of outstanding Directors, including his immediate predecessor, Father Quintano, who has served the Company so well and for such a long time. All of us, and myself in particular,

owe Father Quintano a huge debt of gratitude. When Monsieur Portail died, Saint Vincent said two very striking things. Firstly, he described Monsieur Portail as someone who always had a great zeal for the sanctification of the Company (SV, X, 709). Secondly, when appointing Jean Dehorgny as Monsieur Portail's successor, he described Dehorgny as one of the gentlest and wisest members of the Company and one of those who had most regard for the Daughters of Charity. (SV VIII, 297). I pray today that in serving the Company, Father Javier will be gentle and wise, that he will have a deep love for the Company and that he will encourage you all to grow in holiness in the sight of God and of the poor.

Robert P. Maloney, CM
Superior General

INSTALLATION OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

Mother House, 22nd February 2004

Greetings and thanks

Father Javier Alvarez, CM
Director General

For almost seven years I have served Saint Louise de Marillac Province of the Daughters of Charity in Madrid. Sustained effort over all these years has taught me what it means to be a Provincial Director. Of course I have always had the Lord's help. "*Without me you can do nothing*", says Jesus in the Gospel. My experiences and convictions teach me that the One who calls us to a mission stays alongside us so that we can give the service asked of us. You can rely on my willingness to learn what is required for the office of Director General, and I, for my part, know that I can depend on your prayers. I thank you in advance for these.

I am also counting on a fraternal welcome from my Vincentian confreres. Father Quintano has told me about the good welcome he always received. I realise that the first thing I have to do is to learn to speak French well so that I can express myself clearly in that language. I have to tell you that from now on I am at the disposition of the whole Company, the Sisters of the Mother House and all its communities.

I would like to say thank you to Father General, Father Maloney; to Mother General, Sister Évelyne Franc, to Father Quintano and to the General Council who have entrusted to me this work for the Poor and for the Company. I shall be working in close collaboration with you. Thank you all for your presence and your support. "*In Nomine Domini.*"

Father Javier Alvarez
Director General

INSTALLATION OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

Mother House, 22nd February 2004

Thank you and “goodbye”

Father Fernando Quintano, CM

Dear Sisters and confreres,

March 17th of this year will mark the tenth anniversary of my arrival in Paris. Two months earlier, Father Robert Maloney, who is here with us today, signed the Patent of my appointment as Director General of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. More than a month ago, he appointed Father Javier Alvarez to be my successor and his representative with regard to the Company.

This is a good time to make a change. After ten years in this ministry and after eight months have gone by since the election of Sister Évelyne as Superioress General and a new Council installed, the Company deserves to have a new Director General, too. This is the right time to have a changes so that the Sisters wont be able to say, “it’s time he went” or for me to say “at last it’s over.” These two observations would indicate saturation and fatigue on both sides. And this would not be good because Sisters and Director are called to encourage one another to continue our vocational journey with enthusiasm and joy.

When I started this ministry nearly ten years ago, I said that I was not afraid. I trusted in the good welcome and the prayers of all the Sisters, of my Brothers in the Province of Paris and those of the Community of Saint-Lazare who are represented here today by Father Cornée and Father Landousies. I had their support over all these years. I would like to thank all of them. Better still, I have felt the support and affection of the whole Company as expressed during my visits to the different Provinces, in the letters I received and through the “Echoes of the Company” which for me were an instrument of formation, communication, and a way of being present to everyone. So I would like to thank all the Sisters, especially those who have written to me recently, as I cannot answer these letters individually. I say the same to the Provincial Directors.

Today, I remember especially, Sister Juana Elizondo and the Sisters of the previous Council. They welcomed me, supported me, and helped me to become Director General. My sincere thanks to them all, and also to the Sisters of the Mother House, to the different groups of Sisters whose work is vital for the Company in general, especially those of the General Secretariat and the Translation Centre who have made my task easier.

Since I have experienced this warm welcome and this help, I say to Father Javier: *“Thank you for accepting this new way of serving the Company; don’t worry: Mother Évelyne, her Council and all the Sisters will help you, too, to become Director General. You will probably give this service in a better and a different way than I did, because each of us is different and we have our strong points and our limitations. If there is anything I can do to assist you, be assured of my help, just as I was fortunate enough to rely on the help given by our dear and sadly missed Father Lloret.”*

Today, I would like to give special thanks to our Superior General, Father Maloney, who entrusted this work to me and who has always been very supportive and cordial. I must thank, too, Mother Évelyne and her Council for I have been working closely with them for eight months in a climate of mutual simplicity and trust.

For all this, for the good experiences I have had during this ministry, for any good I have accomplished as the instrument of the Author of all good, I give thanks to God. For my shortcomings and my limitations, for my omissions and faults, I trust in his forgiveness and yours. Now, after spending a few days with Father Javier, I will be returning to my Province of Madrid, to be at the disposition of my Visitor, Father Joaquin who is here with us today. In the December issue of the Echoes of the Company, I deliberately wrote about “availability”...now the time has come for me to practise it myself.

Father Fernando Quintano, CM

INSTALLATION OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

Mother House, 22nd February 2004

Our most heartfelt thanks!

Mother Évelyne Franc

Father Maloney, Father Quintano, Father Alvarez,
Fathers and Sisters here in this retreat room,

May I begin these few words by explaining that I am speaking this afternoon in the name of all the Sisters gathered here – and I say a special thank you to the Sisters who have come from Spain and Italy for this event which is of such importance for the Company – and I speak, too, on behalf of Sisters all over the world who join with us in prayer today. I would like to mention particularly the three Sisters from the General Council who are on mission in the Provinces of Indonesia, Brazil and Cameroon, and who have asked me to tell you that they are closely united to you and praying for you.

It is not easy to say goodbye to a Director General who has given of his best to the Company and to each one of us, and who has exercised the office of Director General in the way that Father General has just outlined, showing such a spirit of faith, such availability and such openness. So I am going to borrow the words of Saint Louise that she wrote in a letter to Monsieur Portail on 16th May 1649:

“I know that your heart filled with charity will accept the humble thanks of our Sisters and myself for the holy admonitions and proofs of goodwill that you gave us”.

We would now say: thank you dear Father Quintano, for your concern for our formation, a concern expressed in your letters, conferences, your articles in the Echoes, and your visits. Thank you for your attentive presence at the meetings of the General Council and for your wise advice. Thank you for your dynamic and humorous dealings with us in everyday events.

It is a moving experience to welcome a new Director General who has agreed with such courage, faith and simplicity, to leave one ministry and take up another one. So I assure you, Father Javier, of our obedience and our respect. On behalf of all the Sisters I thank you for your availability and I assure you of ours. We await your help in the work of revitalisation as outlined in the Action Lines, a task that we undertake with enthusiasm and a great spirit of faith, for the Lord and for the Poor.

From left to right: Father Fernando Quintano, Father Joaquin Gonzalez, Father Felix Alvarez (Father Javier’s uncle) and Father Javier Alvarez.

May the Lord express our most heartfelt thanks to you; Father Maloney, Father Quintano and Father Javier!

Sister Évelyne Franc
Superioress General

Mother House – Preparation for the Renovation 2004

The experience of God

In my first conference I would like to talk about the experience of God. The second of the Action Lines that the Company has given us for the next six years begins by highlighting the importance of experiencing God in our spiritual life and in our union with our sisters.

If the Action Lines have as their objective “to go forward” and to “press further on”, in order to achieve the revitalisation that we are being called to by the Church, the last General Assembly and Sister Rosalie, then an experience of God is absolutely necessary for stimulating our spiritual life and the union we should have among ourselves as Sisters.¹ However, if this experience is lacking there can be no renewal, including the renewal in our lives that is implicit in the Renovation of the Vows.

Indeed, this event, which is repeated every year on the feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, urges us to look into ourselves and examine our relationship with the One who has called us.

We know that the Renovation cannot be reduced to the simple matter of repeating the Vow formula. It must be accompanied by inner renewal and a fresh impetus with regard to reference points which are the foundation of our lives so that these may be revitalised and completely renewed.

What do we understand by “the experience of God”?

“I knew you then only by hearsay, but now I have seen you with my own eyes.” (Job 42:5).

Experience is a way of knowing something, not in a theoretical but in a practical way. It is “inside” knowledge. There is a connection between knowledge and understanding. Experience is something much more profound because the whole person identifies with the process. If this experience is not very sustained it will not have much of an impact; if it is fundamental then it will have a much greater influence.

If we are now speaking specifically about God, the learned person who knows a lot about God is very different from the genuine believer who lives out his or her relationship with Someone who enhances and supports them, who loves and pardons

them, who transforms them and makes them “other-centred.” But is it really possible to experience God in this way? We have witnesses to tell us that we can: Abraham, Moses, Job, the prophets, the mystics, Saint Vincent, Saint Louise.... What was Saint Vincent trying to tell us when he said on many occasions that something was “his faith and his experience”? it was simply that God was a reality in his life. It was the same for Saint Louise de Marillac² who had the experience of Enlightenment at Pentecost in 1623.

We can also think back to our own personal experience even if this is “low key.” Isn’t it true that we have all been influenced by some event which was a genuine encounter with God? Because, in the last analysis, experiencing God is simply a human experience that can only be explained in religious terms. We might, for example, after being in the Company 5, 10, 15, 30, 50....years, look back and try to fathom the reason for our vocation. It could well be that we do not discover any decisive human factor. But if in this searching we are sure that this call did come from God, then we are having an experience of God because we can only give a religious explanation for some human happening, there is no other possible explanation.

We could take another example, this time from Scripture. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that the Holy Spirit prompted Philip to set out across the desert (Cf Acts 8:26-39). We don’t know how Philip came to this conclusion which would be absurd for any evangeliser because logically one would not expect to meet anyone in the middle of the desert. And yet he came upon the chariot that the Ethiopian official had halted and, after talking to him, he ended up baptising the man. When Philip looked back on this event he could only give a religious explanation for it. He realised that the Holy Spirit had guided him and placed him on that particular path in order to accomplish that mission.

We need to have an experience God

“It is your face, O Lord, that I seek: hide not your face.” (Ps 27:9).

We need this experience of God as much as we need prayer. Indeed these two realities complement each other: without prayer it is impossible to experience God in one’s life, and experiencing God finds expression in prayer. The Constitutions clearly state that a Daughter of Charity “cannot persevere if she does not pray.” (C. 2:14).³ What does this mean? Quite simply it means that prayer and experiencing God are, for us, a matter of life and death. Also, since we are called by our vocation to serve the poor, we need to experience God who is to be found in every situation of human poverty, the God who encompasses our entire vocation and life. If this were not the case, our life and our continual service of the poor would be unsustainable.

Forty years ago the great theologian Karl Rahner stated that the Christian of the future would need to be a mystic, that is to say, “someone who can experience God in his life, otherwise he could not be a Christian.” If this statement which received universal approval and applause, refers to Christians in general, it is even more applicable to Daughters of Charity.

The Company realises that intensifying our experience of God is for us a guarantee of serving the poor. But is it possible in our age of indifference and unbelief to have this experience of God in our secularised society where the Daughter of Charity has to live and work?

Difficulties in reaching this experience of God

“Truly God is in this place, and I never knew it.” (Gn 28:16)

Every period in history has its difficulties and our own times are no exception. What gives rise to these difficulties that hide for us the face of God?

One area where these problems are to be found is our secularised culture. The world which is developing more and more technologically is progressively distancing itself from God. Where is He? Is He absent or on the margins? Some people speak about the “death of God” and use this expression to signify the minimal place that God holds in today’s society and in the concerns of many of our contemporaries.

Nobody should find it surprising that this culture should engender a rationalist and technical mentality which does not promote a sense of the transcendental, that is to say, the ability to ponder deeply on things and so find the One who is behind them all, in other words, God. Our world has forgotten that *“what lies at the heart of things cannot be seen by the eye”*, as the fox told the little Prince in that charming story by Saint-Exupéry.⁴ Our culture provides spiritless fare that does not transcend reality. Take television for example, and we see the truth of this: where are the programmes that aim at presenting a deeper meaning to life, the essence of things, programmes for the formation of children, adolescents and young people?

We are Vincentians who are immersed in this culture. Whether we like it or not, whether we realise it or not, the whole of this cultural background affects us to some degree at a personal and at community level. In what way? I am not saying that secularisation has taken over our conscience, but if we are not on our guard, we can gradually lose our sensitivity, our inner ear for listening to the music of God in our lives, in situations and circumstances, especially in difficult cases of poverty and marginalisation.

Another source of difficulties arises from what has been called “the silence of God.” This expression encapsulates all the questions that human beings ask with regard to the problem of evil: *“Why did he die, his life was so pleasing in the eyes of God? If God is good and he cares for every person he has created, why does he say nothing, why does he keep silence about this cruel fratricidal war, this mindless act of terrorism? He had a family and he was dismissed by an unreasonable and cruel boss. They have all lost their home and their livelihood. Is there any justice? What is God doing?”* This problem of evil is expressed in as many ways as there are people, and all of us, sooner or later, end up asking ourselves about it. The believer is then faced with the disconcerting, enveloping silence of God.

The silence of God causes, at the very least, consternation. *“You hid your face and I was terrified ”* (Ps 29:8). Some people even see this silence of God as a scandal and end up alienating themselves from Him. The world today is conscious of injustice on a world scale and this hides almost completely the Face of God; the injustice of the rich countries of the North which wallow in every sort of commodity while the people of the South are dying of hunger because they lack the barest necessities. Our world is not one of brotherhood but it is scandalously unjust. This state of affairs hides the Face of God. It hides it for those who suffer injustice because these cannot understand that history and nature are guided by Divine Providence. How can they recognise God in the midst of their wretchedness? It also hides His Face from those who are responsible for the injustice, because these end up regarding religion as a collection of prayers and empty practices which make both those who practise religion and those who don't, indifferent.

Some paths that lead to the experience of God

“Their eyes were opened and they recognised Him.....they said to each other, ‘were not our hearts burning within us as he spoke to us on the way?’ ” (Lk 24:32)

Let us start from this undeniable truth: nothing and nobody can exist without some support, some base, some foundation. A tree needs earth, a house needs foundations, a believer needs God. What is it that a Daughter of Charity needs? Obviously she needs a community where she finds support, where she can renew her energies and where she can unwind. These are natural needs but they are not enough. If she has to bring human warmth to others, to devote herself unselfishly to their service, and if she has to bring social relief to the vast and complex world of the poor, she needs to contemplate the deepest mystery of life, to experience, to feel and to be certain that God is acting in her life. Could anyone joyfully give themselves completely to God and to others if their faith was weak and languishing? We can easily understand that those Sisters whose faith in God grows ever stronger will have their lives renewed and will become even more dynamic. And it will always be the poor who benefit.

To experience God we only need to look into our own lives, we need look no further than our own vocation. So far we have thought about the difficulties that exist in finding this experience of God. Now we will concentrate on possibilities. We must, of course, open the eyes of our heart if we are to encounter Him. The patriarch Jacob, weary of searching for God, fell asleep exhausted by this lofty aim. When he woke up he could not help saying, *“God was in this place and I did not know it.”* (Gn 28:16) Here we have a good symbol of human blundering: God is in life and man is in the clouds! If we still doubt, the Lord himself tells us, *“Look, I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him.”* (Ap 3:20).

The Emmaus travellers were slow to realise that the stranger who joined them on their journey was the Lord. Fortunately, they did eventually recognise him! (Cf Lk 24:13-25). What are the means we must take in order to come face to face with the One

who is Author of all things? Here are some of them:

The way that Jesus followed

The gospels pass on to us the greatest experience of God that history has every known: the experience that Jesus had. He is so closely united to God that he is described as *“the Word made flesh”* (Jn 1:14) and *“image of the invisible God”* (Col 1:15; 2Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3). If we listen to Jesus we hear the Father (cf. Jn 14:9-11). Saint Paul ends by saying that *“God wanted all perfection to be found in him.”* (Col 1:19).

To experience God by following the path of Jesus means that we have to take to ourselves His experience of God and make it our own. *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; nobody comes to the Father except through me.”* (Jn 14:6). Thanks to the gospels we know that Jesus was able to identify with the Father by opening himself to His Loving Plan, by doing His Will, and by close union with Him in times of intense prayer. Jesus never made any distinction between his encounters with the Father and his unconditional giving of himself for the cause of the Kingdom. The Constitutions rightly state that *“Christ is the Rule of the Daughters of Charity.”* (C.1:5) This is true about every aspect of their lives, including the way they are to come to an experience of God.

The way of inevitable questions

Moses, who was an anxious man, discovered God by asking himself questions. *“Why is the bush not burnt up?”* (Ex 3:1-14). Saint Vincent also had the habit of asking himself questions. One day he reflected on the poor: *“Who are they in reality?” “Why are they poor?” “Can anything be done for them?”* This torrent of questions was poured out to God who gave Vincent His power. From that time onward his life’s horizons were broadened in an unexpected way because he saw in the poor something more than the misery their outward appearance presented.

On a personal level, the Daughter of Charity is aware of what is happening in her own life. As someone who continues the work of Saint Vincent, she has been entrusted with the lives of others. She thus becomes the privileged witness of Jesus’ most fragile and therefore most “sacramental” life. (Cf Mt 25:31-46). Her ministry provides wonderful opportunities for asking herself, *“Who is this human being who relies on me? Why was this person born, why was I born? Why does this person suffer illness, have an accident, be abandoned by others? What is the meaning of life? Isn’t our existence absurd if it means we are to disappear without trace?”* Our secularised society does not encourage people to ask such questions. The prevailing philosophy cannot offer any answers to these questions and so prefers to ignore or to silence them.

Questions like these bring the believer to the edge of a precipice with regard to God: it is all or nothing. Either we must answer these questions with reference to God or else there is no answer to them. When someone turns aside to reflect on them in prayer and lets these questions open up a pathway for him, he soon realises intuitively that they cannot all be without an answer. If there is thirst it is because water exists, if we need

affection it is because love exists, if there are questions about a personal Creator God, then this God must exist; otherwise the world would be absurd. When someone comes to this conclusion in meditation and after some searching, he or she can have the deep sensation of being in touch with the very mystery of life. This is the experience of God; it joins with the certainties of faith and strengthens them.

The Daughter of Charity has access to other means of being with God in her day to day service. We said earlier that she is a privileged witness of life and an instrument of God's action. She must therefore put at the service of the poor, her sight, her touch, her hearing, her intelligence and her heart. It is not enough for her to give irreproachable service on a professional level. Something more is required. She must be able to find God through the service she gives. Saint Vincent often said to the first Sisters, "*A Sister will go ten times to visit the sick, and ten times she will find God in them.*"⁵ Every Daughter of Charity who wishes to be faithful to the Vincentian charism, must find God in her life and her service. Our Founders learned and practised in a wonderful way the art of being "a contemplative in action."

The way of a life that is completely devoted to the service of others

If, as was said earlier, injustice hides the face of God and scandalises our contemporaries, a life that is completely given to the service of others is, today, one of the most authentic signs of coming to an experience of God. The prophet Isaiah says, "*they shall look on the One they have pierced*" –this is a clear reference to Our Lord's Passion. (Cf Is 53). This biblical image is particularly relevant for our times. People do look and seek but they do not find much help in lofty discourses and in wordy catechetics that are full of good reasons for things. In fact, people today, (the semi-alienated, the alienated, the indifferent..) can discover something in the world of the suffering poor. People who live alongside them and devote their lives to caring for them, can be a point of reference and a challenge that helps others to discover God and to adopt, in some fashion, the values of the Kingdom.

For a long time, now, the Church has realised that without charity there can be no evangelisation. Twenty-nine years ago Paul VI said, "*Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because these are also witnesses.*"⁶ So the Daughters of Charity have a big responsibility. Their service of the poor is free from self-interest and so they become icons that help many poor people to discover the fatherly and merciful face of God.

The prayer of meditation-contemplation, is the basic principle for experiencing God

"Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart." (Lk 2:19)

Indeed this is something that we have to do so that the ways of reaching God mentioned in the previous section, may be effective. It is one thing to know about the life of Christ, to ask oneself the most important questions about life, to reflect on the events one experiences and to understand the significance of a life devoted to the service of others: it is a much more profound and decisive matter to create that inner space where

everything “distils” the experience of God. In this interior space, warmed by prayer, the inevitable questions about life, those decisive questions, arise, and we know that there is only one response to them, God.

In this inner space born out of meditation, or as the Constitutions put it, “contemplation”, we can look for the logic behind the events of our personal life until the pieces of the Providence “puzzle” come together: we can also look back over our present life of service and see there, the hand of God. This is the path that leads to a decisive experience of God and it helps us to grow as persons. We learn to put a religious interpretation on events in our lives. Meditation gives depth to our lives because it helps us to move on from simply “looking at” things, events and people; to “seeing” these in depth, and penetrating beyond the surface and beyond appearances, seeing with the eyes and the heart of God.

In order to experience God in prayer we must, as stated earlier, make our life and our prayer inseparable. This is precisely one of the characteristics of Vincentian prayer: its “raw material” is taken from life and this material is worked on in times of prayer. The end result of this is that we experience God.

Let us look a little more closely at this process. In meditation we think back over happy events and this leads us to make acts of thanksgiving. Often this same prayer reminds us of God’s wonderful works and this leads us to praise Him. When we become aware of our personal failings we begin to ask for forgiveness. Then when the sorrows and harsh realities of this world come to mind we have the prayer of intercession. When every aspect of life come together at a deep level in prayer, we can be sure that the Daughter of Charity is enriched by an experience of God because ultimately all this is simply our discovering the silent, constant, real and mysterious presence of God in our world.

By way of conclusion, a brief look at Mary. Article 2.16 of the Constitutions tell us that for the Daughters of Charity she is “*the teacher of the spiritual life.*” Indeed, we have only to imitate her dispositions as revealed in the gospels to understand and appreciate the life that comes from the Holy Spirit. There can be no doubt that Mary experienced God in a very profound way, not just because she bore him in her womb, but because she was a woman of deep prayer and she also knew how to store up and meditate on the events of life, and recognise God at work in them. This gave her the strength to say “yes” to God’s difficult plans for her, plans that were often hard to understand.

Father Javier Alvarez
Director General

Notes

¹ Inter-Assemblies Action Lines, 2003-2009, *Our passion for Jesus impels us to go to the poor fearlessly, compassionately and with creativity (cover).*

² Cf Coste II, p.282 (letter 606)

³ Cf. *Novo Millenio Ineunte*, 34

⁴ Saint- Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, chapter XXI

⁵ Coste IX, p.252

⁶ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41

FR R. MALONEY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Conference given on 25th March 2004 at the Mother House

Five faces of Giuseppina Nicoli

Immediately after the beatification of Rosalie Rendu, many people asked the Procurator General: “*Who will be next?*” He replied, “*Most probably it will be Giuseppina Nicoli.*” Practically everyone from outside Italy asked, “Who is she?” So today I want to speak to you about this remarkable woman.

Giuseppina was born on 18th November 1863, in Casatisma, a small town in northern Italy. It is not difficult to find out what she was like or to learn about her thoughts and her feelings, since 1,473 of her letters still survive. Many witnesses, too, left accounts of the deep impression she had made on them. When the Visitatrice, Marie Maurice, later to become the Mother General, chose her to be Directress of the Seminary, she jotted down in her notebook, “This Sister is a real example of what it means to be a Daughter of Charity.” When Giuseppina died of tuberculosis on the last day of December 1924, she had already gained a reputation for sanctity and for the works she did. There are many other things we could say about Giuseppina Nicoli. Today I will only present you with five faces of her.

1. Teacher and catechist

Giuseppina Nicoli was very intelligent. When she was 16 she began to study to be a teacher. She came out top of her class and was chosen to give the farewell address to the professors and her fellow students at the graduation ceremony.

A year after gaining her diploma she entered the Daughters of Charity. She went to Paris for part of her Seminary, arriving there on 18th June 1884. But a cholera epidemic broke out in France and the Italian Sisters were sent home. She was immediately sent to the Istituto Sappa, not far from her hometown, where she taught young girls, but three months later she was transferred to Cagliari in Sardinia, where she arrived on New Year’s Day 1885. She served here as a teacher and catechist.

At that time 50% of the population of Sardinia could not read or write. Giuseppina wrote: “*The future depends entirely on education. How can we fulfil this mission? By having a high regard for this important service and by trying to prepare ourselves to do it well, by learning the methods that can help to form the character of our*

students: patience, gentleness, firmness, serenity, closing our eyes to a great many things and being fair and impartial in the matter of rewards or punishments.”¹

In her correspondence, Guiseppina spells out her philosophy. She believes that formation is more important than instruction. She believes that the busy life of a teacher should not be an obstacle to praying. She believes that a personal relationship with each student is a most important factor in the overall education process. Alongside her academic courses she organises “religion schools” which put the emphasis on catechetics and personal formation.

During the beatification process some of her students offered very touching testimony:

- I always found her serene, always good-humoured and smiling...She made no distinction between the poor and the rich but welcomed all with the same smile.
- She used to tell me that the suffering I was experiencing would pass but the merit gained by this suffering would remain in God’s eyes.
- She was so used to speaking gently that when she needed to scold us her voice changed so much that we had to laugh.

Two questions to link this up with our own lives

-Who were your best teachers in the Company?

- In your opinion, what are the qualities that make a good teacher?

2. Mother to abandoned children

The work for which Giuseppina is best known was her service of the “basket carriers” children.

At that time Cagliari teemed with street children who were poor, without family, abandoned or orphaned and who slept in doorways or in lean-tos near the seashore. They survived by carrying baskets from one merchant to another or delivering goods from the market to people’s homes, sometimes engaging in petty theft and sometimes cheating people. The civil authorities assigned each one a number so that they could identify them when there was any problem with the law. But Guiseppina treated them as persons with a name; she brought them together in a school and taught them to read and write as well as teaching them catechetics and preparing them for their First Communion. She called them the “Marianelli” or Mary’s poor children. She thought that since they had no father or mother on earth, they should at least know that they had a mother in heaven.

Over the years Giuseppina organised many other groups for poor young people: the Luigini catechism groups, the Sunday schools where religious instruction was given, the junior Ladies of Charity, the Dorotheans, the Zitini, the Children of Mary, the Guiseppini.

The Visitatrice, Sister Rossignol, was amazed at the number of young people who flocked to the Asilo della Marina where Sister Nicoli was working. The total number of young people in the various groups organised by Giuseppina was close to 2,000. At the end of a visitation in 1919, the Visitatrice wrote, "A tremendous amount of good is done in this house. Our dear Sister Nicoli is indefatigable and in general this is true of all her companions."

A question to link this up with our own lives

Sister Nicoli worked at the formation of a great variety of groups of poor young people. In what specific ways can that be done today in France or in other countries?

3. Animator of a local community

When she was only 36 years old, Sister Nicoli was appointed Sister Servant. She continued in that office to the end of her life except for a brief interval of 18 months when she was Provincial Treasurer and nine months as Seminary Directress for the Province of Turin.

On one occasion she was speaking to the Seminary Sisters about the role of the Sister Servant and she said: *"In our houses there is usually a spirit of peace and thanks to this we are happy when we are together...The Sister Servant speaks forcefully when it is her duty to do so. Usually she keeps no secrets from her companions. We consult one another when difficulties arise, we help one another, we support one another and we pray for one another."*²

One of the Sisters gave this description of Sister Giuseppina as Sister Servant: *"She was a true mother and the servant of the Sisters in the house."* Another said, *"She created a joyful and cordial atmosphere in the house."* It is clear that she tried to reach out to everyone. In a conference to the Seminary Sisters she said, *"We are all sisters. Do members of a family stop loving one another just because one of them is a difficult character? If this is what happens in the natural order of things in the world, how much more love should we have for one another in community if we follow the divine law of mutual charity? Do not let yourselves be too much affected by the outward behaviour of your companions. Each of us should see ourselves in our sisters. We must be truly united in heart."*³

You will recall that Saint Vincent once said that Superiors should be the first to obey.⁴ This seems to have been the case with Sister Nicoli. One Sister testified, *"She was very docile in doing what others wanted, not out of weakness but out of humility."*⁵ Another said, *"She was obedient to everyone. She really accepted other people's ideas, provided that the thing proposed was not unjust."* In fact, in one of the conferences to the Seminary Sisters, Giuseppina told them, *"In order to acquire the virtue of charity we must be very respectful of others and accept their opinions as long as there is no sin involved. If what is proposed is good, let us accept it even when it differs from our way*

of thinking. It is not necessary that our own judgment should prevail. If peace is to reign in a house it is absolutely necessary that everyone be willing to sacrifice her own opinions. If this is not the case there will always be strife.”⁶

A question to link this up with our own lives

What three qualities do you look for most in the Sister Servant of a local community?

4. A Woman of God

Since we have so many of Sister Nicole’s letters and the notes for her conferences, it is not difficult to discern the motives of her heart. We could talk about many qualities that characterised this remarkable woman. Today I would like to share with you the three qualities that strike me most.

A. Her joy

The words “joy” and “happiness” appear over and over again in her writings. She tells the Seminary Sisters that Daughters of Charity are clearly “happy”, “content”, “gay” and “enthusiastic” in their vocation. Guiseppina had an inner peaceful joy that seems to have radiated out to others. On one occasion she wrote, *“Let us serve God joyfully and fervently. Fervour will nourish joy and joy will keep us fervent. Joy will also contribute to our physical wellbeing. Joy is a great remedy and I strongly recommend it to you. Be joyful. I repeat, be joyful. When we are joyful we do not feel pain so much and we are healed more quickly.”⁷*

B Her humility

One of the qualities that most impressed the people around her was Giuseppina’s humility which seems to have given her a deep confidence that God can work great things in us if we recognise our own limitations and weaknesses.

She told the Seminary Sisters that a genuine spiritual life consists in total self-emptying so that God can fill the void. Humility was the basis of her peaceful sense of God’s Providence in her life. She wrote to one Sister, *“Don’t let yourself become discouraged. Let us serve God joyfully, always trusting him and abandoning ourselves totally to him. Let us live peacefully and happily in the arms of God, as a child is at rest and happy in his mother’s arms.”⁸*

C Her emphasis on the crucified Lord

Like Saint Vincent and so many other saints, Giuseppina’s attention was often fixed on the crucified Lord. She told the Seminary Sisters, *“This devotion has close links with the spirit of our vocation: it fosters in our community a spirit of sacrifice, self denial and generosity....Let us be filled with those sentiments that we experience as we meditate*

on Jesus Christ who gives his life for us.”

On another occasion she told them, *“Our holy vows are the four nails that attach us to the Cross of Our Lord, that is to say, they make us like our crucified Lord...They are a holocaust. We must not take away from God what we have given to him. Our life belongs to him, it is no longer our own.”*⁹

A question to link all this with our own lives

In your own life, which two people have most struck you as being “women of God.”? Which qualities in them impressed you most?

5. “Cauldron of charity”

Giuseppina taught the Seminary Sisters that charity is the “profession” of a Daughter of Charity. Professional people such as doctors and nurses are so expert in their field of work that people come to them with confidence to ask for their help. In the same way, a Daughter of Charity should be so much an “expert in charity” that the poor will rush to her with confidence. She said to the Seminary Sisters, *“Every profession has a name that indicates the work of those who belong to it. Our profession is to be **Daughters of Charity**, which means that we have our origins in the heart of God. But we have to show this by our works. We must be the guardian angels of the poor so that every time they come to us, we must give them a kindly welcome and not spare ourselves in coming to their aid. We no longer belong to ourselves, we belong to the poor. All our time must be devoted to them.”*¹⁰

In 1912 Giuseppina taught the Seminary Sisters as follows: *“(If someone asks you) What does it mean to be a Daughter of Charity? you should give this answer: ‘I am the voice of the One who, unable to make his voice heard by the poor, sends me to them. I have been given the mission of charity. I break the bread of God’s Word with those who are ignorant of it. I break material bread with the needy. And when that voice has fulfilled its mission, I withdraw into solitude in order to go out once more when duty calls me. This is what being a Daughter of Charity means. She is the personification of Divine Providence. She is tangible proof of God’s love for the poor.’”*¹¹

Giuseppina’s many works, particularly the instruction and care she gave to young people, were the visible sign of God’s love for the young people of Sardinia. Her charity was inventive and she thought up new ways of organising each group she brought together. During the first World War she and her Sisters made great efforts to find food for the hungry, and, with her companions, she showed support for the many widows who suffered the loss of a husband, and the many children who found themselves orphaned.

But it was young people who were her primary concern. She was continually organising youth groups and was concerned for their physical, social, intellectual and spiritual well-being.

The cauldron of her burning charity was also very evident in community. The Sisters knew that she loved them and they loved her in return. She was gentle and obliging and really wanted them to be happy in community. She was a true Daughter of Charity.

A question to link all this up with our own lives.

Describing what it means to be a Daughter of Charity, Giuseppina Nicoli wrote, “She is the personification of Divine Providence. She is the tangible proof of God’s love for the poor.” In two or three phrases, can you sum up what it means for you to be a Daughter of Charity?

What is a saint? Some people equate holiness with piety. But while piety is important, it is not the whole story. Other people who are of a more active temperament equate holiness with tireless apostolic zeal. But again, while zeal has a lot to do with sanctity, it, too, is only part of the picture.

So what is a saint? It is not easy to come up with one single definition because there are so many models of holiness. But I am convinced that real saints allow themselves to be taken over by God. They radiate God’s presence. People sense this.

Those who knew Sister Nicoli felt that in meeting her they had seen the goodness of God. Her gentleness, her love for the poor, her care for the Sisters in her community, her unshakable serenity and her constant joyfulness gave others the sense of God touching them through her.

In the Church, the life of Jesus continues in the lives of the saints. They are part of a living Christology, the work of the Holy Spirit among us. They are a page of the gospels written in flesh and blood. The true reliquary of Jesus is not some material object handed down to us from his time: it is the saints in whom the spirit of Jesus manifests itself.

The saints live in different times and in different places. They have different temperaments. They face different kinds of suffering. They serve different needs. Different things make them happy. But in every age they give concrete expression to what “being in Christ” really means.

In the first quarter of the XXth century Giuseppina Nicoli did precisely that for young people in Sardinia and for the Sisters in the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Today she gives us these words of encouragement:

- live your vocation joyfully,
- stand before God in humility,
- keep your eyes fixed on the crucified Lord
- love and encourage young people,
- be gentle and accepting of those you live with in community.

Today, I join you in thanking God for being present among us through her.

Robert P. Maloney, CM
Superior General

Notes

¹ Writings of Sr Giuseppina Nicola, Q XVIII, Instructions for Seminary Sisters, 1912, p.66-67

² Writings of Sr Giuseppina Nicoli, Q XVIII, Notes for conferences to the Seminary Sisters 1912, p. 35

³ Writings of Sr Giuseppina Nicoli, Q XIX, Notes for conferences to the Seminary Sisters, 1912, p.36

⁴ Saint Vincent IX, 526

⁵ Positio II Summarium p.353

⁶ Positio II Summarium p.423

⁷ Giuseppina Nicoli, Figlia della Carità, *Erminio Antonello* CM p.74

⁸ Writings of Sr Giuseppina Nicoli, Q VII, 506, 1st April 1918, p.130

⁹ Writings of Sr Giuseppina Nicoli, QXXI, various writings, p.10-11

¹⁰ Writings of Sr Guseppina Nicoli, Q XIX, Notes for conferences to the Seminary Sisters, 1912, p. 31-32

¹¹ Positio II, 1912, Instruction to the Seminary Sisters, document 130a, p.1161

News from the Provinces

NOMINATIONS

NOMINATIONS

PROVINCE OF CENTRAL AMERICA: Sister Rosa Elvira Gomez Mendez was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Thelma Moran Reyes, 1st October 2003

PROVINCE OF BELO HORIZONTE: Sister Maria das Gracas Alves was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Therezinha Madureira Goncalves, 17th November 2003.

PROVINCE OF TURIN: Sister Maria Pia Bertaglia was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Rita Ferri, 26th November 2003

PROVINCE OF IRELAND: Sister Catherine Prendergast was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Catherine Mulligan, 30th December 2003

PROVINCE OF ARGENTINA: Sister Clementino Aquino was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Beatriz Cano, 31st December 2003.

PROVINCE OF AUSTRIA: Sister Angelika Pauer was appointed Visitatrice, 3rd February 2004, after the regrouping of two Provinces.

PROVINCE OF VENEZUELA; Sister Yolanda Zambrano Palencia was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Ascension Pineiro, 11th February, 2004

PROVINCE OF SAINT LOUIS: Sister Marie-Therese Sedgwick was reappointed Visitatrice for three years, 11th February 2004.

PROVINCE OF GERMANY: Sister Hildegard Kohler was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Cypriana Ploskal, 18th February 2004.

PROVINCE OF PAMPLONA: Sister Presentacion Urricelqui was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Maria Teresa Claveria, 26th February 2004.

PROVINCE OF EMMITSBURG: Sister Elyse Staab was reappointed Visitatrice for three years, 1st March 2004.

PROVINCE OF MADRID SAINT VINCENT: Sister Maria del Carmen Zaballos Losada was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Margarita Morante, 2nd March 2004.

PROVINCE OF CUBA: Sister Iliana Suarez Perez was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Maria del Carmen Barrios, 6th March 2004.

PROVINCE OF THE NETHERLANDS: Father Jan Van Broekhoven was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 17th December 2003.

PROVINCE OF VENEZUELA: Father Antonio Estevez Conde was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 28th April 2003.

PROVINCE OF AUSTRIA: Father Alois Schreiber was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 31st January 2004

PROVINCE OF GERMANY: Father Georg Witzel wa reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 31st January 2004

VISITS BY SUPERIORS

Mother Évelyne Franc

Visit to the Province of Romania

When Mother Évelyne arrived in Romania on **16th December 2003**, Bucharest was decked out in all its winter beauty. During this brief visit, Mother Évelyne divided her time between the two houses in the Province; Oradea, the Provincial House, and Bucharest, the local community that was established in 1999. At both these houses Mother received a traditional welcome: she was presented with bread and salt, symbols of respect and welcome for an honoured guest.

Sister Évelyne began her visit by attending Mass and the Christmas Novena in “our” church. This is built next to what used to be the hospital run by the Daughters of Charity. These two edifices were built by the Company. These days it is the government that runs the hospital.

At Oradea and Bucharest each Sister had the happiness of meeting Mother Évelyne. For both communities she had words of encouragement and appreciation for what the Sisters had lived through during those years of communist rule. She had a message of hope for the future, especially for the eleven young Sisters who have entered the Company since 1990 (the year that marked the collapse of communism).

At Oradea, Sister Évelyne met the Visitatrice, Sister Kinga, the Council and Father Director. Next it was the young Sisters’ turn and then that of the Sisters of the Provincial House. Her visit to each sick Sister who was confined to bed made them very happy and it encouraged them in the special service they offer, their suffering and their prayers.

After sharing some news from Provinces all over the world, Mother said she wanted to encourage and support the Provinces of Eastern Europe. She is very conscious of the challenges that arise in the post-communist period in the history of these countries.

For Mother, it was an opportunity to learn more about our life and our service of the Poor. With great simplicity she shared with us her impressions of the Province, her hopes for the future, and some challenges we need to respond to. We feel, now, that we have the courage to examine the possibility of starting up a new mission in the Eastern region of our country. This is a very poor area but the majority of the people are Catholic; many of our young Sisters come from this region. We also need to make the effort to learn another language, English or French, so that we can read the Company’s documents and participate more effectively in formation sessions and international encounters.

Mother stressed the importance of formation for young Sisters – it is these who have to respond to the needs of the Company, the Church and today's society.

In our country, the needs of the poor are very pressing; Mother encouraged us to spare no effort in seeking out the most urgent needs and urged us to collaborate with others and to be imaginative in our response to these problems.

The young Sisters must also try to be creative with regard to vocations ministry, while not neglecting their own ongoing formation.

Mother Évelyne expressed her joy at all that has already been done, and for all that is being done now – either for formation or for the service of the Poor.

Her visit was for us a very special grace; she communicated to us something of her own strength so that we can seek out better ways of facing the challenges of our times.

When she left us, our hearts were filled with joy and gratitude for her great simplicity and her sensitive regard for each of us.

Sister Germaine Price
Daughter of Charity

VISITS BY SUPERIORS

Mother Évelyne Franc and
Sister Margaret Barrett, Assistant General

Visit to the Province of Albany, New York

On 27 January 2004 Sister Évelyne Franc, came to New York City at the invitation of St. John's University, to receive an honorary Doctorate and to give the Vincentian Chair of Social Justice lecture during Founders' Week.

The Sisters of the house in Bayside, Queens, welcomed Mother Évelyne and Sister Margaret Barrett during a snowstorm (which was forecast to bring nearly two metres of snow)

During the next few days, Mother Évelyne met the Provincial Council and Father Tom Casella and then the Sisters of Brooklyn engaged in many works in a poor district, before going to St. John's University to give a lecture in English, entitled "Towards a civilisation of love and justice.". She drew a parallel between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries as she spoke of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, Blessed Rosalie Rendu and Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

Thank you, Sister Évelyne, for these days we were able to share with you. We look forward to another occasion when all the Sisters of the Province will have the joy of meeting you.

Sister Maura Hobart
Daughter of Charity.

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of Los Altos Hills

The Vows, Icons of Our Yes

Sister Juana Elizondo, in her Vow Circular last year, invited Daughters of Charity to imagine the symbolic expression of our “yes”, as if the vows were a painting that we offer to God. Sisters under ten years vocation from various English-speaking provinces took this challenge to heart in Los Altos Hills, California, last summer, during Vow Institute 2003. The session’s theme was “The Icon of Our Yes.”

Participating Sisters dipped artists’ brushes into the palettes of their spirits and painted watercolour icons of their “yes” to the four vows – a painting that they offered to God.

Seton Provincialate, headquarters for the U.S. Province of the West, was the setting where the Sisters expressed the meaning of their “yes” through prayer, worship, presentations, dialogues and social events. Against this background of natural beauty it was not unusual for a deer or a duck to meander into the Sisters’ reflections as these creatures peered through the glass windows of the chapel during the week. The session brought together Sisters under ten years’ vocation, and Formation personnel from Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and the five Provinces of the United States.

Sister Claire Murphy, SHCJ, an author from Dublin, Ireland, served as keynote speaker. Recurrent vow themes were those of imitating Christ’s love and living Community with a “listening ear and a challenging word.” Her sessions were supplemented by talks on specific vows given by several Daughters of Charity.

“There is one major factor that can never be omitted,” said Sister Juana in her 2003 Circular Letter: *“it is the ‘Yes’ that we pronounce year after year.”* Sister Donna Kramer, from the Province of the West, served as artistic guide in creating visual images of that “Yes”.

The sessions were interspersed with discussions in small groups and personal time for reflection. Delightful multicultural meals were served. Prayers and liturgies also represented the various cultures present. They were enhanced by the musical leadership of Seminary Directress, Sister Julie Kubasak, and the presiding of Fathers Joseph Haley, Ruben Restrepo, Richard Benson, Binh Nguyen and Jeff Harvey, all priests of the Congregation of the Mission. During an intergenerational evening of song and stories, one could hear a Vietnamese number, an Irish tale, popular American tunes, ritual words in Maori (New Zealand), and much more.

Sister Donna led the Sisters from painting free-style, at the beginning of the session, to creating icons depicting their “yes.” She was inspired as she explained the creative art. It speaks of “energy, inner peace and personal intuitions” she said, and she added, “*They (the Under Tens) are sure of what and who they are.*”

Vow Institute 2003 opened on Thursday July 3rd, with a welcome from Sister Christena Papavero, Formation Councillor and Sister Margaret Keaveney, Visitatrice of the Western Province. The hardwood walls of the chapel and the redwood altar provided a note of authenticity. Paint-pot candles and artists’ brushes reflected the week’s work of creative iconography. Sister Christena displayed a Marian icon which was discovered in the grounds of the Provincial House. She explained the finer details of its artwork and the effect an icon has of drawing one closer to the Divine. At the end of the Session she exhibited an exquisite icon of Jesus Christ Pantocrator, painted by Sister Lucia Lam Nguyen of the Western Province.

Californian redwoods are trees with deep roots and they are a visual image of the Vows. Sisters were able to look at these giant trees during their visit to San Mateo Country Park, which was a prelude to the presentation of the Vows. The Sisters went to the sea and to a beach house at Half Moon Bay for evening prayer. On Friday, July 5th, Sister Claire gave her first talk. This was on chastity, which not only frees the heart and calls for openness and presence to the world, but also means enthusiasm, affection and mutual support. “*Our lives are fundamentally about being called to love,*” she said.

As there are nine Greek words for love, Sister Claire invited the “under tens” to think of short definitions of love in their own culture. They came up with these concepts: patient waiting, practical help, and tenderness.

“The community in which chastity is well practised features friends who are co-disciples in ministry. These open friendships foster respect, support, mutual sharing and warm relationships,” said Sister Claire.

She went on to say, “*Community should create a setting in which everyone can grow as a person,*” and she emphasised that “*the more a Sister is able to relate, the more she will develop and have good relationships with others.*” Sister Claire then named three elements needed for strengthening our chastity today. First the body needs to be seen in an integral way (we need to be aware that sexuality is inseparable from spirituality). Also, incarnational images must include at least some reference to women. Finally, we have to recognise the prophetic significance and the interconnectedness of all creation (a key feature of Celtic spirituality).

“*How would you sing your vocation?*” asked Sister Maureen Tinkler as she began her presentation on chastity. The Formation Councillor from Great Britain then discussed the realities and the challenges of chastity. She gave musical illustrations of chaste loving through contemporary songs such as Bryan Adam’s “Everything I Do”, and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “Love Changes Everything.”

Sister Maureen portrayed the Vows as not just a formula of words but rather as a journey to be lived, a journey that is pure mystery and is ongoing. She spoke of the importance of having a deep love for the community as well as gratitude for God's faithfulness and that of our Sisters.

On July 6th activities centred on the Vows of Poverty and Service of the Poor and this was very much in keeping with the feast of Marguerite Naseau, who lived them in an exemplary way. Sister Claire pointed out the contrast in references to poverty in different editions of the Constitutions. She said that older usages of the word "poverty" seemed to focus on minimalism (everyone being treated in a uniform way and being satisfied with the minimum), whereas the 1983 Constitutions stress the need to hold fast to Christ alone and to witness that God is the only source of riches for our human hearts. *"Holy Poverty and trust in God are the two pillars of the Daughters of Charity"*, she said, echoing Vincentian writers. She went on to refer to several passages in Scripture (the rich young man, the lilies of the field, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, etc.) to help the Under Tens realise the implications of the Vows. She emphasised the witness aspect of Poverty and the Service of the Poor, and their call for us to be the voice of the voiceless, to network with others and to work for justice.

"Jesus did not bless poverty," she said, *"he tried to eradicate it."*, and she stressed that prayer has to be accompanied by action. She explained that commitment to defending the poor and to bringing about justice often incurs harsh judgment from other people, as the prophets experienced.

She reminded the Under Tens that the Constitutions insist that the Sisters' primary obligation is to pray for the poor. She echoed Sister Juana Elizondo's suggestion that Sisters who hold service in high esteem would do well, at the time of the Renovation, to evaluate the quality of their service, but also to avoid excessive fatigue and activism. She then spoke about the virtue of availability and the need for this if there is to be effective revision of the works.

Since some people might object to the word "poor", Sister Claire suggested the alternative word "neighbour." She also said it was important to recognise that the concept of poverty is expressed in different ways by different cultures. To illustrate how injustice and indignation lead on from reflection to action, she invited the Under Tens to become like the widow in the Gospel (Lk 18), who pestered the judge until he saw to her needs.

The "Under Ten" Sisters benefited from the prayers of the elderly Sisters in Labouré Home during this session on the Vows. They had the happiness of meeting their partners in prayer during a festive meal on the Feast of Marguerite Naseau.

Sister Alice Marie Quinn, Daughter of Charity, spoke about her efforts to address the problem of poverty in Los Angeles: she shared Sister Claire's view that charity is wonderful but it must always go hand in hand with justice. Her presentation on food provision schemes in Los Angeles (the project started by providing a meal for 84 old

people on 7th July 1977, and ended up with the regular delivery of 820,000 meals to people's homes each year) was testimony to her courage and her trust in Providence. She showed a video of the new project in Los Angeles which will comprise sheltered accommodation for 114 people, a chapel and kitchen facilities for preparing the "meals on wheels."

"Saint Vincent said that the poor deserve the best, and I always said that whatever I did, I would do it as well as I could," declared Sister Alice Marie. *"That is what Saint Vincent did and what Our Lord did."*

Next day, 7th July, the Sisters left, after morning prayer, to visit San Francisco. In the evening they went to pray at the Caritas Home.

Sister Eileen Browne, DC, from Ireland, was guest speaker on July 8th and she spoke on the subject of Obedience. She spoke very movingly about her continued following of God's call in the midst of her brokenness. She commented on the importance of the "listening" element in Obedience, something that goes back to the root meaning of the word in Latin. She added that the way people practise obedience depends, among other things, on their personality. Sister Claire referred to the 1983 Constitutions dealing with obedience and she emphasised that these call for inner freedom, faith and responsibility. She spoke of obedience as a commitment to seeking God's will and to being a person of integrity, to listening to one's conscience and to God's inspirations. She said, *"In this process, trust and dialogue are needed for genuine obedience."*

Recalling several passages from Scripture, such as Jesus' command to Peter, *"Feed my sheep,"* Sister Claire said that the obedience of those in authority should nurture obedience in others. She likened the exercise of authority to holding an egg. If we grip the egg too tightly it will break, but if we hold it too gently it falls to the ground.

"What more beautiful icon of our "yes" (practising obedience well), could we have than Mary?" asked Sister Claire. *"She had the inner freedom to be able to ask questions...She didn't consult anyone before making her decision. She relied on her own inner authority. And then she went with haste to Elizabeth."*

After another talk from Sister Claire, sharing in groups during the afternoon, and a closing ceremony, the Sisters celebrated the end of their session on July 9th with a festive meal. The "Under Tens" left on 10th July, taking back with them to their local community and their work some icons and, we hope, a renewed image of their vows

Sister Margaret O'Dwyer
Daughter of Charity
Evansville (East Central) Province

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Australian Province

Love is the first gift you can give to the poor

Celebrations in Fiji
in honour of Blessed Rosalie Rendu

The Daughters of Charity in Fiji have two local communities, one in Nausori and the other in Natovi. The Sisters number six in all and it is a very multicultural group as there are three Irish Sisters, one from the Philippines, one Australian and one (the first) Fijian. The Sisters decided to celebrate the beatification of Sister Rosalie Rendu with the Fijian people and to make this celebration something very special. The Sisters have been in Fiji since 1980 and the Vincentians since 1957.

When the General Assembly feedback sessions were taking place in Fiji in August 2003, the Sisters thought it would be a good idea to prepare a celebration project. There was much excitement in the air – who would be the speakers? who would be on the guest list? where would the celebration be held? and many other questions were being asked. There were seven committees of local people working together with the Sisters and the Vincentians. A really remarkable programme was the outcome of these many months of planning.

It was decided to have a triduum of evening events with guest speakers, leading up to a full day of eucharistic and festive celebrations. The programme was as follows:

11th November: - Nausori parish: **“The life and mission of Sister Rosalie Rendu”**. Sister Marie Cantwell DC (Australia).

12th November: - Cathedral Crypt: **“The spirituality of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society**. Government Minister, Kenneth Zinck

13th November: - Raiwaqa parish – **“Have you seen Rosalie Rendu in Fiji?”**
Ranadi Naqelevu

15th November: - Nausori parish – Eucharistic celebration with His Grace, the Most Reverend Petero Mataca, Archbishop of Suva.

The programme was structured so as to give people, during the Triduum evenings, an insight into the life and spirituality of Sister Rosalie. It also aimed at fostering among the members of the Vincent de Paul Society, knowledge and appreciation of the connection between the members and the Daughters of Charity, how their Society was

founded and the basis of their spirituality and service. The evenings were well attended and those present took part in group work and shared their reflections.

The guests who attended the eucharistic celebration on 15th November, included residents and carers from organisations all over Fiji, people whose aim in life, like that of Sister Rosalie, is to care for the marginalised, the lonely, the handicapped, the young, the homeless and the elderly people of our society. The response was wonderful. Among the other guests were His Grace, the Most Reverend Alapati Mata'alinga, Archbishop of Samoa; His Excellency, Pierre Vidon, French Ambassador to Fiji; several Ministers of the Fijian government, priests from the diocese, members of sixteen Religious Congregations and the Presidents and members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. Many friends of the Sisters and the Vincentians came in from the neighbouring small villages

The church at Nausori experienced a renaissance that night. Exquisite banners, flowers, ribbons, mats and carpets gave new life to the liturgical ambiance and set the stage for one of the most colourful celebrations I have ever seen. Then the people arrived, dressed in their national costumes and the church resounded with their vibrant singing. It was beautiful and moving..... The first reading was in braille and our gifts were brought to the altar by children with impaired hearing. God's people prayed, listened and sang, as they joyfully celebrated the momentous occasion of Sister Rosalie's beatification.

At Nausori, the church and the parish hall are situated in spacious grounds which lend themselves to important festivities like this. After Mass there was a concert and the items included dancing, music groups and, most importantly, a play based on the life of Sister Rosalie Rendu which had been prepared by the Sisters. Children from the two schools where our Sisters teach were the actors. The children who played the part of the lame, the drunkards, the blind and the elderly gave a superb performance and the "Daughters of Charity" and "Sister Rosalie" in their long habits and cornettes drew much applause. It was instructive and, at the same time, very enjoyable.

During an interval between the concert items, a delicious lunch was served in the hall for all the guests. This had been prepared by the catering committee comprising members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society (Suva) and the Daughters of Charity. The meal was set out on beautifully decorated tables. Some of the guests ate in the hall while others took their lunch out into the grounds and sat under the shady trees.

The Sisters and their friends agreed that every moment of the preparations had been very worthwhile. At the end of the day, the French ambassador commented that drama is a wonderful teacher and he added that the children who took part in the play would surely remember the story of Sister Rosalie for a long time. Bula Vinaka!

Sister Marie Cantwell DC
Daughter of Charity

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of Slovenia

Families, what can we do to help you?

5th Anniversary of the “Saint Anne” Foundation.

“Relying on the power of the Spirit, we commit ourselves to promoting ‘fulness of life’...To join forces with people who defend life and human rights...” (A New Fire, II, 1b). The whole Province of Slovenia let itself be challenged by these and other commitments made at the General Assembly of 1997: *to which groups of people should we be specially directing our efforts in these changing times?* We decided to concentrate on the place and the role of **the family**. Today the family is much undervalued and many families are currently experiencing great problems, particularly those families that have a lot of children. In our country we are confronted with legislation that not only fails to provide support for large families but which often treats them unjustly. Our “post-communism” era does not favour big families any more than fifty years of socialism did. As a consequence, we have very difficult social conditions: a high cost of living, low income, shortage of housing. Nowadays families opt to have just one or two children. Large families are often regarded as unacceptable.

After the Second World War, nearly everything was nationalised by the government. Now there is a gradual process of “denationalisation” (restoration of property). The Province has had some assets handed back and this has helped us to come to the aid of several large families. Clearly, this isn’t enough. After reflecting on this situation, we thought we should set up a new foundation, to offer material aid and moral support. We couldn’t guarantee to carry out this project on our own, so we appealed for help from other Congregations and Religious Institutes.

Just prior to the great Jubilee of the year 2000, this Foundation was established by the Union of Conferences of Major Superiors in Slovenia (KORUS). The Church authorities approved the Foundation, seeing it as something inspired by the Holy Spirit and *a work that has the charism of Saint Vincent de Paul*.

The foundation was named after St. Anne, the mother of Our Lady, and the patroness of families. Today we are celebrating its fifth anniversary. After modest beginnings the Foundation has expanded. Many benefactors gave it their support: business enterprises, municipal authorities, parishes, some State institutions and some people who, like the poor widow in the Gospel, gave what they could.

Parents who ask for help have to accept the conditions laid down in the Foundation's Statutes. We find that these people are becoming more conscious of their own dignity and this makes for better family relationships. Also, families meet from time to time, to share their experiences, their problems and their needs, and they learn to help one another (clothes, books, etc.) The Foundation also provides the service of family and Christian vocation ministry. God calls each member of the family to a particular vocation which has, in some way or other, the objective of giving life, fullness of life. We thank God for His work through the Saint Anne Foundation and we ask Him to continue to bless it.

Sister Cveta Jost
Echoes Correspondent

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of the Near-East

Telling the most deprived people that God loves them

El Moqatam is district of Cairo where some 30,000 men, women and children live packed together in very difficult conditions. Curiously enough, it isn't marked on the city plans that are sold to tourists in the town's luxury hotels, and it rarely gets a mention in the guide books. It is somewhere that is quarantined right in the middle of a capital that is teeming with people. "Listen, " said a taxi driver, "this town has one foot in the Middle Ages and one foot in modern times. We haven't yet been able to find a balance between the two."

Buses full of schoolchildren and carts making their way to the citadel built by Saladin, are wrapped in a thick blanket of smoke. The din is never-ending. We come to Manchet Nasser, the ragpickers' quarter. There is a buzz of life round the brick houses where hundreds of bin bags, stripped down scrap iron and accumulated rubbish are strewn along the lower edges of the street. In the dilapidated courtyards behind the houses children of all ages play ball nonchalantly among the pigs and the goats.

In Cairo 40% of the population would live in shanty towns. According to a government report on the capital issued in December 1997, 68 shanty towns were due to be cleared and 13 districts were scheduled for demolition. Most of the houses were makeshift buildings with no running water or drainage system: houses made of crude brick, mud hovels or lean-tos made of material or cardboard. Poverty is a cruel part of everyday life and it brings with it sickness, a high level of illiteracy, and child labour.

Up to the year 1992 the shanty towns were considered illegal and neglected by successive political parties. *"But this attitude changed when the State finally realised the harsh conditions of life there and the government feared that the anger of the inhabitants could lead to terrorism, " explained an engineer from Cairo. The constant expansion of these "informal" areas was the direct cause of the mass exodus from the country parts that began in the 60's. "Whole families emigrated from Upper Egypt to the capital, in the hope of finding work," explained a member of the Red Crescent Society in Cairo which does a lot of work with people who are victims of poverty.*

The families that have settled in El Moqatam are no exception. Originally from villages in Upper Egypt they usually join the landless peasants. Their work is to collect and then to sort rubbish, with a view to recycling it.

A Franciscan tells us that *"they began by settling near the Turkish baths so as to feed their animals on the refuse near there but little by little they took over the household*

waste of the whole town. As country people they still have a peasant mentality; they work as a family and this includes the women and children."

Known as rag-pickers, these workers who manage to make a living in impossible circumstances are for the most part Orthodox Copts and they have succeeded, in the space of twenty years, in setting up a real community network amid the mountains of household waste. Their work, which is so laborious, brings in a couple of pounds but this at the risk of contracting and passing on diseases such as tetanus, which continues to kill young children. In El Moqatam no less than 200 tonnes of household waste are sorted and then prepared for recycling. This is generally collected at night.

Each family of garbage collectors has to pay a sort of tax to some petty chief who allocates them a particular street or even a district. A woman living in Cairo explained, *"You shouldn't think that all rag-pickers are poor. I know people who have made a fortune out of rag-picking, so much so that they own several properties."* It is hard to imagine that that man who would be about fifty years old and who stands in rags over his mountain of rubbish could possibly have made a fortune. With a smile on his lips and waving his hand, this father of a family greets people and then, robot like, resumes his work. Behind him, some thirty pigs give off a foul smell.

Ten minutes away from Manchié Nasseh, in the Abbassieh district, the Daughters of Charity have had a mission since 1905. The Sisters put all their energies into improving the living conditions of those who are most poor, particularly by their work of teaching. This is an arduous task that brings them every day to the frontiers of poverty and human destitution.

Out of the 30,000 people living here, only 5% are Muslims. Sister Charlotte tells us, *"10% of these people are comfortably off, 20% have a decent livelihood, while 70% are poor. The money that the poor earn is hardly enough to feed the family. It is precisely this most deprived sector of the population that has to work at collecting and sorting rubbish or in small factories that lack proper ventilation."*

Sister Charlotte went on to explain the community's mission: *"In 1974, a group of poor women, including several young widows, came from many parts to listen to the Word of God with our oldest companion, Sister Margaret. Sister Suzanne Selim helped her to solve these women's problems by visiting them in their homes. These visits made us realise the poverty that is rampant in this district that is so near our house."* As Daughters of Charity we then felt that we had a mission: to work at promoting the welfare of the people of El Moqatam so as to *"tell them that God loves them and wants them to live in more human conditions."*

The Word of God is spread through education. With just a very small number of pupils, the Sisters began by opening a little school. Today, there are 480 children and the school provides other amenities besides teaching. *"We didn't think it was enough just to have the children in school because of the poverty in which they lived. We committed ourselves also to being almost continually at their side through a programme of aid and*

social development.”

Finding them accommodation, seeing to their health needs, providing them with a full hot meal five times a week at school, and always giving the family a basketful of food, is just part of the ways in which the Sisters are trying to expand their field of action. *“All this work is for us a source of joy but also of much sorrow: this sharing in the concerns of these poor people is just a drop of water in this ocean of poverty that reminds us of the days of Saint Vincent...”*

People working along the main arterial road of Manchié Nasser wave their hands, and their faces light up as Sister Ferial and Sister Mona pass by. The two Sisters are known and respected for their charitable works and they stop to exchange a few words in Arabic. Behind them a crowd of carts driven by young men, try, as best they can, to get quickly into the winding alleys where the ground is strewn with piles of rubbish and broken down pig troughs.

Amid this accumulation of rubbish, Sister Ferial explains: *“For some time now, a Spanish firm has offered to treat the town’s waste material. It intends to employ people for a little more than a hundred pounds a month. It says it will offer better working conditions but what is to become of these good people who, when times are good, can earn three hundred pounds a month?”* The monthly income of a family of waste collectors that can specialise in selling recyclable material such as rags, plastic or even paper, can amount to 300 Egyptian pounds. This is providing, of course, that it is a large family with children who get down to the work.

It is because the children’s life is threatened and because their daily living allowance is not in accord with the universal rights of the child, that the Sisters are struggling to obtain for them the right to education and to care. Instead of waiting passively for families to come to them, the Sisters have taken to knocking on the doors of houses to convince the adults and the children of the benefit of good, solid teaching. This is an even more unimagined opportunity because the children have every chance of being able to speak French at the end of their schooling.

Between the three brick walls of a small family business, a man holds out his arm to show us the cross tattooed on his wrist. This is a sign that he belongs to the Orthodox Copt community. With the man is his wife in a multicoloured robe and their three children. A pile of two quintals of rubbish shows us how much work they still have to do. Higher up the street, Sister Ferial and Sister Mona are going through the door of a house made of hard materials. On a staircase overflowing with water they try to reason with two little girls who missed school one morning. Without trying to find an excuse, the mother said that her daughters had arrived just a few minutes after the community had come to collect the pupils.. This is a discouraging but a common situation in this district where the people are ground down by poverty. Reproaches are quickly replaced by smiles and laughter. After an almost obligatory stop in the family’s living room, the indefatigable Sisters get back to their car.

LESSONS FROM THE POOR

Province of France-South

The civilisation of Love

“Shelter for the night” and “dying in the open air” are two of many facts of life experienced by the Saint-Jean community in Lyons. They demonstrate that conviction which is so deeply rooted in the heart of every Daughter of Charity: *“To serve and love the Poor, regarding them not just as our Lords and Masters but as brothers and sisters.”*

A shelter for the night

Our Day Reception Centre situated in the premises of the former Provincial House of Lyons, has been open for ten years to people wandering the streets of our town. This year, in response to an appeal from the prefecture, it has opened its doors as a night reception centre for foreigners who have come here, fascinated by the allure of our big cities in France.

One Wednesday, there arrived, in the pouring rain, a mother and her little flock of eight young children who had been picked up by the mobile social services patrol car. They had been wandering the streets of Lyons for two days without finding anywhere to stay or to sleep. The youngest child was only a few months old and his nappy hadn't been changed all this time. We were too inexperienced to foresee every situation.

The lady on night duty (her salary is paid partly from grants by the DDASS of the Rhone district and the city of Lyons), immediately telephoned the Manager of the Night Reception Centre. We should explain that in order for this service to function, the Community subscribed to a partnership with a reputable Association in Lyons, Our Lady of the Homeless residence, which was set up in 1950 by Gabriel Rosset, regarded at that time as a saint in the city, and someone who is waiting to be raised to the altars of the Church. Gabriel Rosset's successor was woken up in the middle of the night and immediately gave up his well-earned sleep after his exhausting work with the poor. He started up his car and drove to the night duty chemist's in the centre of the town. He brought back, not just nappies, but a small tube of cream for the baby's bottom.

This is just one of the thoughtful actions that we see: things like this are being done all the time and they require a lot of love. They lead us, as a Community, to give thanks to God, and to offer up in our prayers, the work done by other reception centres for the poor; those in our town and those in other places. Our Night Reception Centre takes in between ten and thirty people every night of the week; people who have been picked up by the social services patrol. This offer of a night's accommodation for homeless people who are shivering in the streets of our city, means they will find warmth

and food as well as a night's sleep on lounge beds until daybreak. When morning comes these people are directed to other agencies that are responsible for providing emergency accommodation for emigrants in France.

Dying homeless or dying alone

In our days it is no doubt possible to die homeless in France, and yet...! His name is Reid, he is Scottish and his home has been "the streets of Lyons" for God knows how long – Why? One night Reid died of a heart attack near one of the town's squares, one of his "residences."

Next morning, some men and women who shared his poverty came along. A woman from that district came by; she alerted the emergency services and she said, "*We must pray for him.*" Maybe she said this without thinking but her words were quickly taken up, "*Oh yes, if we can find a priest who is willing, we could pray for him.*"

And so they organised a remembrance service for him: the local priest agreed and people were surprised. However, there is nothing surprising in that. He met with the dead man's "friends" for an hour to prepare the celebration.

A Scot who lives in the town (he is in no way a "man of the streets"), read in the local newspaper about the death of this compatriot in such sad circumstances and he came to offer his services.

The dead man's family were traced and the deceased will be taken back to his native country to sleep his last sleep among his own folk. But at Lyons, the remembrance service still went ahead.

On the appointed day, the priest in choir dress, waited in the street for "the faithful". The poor appreciated the honour shown them even if this was just symbolised by the vestments he wore for the occasion. Gradually about a dozen people seemed to come from nowhere. Some members of the parish pastoral team had been informed of the service and they were waiting in the church.

A Jewish friend, his head covered in accordance with religious custom, started up the service in the church: "*My friend, I miss you so much, we had some good times together,*" he said before bursting into tears. Other friends expressed their grief in a language that we others could scarcely understand, but one that is surely understood by the heart of God. The Scottish compatriot was there in national dress and with his bagpipes. He played some Scottish melodies that brought tears to the eyes of friends who were there and who didn't mind what people thought of them.

In front of the altar was placed a stand that held a large icon representing Rembrandt's famous painting, the return of the prodigal. During the service the priest spoke very movingly about our heavenly Father's mercy. Next to the picture were candles that were lit by everyone there, and in a prominent position, were placed the dead

man's favourite things: two cans of beer and a packet of Marlborough cigarettes. Finally a bunch of flowers, paid for out of each friend's "riches", was laid down in the exact spot in the street where their departed friend had breathed his last.

The two Sisters who had come to the service as a sign of friendship that continues right to the end of life's journey, recognised a good number of "brothers and sisters in Christ" who come to the Day Reception Centre. At the community meeting at 1.30 p.m. they shared with us their moving experience that morning.

Community of Saint-John, Lyons

NEWSBRIEFS

Vincentian Family

FATHER JOSE ANTONIO UBILLUS LAMADRID, C.M

The role of counsellor to Vincentian Family groups

Introduction

This account is meant to provide some guidelines concerning the profile, role and functions of the counsellor to groups of lay people within the Vincentian Family. I will be presenting it in outline form and I do not claim to say all that there is to say on the subject.

I SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COUNSELLOR'S FUNCTION

Before undertaking this service, and in carrying it out, it is important that the counsellor should have a clear idea of his or her role, that is to say, about the objective towards which they have to direct the group that they are accompanying. In my view, this objective has two elements: following Christ and sharing the spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul.

1. Following Christ

The counsellor's function as teacher of the Christian faith is essentially geared towards the formation of men and women which will help them to become genuine disciples of Jesus Christ, and adult Christians whose lives are increasingly centred on Christ.

Looked at in this way, the mission of the counsellor presupposes a Christocentric form of teaching, one that will help individuals and communities to make Christ more and more the centre of their lives.

Being a Christian means committing oneself to following Jesus of Nazareth and recognising him as Christ and Lord, the One through whom the Father offers us salvation. It means recognising that his way of living and of speaking is "messianic". His personal

identity is revealed in the answer he gave to the disciples sent by John the Baptist to ask him who he was: “*Go and tell John what you have seen and heard....*” (Lk 7:22). But this recognition brings with it some practical obligations: one has to identify one’s life with that of Jesus. Recognition implies that we will follow him. Believing means committing oneself to Jesus Christ and making one’s own His way of life. Faith is a personal decision to follow Christ, it is a new way of viewing and appreciating life by taking Jesus Christ as the ultimate criterion for, and the original source of, this new life.

Jesus did not simply want people to listen to his teaching. He worked at forming disciples, men and women who would choose Him as their life-option. With this in mind, he called some of them and invited them to share His experience of life. He invited them to follow him: “*Come, follow me*” (Mk 1:17) and “*Come and see*”(Jn 1:39).

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus announced his mission in these words from the prophet Isaiah: “*The spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring the Good News to the Poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favour.*”(Lk 4:18-19). These words, described by John Paul II as “Christ’s first messianic declaration”, show that the Good News of the Kingdom is not simply a matter of proclamation but it involves the implementation of what has been proclaimed. Jesus’ mission was to evangelise the poor, to give them life and to liberate them. Here we have two clear aspects of Jesus’ mission: his way of life and liberation, and the special place in his ministry for the poor, the weak and sinners.

For us who today desire in faith to have the experience of being a “disciple”, it is necessary to go back to Galilee, to see him there and to learn how to follow him: “*It is there that you will see him, just as he told you.*” (Mk 16:7) The phrase that Saint Paul uses about discipleship: “*To live in Christ*” and his even bolder assertion, “*It is Christ who lives in me*” (Gal 2:20) imply the need to follow Jesus and conform our standards, our options and our lifestyle, to the teaching and the life of Jesus.

So the function of the counsellor as teacher of the faith and discipleship, must be to bring people to set off together for Galilee to find Jesus there, “*teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people.*” (Mt 4:23). So following Jesus means holding to his way of life and continuing his mission of proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and curing those among the people who are suffering.

2. Saint Vincent de Paul’s spiritual experience

Apart from his letters, Saint Vincent did not write anything down about his spirituality, even less did he try to categorise it. This means that if we are to uncover the key points of what we call Vincentian spirituality, we have just to refer to Saint Vincent’s life and his spiritual experience as he himself describes this, or as it comes across in his conferences and his letters. These will help us to see how he followed Christ in his daily life and in the unfolding of events. The starting point for this spiritual experience was his encounter with the poor. This led him to know in a profound way, and to follow, Jesus Christ, Evangeliser and Servant of the poor and the marginalised.

In a letter to Monsieur Portail he wrote, *"Remember, Monsieur, that we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ and that we should die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ: our life should be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and that to die like Jesus Christ we must live like Jesus Christ."* According to his first biographer, Abelly, Vincent *"one day made up his mind to take the firm and irrevocable resolution to honour Christ more perfectly than he had done in the past; this resolution meant offering his whole life, in love, for the service of the poor."* (L. Abelly, *Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul, I, Paris, 1664, p.241*).

Saint Vincent's followers have the grace and the happiness of being inspired and strengthened by this spiritual experience which is the fundamental motive for serving the poor and proclaiming the Kingdom to these people who represent the suffering face of Christ. So the counsellor has to guide the group towards this same goal.

II PROFILE OF THE VINCENTIAN COUNSELLOR

As a rule, the counsellor is not called to give this service without first having the appropriate training. But even so, it is possible for the counsellor to make mistakes, so this training needs to be revised and updated on a regular basis. I will now indicate just a few points that merit our attention.

1. Spiritual experience and experience of life

It is only by having a genuine experience of Jesus Christ, Evangeliser and Servant of the poor, that the counsellor will be able to listen to the Spirit working within the group. A knowledge of theology and Vincentian spirituality are essential but these are not enough if the counsellor fails to make Vincent de Paul's spiritual experience his own. It is not a matter of sharing this experience to a high degree, but of living out one's encounter with God, bearing in mind one's limitations and our different circumstances in life. It also means that the counsellor should have experience of life and be in constant dialogue with the world around him.

2. Pastoral experience

The counsellor must also engage in pastoral work with the poor, should be familiar with their sufferings and aware of their spiritual and material needs. It is through his own personal experience of evangelising the poor that the counsellor will have the sensitivity needed for guiding groups of lay people in the Vincentian Family. These lay people are not theorists, they work with the poor and operate in situations of poverty.

3. The counsellor's prayer

The counsellor's mission has to have prayer as its foundation. Union with God and with the group constitute the twofold axis of his prayers of intercession; he has to come before God and before the group, praying for its members and for himself, setting

aside his personal interests and letting God transform his heart. In this way the counsellor grows in transparency and is docile to the action of the Spirit, so that through him God can speak to the group and help these people to commit themselves to following Jesus Christ, the Evangeliser and Servant of the poor. Authentic dialogue requires many human qualities: welcome, respect, a balanced outlook, conciliation and love: all these are rooted in this form of prayer.

4. Psychology of the counsellor

Experiencing God is a living process. When people have this divine experience, the whole person is involved and this includes one's psychological makeup. To forget this would be to ignore the teaching of the best spiritual guides, including Vincent de Paul who had a good understanding of human psychology.

The counsellor should be psychologically mature. Maturity does not mean perfection but it leads to self-acceptance. We are speaking here of someone who is kindly, who can have a good relationship with others, and who has a good level of self-esteem. This, in turn, comes from a good knowledge of one's limitations, one's strong points, tendencies, and the pitfalls to be avoided: it means, especially, owning these realities.

Still more is required, however. The mission of guiding a group means that the counsellor must have at least a basic knowledge of psychology so as to avoid the pitfalls that can arise in relationships: the counsellor has to know what is permitted and what is not. Images of God, prayer, affection, desires, wishes, moral imperatives, etc. are areas where psychology has much to teach us. The same can be said about dialogue: we learn about transference, the possibility of the group becoming dependent on the counsellor. Also, a counsellor might find himself dealing with people who are not normal or who have various psychological problems. In these cases, he should be sufficiently well-informed to be able to direct these to people who are more competent to deal with these matters and he should avoid anything that really belongs to the field of therapy.

To take up another point: the counsellor has to be aware of the dignity and the vocation of women, their crucial role in the Church and in society, as well as the contribution they can make within a lay Vincentian group.

5. Sense of belonging to the Church

The counsellor has also to fulfil his role within the framework of the Church. He has to help the members of the group to live out their vocation of service of the poor, in union with the universal Church, and to understand that every individual action has a universal value. As well as this, the counsellor ought to have adequate background knowledge of the Church's social teaching which has its origins in the writings of Leo XIII. This teaching is now over a hundred years old but it is a way of expressing the Church's current option for the poor. Similarly, if the counsellor is to carry out his duties properly, it would be good for him to have some knowledge of contemporary trends in

theology which give a special place to the poor.

6. Having a good knowledge of the Association he is working with

The counsellor should have a good knowledge of the Association he is working with: its history and its distinctive characteristics as part of the Vincentian Family. The various Associations differ from one another and these differences have to be preserved so that the Vincentian family can maintain this rich diversity and not become a mere amalgam of its various branches. As well as this theoretical knowledge, the counsellor must have genuine love for the Association he is working with and must seriously devote time to this mission.

III THE ROLE OF THE COUNSELLOR TO VINCENTIAN LAY GROUPS

We have now come to the heart of the matter we are dealing with today. I hope that what I have said so far will help you to understand what I will now be saying about the role of the man or woman who is a counsellor to a Vincentian group of lay people.

1. Some introductory clarifications

*Accompaniment has to be liberating, not prescriptive.

The person who takes on the work of counsellor can only do so in a self-effacing way and in humility at being asked to accompany a group on its spiritual journey. With these interior dispositions, the counsellor will walk respectfully, as though on tip-toe, realising that he is treading on holy ground.

**“Moved by the spirit of God”* (Rm 8:14).

The Spirit is the source of life, the only guide for a Christian. It is He who points out the way, who leads us and gives us the strength we need in our everyday lives. Nobody can take the place of the Holy Spirit.

* *“Do not allow yourselves to be called ‘Teacher.’ Do not call anyone on earth your Father.”* (Mt 23:8-10) And don’t let anyone call you “Director”!

The counsellor is not exempt from the danger of dominating or of taking over people’s consciences or manipulating their relationship. There is only one Father, our Father in heaven, and there is only one Teacher or Director and that is Christ. From the Father and from Christ we receive the Holy Spirit.

* *“He must increase and I must decrease”* (Jn 3:30)

As time goes on the accompaniment is less intensive, so the counsellor tends to withdraw. The aim in accompanying a group like this, is for the person of Christ, the Evangeliser and Servant, to occupy an increasingly important place in the heart and life of each member and for Christ “to be formed in them.” (Cf. Gal 4:19).

* A Vincentian lay group is destined to fulfil a mission

The lay members of a Vincentian group are preparing themselves to fulfil a mission, that of serving and evangelising the poor. Consequently their Association is not a Bible study group or one for theological reflection; it is not a prayer group or a group that meets to exchange ideas.

2. Role and functions of the counsellor

After giving you these explanations, I can now say that there are four criteria for the role of the counsellor to a Vincentian group.

2.1 Spiritual Qualities

*First and foremost, the counsellor is someone who passes on to the group his own experience of Christ. He encourages the members to become, as Saint Vincent de Paul, did, more faithful followers of Christ in order to carry out, with Him, the mission of evangelisation and service.

*He is careful to see that the group is animated by a Vincentian spirit and not by all sorts of trends in spirituality, be these traditional or contemporary, which are not in keeping with the Vincentian spirit. (cf. Jaime Corera, o.c.p.87). However, he may benefit, as Vincent de Paul did, from forms of spiritual teaching that have ties with Vincentian spirituality.

* When we say that a Lay Vincentian Group is not a prayer group, we are not suggesting that the counsellor should not help the members to have an authentic prayer life. Similarly, the Eucharist must nurture their faith and sustain their efforts to evangelise and serve the poor. However, for a Vincentian person, prayer and the Eucharist are only a brief stop on the road of following Christ, a halt we make in order to gain spiritual strength and fulfil in a better way our mission.

2.2. Human qualities

The counsellor tries to help people to advance in these four basic dispositions:

*The first is that of being **welcoming**: this involves more than just politeness, kindness or sympathy. Having a welcoming attitude means listening to people in a friendly and sensitive way, showing respect for the experiences and personal circumstances of the other person: it means being in tune with a person's feelings which can lie deeper than words that are said or listened to, not imposing silences and never being afraid of listening and not being able to understand fully what the other person is saying; treating everyone with a compassion that is in no way paternalistic, but recognising our own limitations.

* The second attitude we should have is that of true **humility**. We need to be very much aware that we are not the prime movers in this work but simply God's instruments in His saving action; it is not a question of teaching but of learning, day after day, the lessons we give to the group. We do not know everything, in fact, we know hardly anything.

*The third disposition is that of **patience**, so that we will be tireless listeners, giving people the time that they need, not being calculating or mean with our time, not giving it unwillingly. Before we say anything to the other person we need to listen well and know how to remain silent. If it becomes necessary to correct or to reprimand someone, we must do this not only with great respect, but also being very sure that all we want to do is to help that person.

*The fourth disposition is that of **self-sacrifice**. Accompaniment is a service and that is why the counsellor puts him or herself at the other person's feet. We must take care that we do not become the main focus, we must not make people dependent on us and we must not demand more than Jesus and the service of the poor ask of people. We have to give freely without expecting in return affection, gratitude or respect.

2.3 Formation

Although accompaniment is in itself an excellent means of formation, the counsellor must see that the members of the group receive biblical, spiritual, Vincentian and pastoral formation in order to help them to serve and evangelise the poor, not simply with goodwill and warm-heartedness, but also using their intelligence.

2.4 Pastoral care

From a pastoral standpoint, the counsellor has to motivate and guide the group in the evangelisation and service of the poor. This takes for granted that:

* The counsellor is aware of the social, economic and political problems of today's world, situations that are not in accordance with God's Kingdom, problems which affect the poor particularly. He can help the group to be aware of these problems, to think about them in the light of the Church's social teaching, and to keep them in mind in their approach to the poor.

*The counsellor will also help the group members to discover that the Good News of Jesus is meant to reach all peoples and it is not tied to any particular culture. The Gospel has to be inculturated, to take on the good values inherent in the different cultures and, like the leaven in the dough, it has to transform any counter-values. The same can be said, of course, about spiritual experience and the Vincentian charism.

*The counsellor should be sufficiently well-informed about the situation and the most urgent needs of the Church in his particular diocese or country. This is a key issue. Lay people live out their vocation in the context of their mission work.

IV. THE WAY THAT JESUS TAUGHT THE TWELVE AS THEIR “COUNSELLOR.”

At the beginning of his public life, Jesus called some people to follow him and become his disciples. He shared his life with them and paid particular attention to them, especially after the “Galilee crisis.” He spoke to the crowds in parables but he explained the meaning of these to his disciples. *“He would not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were alone.”* (Mk 4:34). The disciples were able to question Jesus about his actions and about the reasons for their own failures: they were not able to drive out the evil spirit from the epileptic demoniac: *“When he had gone indoors his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why were we unable to cast it out?’”* (Mk 9:28).

Jesus is always in dialogue with them, he instructs and counsels them, balancing the hard and demanding stricture: *“This is not to happen among you”* (Mk 10:43) with consoling concern, *“You must therefore be on your guard. I have forewarned you of everything...Be on your guard, stay awake...”* (Mk 13: 23,33).

But there is no doubt that the fundamental basis of Jesus’ teaching was his sharing of everyday experiences: the disciples observed his life and his teaching very closely and these were to be their rule of conduct for the future. As He said to them on one occasion, *“It is enough for the disciple that he should grow to be like his teacher.”* (Mt 10:25).

The disciples watched closely how Jesus acted, the way he dealt with people and responded to their needs. They took this as their model for living according to the teaching of the Gospel.

In the past, and in our own times, following Jesus has meant continuing his mission of evangelising and serving the poor and the marginalised in different historical contexts, while at the same time, trying to discern and be converted to the dispositions he had, the options he made and the way he acted. The counsellor to a group called to mission has a crucial role in this task.

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(Rome, 10th April 2002)

Vincentian Family

Mother House, 20th-22nd February 2004

10th Encounter for those in charge of different branches of the international Vincentian Family

On 20th February 2004, the heads of the main branches of the Vincentian Family assembled in the Mother House for their 10th Encounter. After sharing information about their different activities during the year 2003: (globalisation of charity, combating hunger (2001-2004), political action against malaria (2003-2004) and the formation of counsellors to groups in the Vincentian Family, the following three propositions were put forward for the year 2004-2005: Youth Year in the Vincentian Family, working to overcome poverty among women, and the promotion of understanding and union between the generations.

Back row: Charles Selby, CM (AAM), Marco Betemps (SSVP), Yvon Sabourin (RSVP), Father Benjamin Romo, CM, Father Felipe Nieto CM (MISEVI), Jose Ramon Diaz Torremocha (SSVP), Father Robert P. Maloney, CM.

Front row: Edurne Urdampilleta (JMV), Gladis Abi Said (JMV), Anne Sturm (AIC), Eva Villar (MISEVI), Sister Margaret Barrett, Sister Évelyne Franc, Martha Leticia Tapia (AAM).

History of the Company

SOURCE MATERIAL AND NEWS

The Mother House's Vincentian Heritage

The Mission Courtyard

A courtyard bordered by two large and rather dark rooms with long tables that could hold cases and large boxes, huge racks of pigeon holes with embossed labels printed in capital letters – this was the setting for what used to be called “The Mission Courtyard.”

It was here that the missionary Sisters were welcomed. Sister Arens, and later on, Sister Depalme, would make preparations for their arrival. A few days before the Sisters came, space had to be made among the long rows of shelving so that “everyone could feel at home in her little apartment” as Sister Arens used to say with a smile.

It was here, too, that the Sisters prepared “everything” that was to be sent to the Missions. Here could be found the most motley collection of items, from a washing machine to apron strings that our missionary Sisters had asked for!

There were, in fact, two distinct offices in this courtyard, both of them part of the Economat: the actual Mission Service and the Economat where Sister Montaigne supervised the dispatch of goods. She also welcomed French Sisters, particularly those who were moving to another house, with their blue bags and parcels: Sisters coming and Sisters going. But there was no firm division between the two offices, they worked in close collaboration when circumstances required it.

Then in 1914 came a big change. Sisters left for the battlefields in the north and in the east, and even to the Dardanelles: the Mother House cared for the wounded.

The 1940 war caused a great upset in the Mission Office. No more departures were possible, no more goods could be sent abroad, no more crates to be filled: besides, where would they find anything to put in them? The one van that they have lies idle in a corner of the courtyard because there is only enough petrol for an occasional trip to Les Halles, the wholesale food market.

But from the first weeks of this sad situation, the conscripted missionaries asked the Sisters for all kinds of help. Priests serving at the front were already writing to say they didn't know where they could get hosts and altar wine. A new form of service was about to be born.

In a very short space of time, the military chaplains were passing on to one another the address of rue du Bac.

And very quickly after the country's capitulation in 1940, the Chaplaincy for Prisoners, in rue Leneveux, was making enquiries about the possibility of sending parcels of things needed for the liturgy. Father Rodheim's thin figure could often be seen outlined against the windows of the dark office in the Missions Courtyard.

Later, when nobody could have imagined it, the Mission Office became the indispensable annexe of rue Leneveux. More than 6000 priests were suffering in those camps. For five years the Missions Office was to become the Office for Priest Prisoners. This really was a tremendous change.

The Children of Mary took responsibility for funding the work. However, ways had to be found of providing "*fresh spiritual supplies*" and the Sisters got in touch with various monasteries. Eighteen monasteries gave their help.

Soon a whole range of personnel was needed to help the Sisters of the Missions Office to prepare rolls of fragile hosts, portable altars, linen, missals, chalices, Holy Oils, and everything they might be asked for. The packages, tied up with heavy wire, piled up in the courtyard waiting for the chaplaincy van to arrive.

Providing altar wine was a great source of worry. Then huge casks of wine from the Sept-Fonds Trappist monastery arrived in the Cour Sainte-Marie. The Conferences of the St. Vincent de Paul Society appealed to their members in Rheims and Epernay. The work connected with providing altar wine took place in the basement under Sainte Marie's refectory, which had a barred basement window through which parcels could be passed. It was in this basement that most of the work was done, thousands of bottles brought in from all sorts of places were washed here, the bottles were filled and corked, and they were labelled in French and German, "*Strictly for use during the celebration of Mass.*"

February 1946

Altar wine was still being put in bottles, hosts from the Visitation monastery were still being rolled in white paper. Telephone calls still came from the Prisoners Chaplaincy in rue du Cherche-Midi: 50 liturgical parcels for the armies of occupation, a delivery to Germany tonight! A lorry will come to the rue du Bac for chaplains in Indo-China! ...and as well as these, there are the many German prison camps in France.

Missions Office, Tuesday 29th March 1949

"Blessing and installation of a small statue of the Blessed Virgin. To the right of the door leading to the Missions Office, and in a large section of stone wall that time has

put a sheen on, a small lancet arch of rustic timber will, from now on, house the statue of Our Lady of Mercy. This was given to Sister Arens towards the end of the war, by Father Rodhain, Chaplain for Prisoners, in commemoration of the great work done at 140 rue du Bac in collaboration with the Chaplaincy in rue du Cherche-Midi. Our Lady wears a wide cloak decorated with a long symbolic chain that she winds round the hands of her child who lies asleep on her left arm. On the bracket that supports the statue, a simple piece of barbed wire protects a tiny oil lamp whose feeble flame is lit on feast days.” Mother Decq came from rue Montcalm to be present at the ceremony: it was six years to the day since the prison gates of Sarrebruck finally opened for her

Nowadays, the statue of Our Lady of Mercy is on the right, in the parlour courtyard. On either side of the statue there is a wooden plaque that tells of the work that was done. On them is this inscription: *“Between 1940 and 1945, 150, 000 liturgical parcels for 8000 priests who were prisoners in Germany, left this place, enabling 4, 500,000 Masses to be said and 90 million hosts to be distributed.”* Beneath the statue are inscribed these words that express the gratitude of the Daughters of Charity.

“Sweet Virgin Mary, you did not allow bread and wine to be lacking, and during these five years, the Blessed Eucharist has, thanks to you, brought consolation to our poor prisoners.”

Today, this Mission Courtyard has been turned into a little leisure garden where Our Lady of Mercy recalls the generous and laborious hours of labour in the Mission.

Sister Anne Bergeron
Archives office

SPECIAL SIGNS

that show us that a family is on
the path to sanctity:

Laughter and smiles,

for these, by their vibrant music, drain away all poisons

Joy in being together,

this refreshes and gives courage to all

Sharing,

this means each one takes up part of the burden,
each one gives something of themselves.

Forgiveness

that makes it possible for kindness to overcome
the harsh events that can divide people

Respect

which doesn't force people into a particular mode,
even when this is done out of love

Speaking to one another

which is simply a way of saying "I love you"
and constantly striving against superficiality and being out of touch.

Prayer

helps us to grow together
as God's beloved children

A creative force, a spirit

that touches everyone
and causes their gifts to blossom.

In fact, it is generally recognised that these special signs
are inherited family features;
they come from our Father in heaven!

Charles Singer