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Spiritual Life

FR G GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

To all the members of the Company of the Daughters of Charity

Dear Sisters,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and for ever!

Greetings to all of you. First of all, I want to take this opportunity, at the beginning of my mandate, to thank many of you for the prayers and support you have offered me through your letters, e-mails and the like. I only regret not being able to answer personally each and every one of the messages I received. In these first few days here at the Curia, I have spent many hours reading mail from all over the world. It is truly a humbling experience and, at the same time, an inspiration for me to take more deeply to heart my responsibility as animator of the Company.

I would like to share with you a little bit of what I have done since I began my mandate. The first thing was to get some rest. I visited my family and we spent a week together at the beach.

I spent the following week in a special way, as I had decided to do, after being elected Superior General. I went with my father to Emmitsburg, Maryland, to visit the shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. It is also the Provincial House of the Daughters of Charity of the Southeast Province of the United States. When I was a young priest, only six months ordained, I served as temporary chaplain to the retired and infirm Daughters there. I shared the experience of being their chaplain with an older confrere (86 year old Fr. Jim Twomey), who has since died, but we developed a very beautiful friendship and he helped me learn to love the Community in a very special way. He also showed me how to be a gentle, loving servant, something I personally witnessed in his service of the sick Sisters. I celebrated the Eucharist in the Basilica of Mother Elizabeth Anne Seton and in my homily I highlighted how certain members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity had touched my life and continue to be part of who I am today, through their example of love of the Community and the poor.

After the second week of my home visit, I returned to Guatemala on August 15th and was warmly welcomed at the airport by the confreres, a great many Daughters of Charity, and by our confrere-bishop Rios Mont himself. It was a truly humbling experience. We went to the Provincial House in Guatemala and had an opening prayer service in our local chapel. Then we all shared in a meal, there was dancing, laughter and celebration. It was a truly wonderful time.

Next day I left for our mission in Panama, where I visited our confreres, the Daughters, and members of the Vincentian Family. I took part in the ordination of one of our young confreres for the Central American Province. I had the privilege of concelebrating at his first Mass, and he asked me to preach the homily. In the first reading, Isaiah spoke about being sent as the Lord's messenger and of being willing to go to far-off lands to let God's name be known among all nations. Very appropriate words for a newly ordained missionary!

I returned to Guatemala, where the local Superior had arranged a number of events for the confreres, the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Family. I had the opportunity of sharing the Eucharist, meals and dialogue, with each of these groups. It was certainly edifying for me but it was also a difficult time. In the five years that I was Visitor of the Central American Province I came to know and to love many of the confreres, Daughters and members of the Vincentian Family. There were tears at the parting but at the same time there was the hope that they would all continue to work together as a Family and evangelise the poor.

Since my return to the Curia, I have had the opportunity to reflect and to set some goals for myself. What I would most like to share with you in this circular is that I want to take seriously my responsibility as animator of the Vincentian charism. I hope to be able to visit confreres, Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Family throughout the world. I want to spend time with the young people in the different branches of the Vincentian Family. I hope to see the works that the Family are doing with the poorest of the poor. These are our pride and joy, "a treasure hidden in a field", people for whom we must live out our charism more deeply, in fidelity to following Christ who evangelised the poor.

During my visits I will not want to say a whole lot. I want to listen to what you have to say. I think one of the greatest challenges facing us is that of learning to work together as Family for the good of the poor, for their evangelisation. While respecting the autonomy of each and every one of these branches of the Vincentian Family, we should never lose sight of the fact that we were all born of the same charism. The same love of God that inspired St. Vincent to serve the poor has been entrusted to us. To be faithful to our charism we are called to be missionaries, this means that we do not know any frontiers, be these geographical, national or even family related.

If we are people of faith and followers of Jesus Christ, we know that it is important for us, wherever barriers exist and wounds have been inflicted, to reconcile the differences that keep us apart and to put our energies into serving the poor.

Another challenge I see facing us is the need to be creative in reorganising our works. In some parts of the world today there are fewer vocations and Provinces are ageing. This means that Provinces are becoming smaller and there are fewer Daughters of Charity in full-time, active ministry. These signs of the times challenge you to seek creative ways of inviting others to share your charism and you should reduce the number

of Sisters working full-time in administration, so that your ministry of serving the poor is not adversely affected. In some cases this may mean restructuring Provinces. We must be able to move on from conditions that have kept some of you apart for years.

Though the Company has made great strides in the task of following its charism more closely, I think that you need to continue to re-evaluate your works that are not in the direct service of the poor. Some Provinces are dependent on certain apostolic works for the financial support they need for their apostolic works for the poor. And yet you cannot allow these commitments to hold you back and impede new initiatives and ministries that respond to the needs of the poor. I think it is important that you look for innovative ways of financing your works. I would also like to see more and more Daughters of Charity working in the service of the poor. That is being faithful to your heritage. It is how you come to experience true freedom, personal and communal liberation as Daughters of St. Vincent.

Another ongoing challenge for all of us is the formation of the laity, the need to continue St. Vincent de Paul's prophetic vision of organising, forming and helping lay people to be faithful to their baptismal promises within the Christian community and serving their brothers and sisters in some type of mission experience.

Some practical points concerning my visits:

1. I am not first and foremost a conference-giver. That is not my style. I hope that my presence among you will be more informal and that our meetings will be less "academic" with more dialogue: I would like them to be more occasions when we can share and express our opinions. One of the things I learned during my 19 years of ministry in Latin America, is that as a Church we are called to live our faith "in communion and participation." That is more my style. When I come to you the important thing is not so much anything that I may say to you, but rather what we can share, as a Family, about our experience of meeting Jesus in the poor.
2. I hope to be able to share the Eucharist wherever I go. There is one thing about the Eucharistic celebration that I feel strongly about. I prefer to celebrate the Word of God that is being used by the Universal Church for that particular day. We are called to be completely united with the Universal Church. St. Vincent wants us to be people who are committed to the Church and working to bring about the Kingdom of God. When we celebrate the Eucharist, the high point of our faith, we listen to God's Word, that Word that is being listened to by the whole Church. We are in tune with the whole Church and being together as Church we allow that Word to revitalise our lives and move us to personal and communal conversion as well as bringing about the conversion of the world in which we live.
3. One other practical point that I would like to mention before finishing this letter has to do with gift-giving. I imagine that people may wish to present me with a

gift as a souvenir of being with them. I really do appreciate the thought but, as a symbolic gesture or souvenir of my visit, I would encourage you to make a monetary donation towards the needs of the poor rather than giving me something material that at times could be costly. If I am visiting a place where you cannot give any money at all as a gift, the greatest token of remembering my visit would be the Daughters' ongoing desire to give themselves in service – and more specifically – to offer the gift of themselves to one of the missions where there is a shortage of personnel. I ask you to think about giving financial help through donations for the poor, or through providing personnel so that we can continue to bring life to the most abandoned people of our world.

I would like to end this circular by reaffirming what I am, a missionary. It was another missionary who inspired me to become this. I thank God for having had the opportunity to serve as a missionary. As Superior General, I will continue to be a missionary. I would like to invite all of you to rekindle your missionary spirit so that together we may continue to serve the Lord and evangelise the poor.

Your brother in St. Vincent

G. Gregory Gay, CM
Superior General
Rome, 11 September 2004
Feast of St John Gabriel Perboyre

The effects that globalisation has on different ways of life, as seen in the light of the Bible

The intercultural and interreligious factors in the Acts of the Apostles

Notes taken from a cassette recording (conversational style)

Globalisation: new realities, an old movement

Today we are also witnessing a great mix of cultures: whether people come to our doors and live among us, or whether we ourselves go out to meet other peoples and learn about their histories....But even if globalisation creates new situations, it seems to me that it is in fact a very old phenomenon. We will come to realise this with Theophilus.

What is the connection between Theophilus and our modern world?

Since the **20th century** is a century based on international and multinational enterprises as summed up in the word globalisation, let us consider some of the features of preceding centuries.

The **16th century** was also a mix of new cultures, new civilisations and new questions about humanity: what does it mean to be human? |Does every person we meet have a soul? Are they all human? Those were the questions being asked at that time. It was an era of great discoveries, a great renaissance in ideas, a vast extension of space as discoverers journeyed to the New Indies, Asia, etc

The **13th century** is the time of Saint Francis, a time when all Europe was changing. It saw the creation of great cities and big markets in the important capitals; people moved round a lot, goods circulated throughout Europe, and, from a Christian point of view, it was important, among other reasons, because it marked the end of the crusades (something that people found sad and hard to accept). At the same time, and seemingly in opposition to all this, we have Saint Francis of Assisi (the finest jewel of this century and of the Church). These two elements have something in common: new horizons were emerging, particularly those of Arab countries, and the intuition that Saint Francis had, that it is impossible to make Jesus known and loved through the use of arms, this can only be achieved by love and by gentleness. That is why he went at that time to see the Sultan of Egypt.

With regard to the **1st century**, let us recall the two following aspects that were characteristic of those times: the world was seen as immense, and it was a century of peace and prosperity. We could say that Christianity came to birth in the vast Roman empire that stretched from the Atlantic to the Arabian countries and from Ethiopia to the

Black Sea. It was also a time of prosperity and the peace that this brings. People could move about the empire thanks to a whole network of roads, the famous “Via”, and to river networks, too. People sailed the seas in great security. There were no wars. It was a century that promoted exchanges, prosperity and travel. Christianity would greatly benefit from this Roman communications network. We only need to think of Saint Paul.

The Bible: cultural exchange...between Israel and all people

Towards the end of the 1st century Luke wrote a double work: his Gospel, and the Acts of the Apostles for someone called Theophilus. This man will be our guide as we learn about the Roman Empire and Luke is going to help him to be in contact, from a religious and cultural point of view, with the different nations that people this Roman world.

Why did Luke decide to dedicate his work to this man, Theophilus? He did it to give a new identity to this man and, in a wider sense, to the communities for whom he was writing, an identity which would be a synthesis of everything that had happened and been handed on in Palestine, down to the time of Saint Paul’s missions. Luke will make this synthesis for Theophilus in order to give him the essential message of the Good News, bearing in mind all the questions that Theophilus might be asking himself and all the questions that this mix of cultures and religions could be posing at the end of the 1st century.

Let us develop the outlines listed below and the circumstances in which Theophilus lived. I have already mentioned the Pax Romana and the Roman occupation of Palestine.

1. The religious context: a great mixture of religions

As regards religion, a number of different religions were to be found everywhere...It is like a huge mixture of religions. The East turns up again in the West: the Egyptian religions turn up in Rome as well as the religions of Asia Minor. We might say that in all the big cities (Corinth and many others), we find a microcosm of every available creed and every type of religious proposition.

Today people talk about a supermarket of religions. It might be said that at that time the important Roman cities presented a considerable range of divinities, explanations about the world, epic stories and other propositions.

On the other hand, in presenting this world, the world of Theophilus, we have to take into account the Jewish world. The major factor that caught the attention of Theophilus is surely the fact that the Jews lost the war against the Romans in the year 70. This had been a huge psychological shock, a political and religious shock for all Israel and consequently for Christians, too.

After this, many written works tried to formulate a new synthesis: the Apocalypse is one of these, and I will be speaking about this work later on and for different reasons.

After experiencing this catastrophe, the Jewish world tried to recreate itself. There was a big assembly which took place in the interim before what we now know as the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). And if the great figures of Christianity came together to define what people should be like and what they should do to be Christians; the Jews, too, assembled in another place called Jamnia or Yavne, on the Mediterranean coast near Tel Aviv in order to reformulate their traditions. It was the traditions held by the Pharisees that would prevail.

The new religious creed available (Christianity) or the ancient one (Judaism) are reconstituted and, if reconstituted, could not be the same as before. The Judaism that emerged after 70 years could not be the Judaism that Jesus and his companions had known in the year 30. The Christianity that will be presented to Theophilus will be a bit different from that already described by Mark in the first gospel, or the one that had been taught and spread abroad by Paul in all the cities of the Roman Empire, or at least in a great number of them. So it is within this world that is simultaneously a Roman, a Jewish and a Christian world, that Luke is challenging Theophilus and dedicating to him a work which, on the one hand has been called a “gospel” and on the other hand, has been traditionally called “the Acts of the Apostles.”

2. The name Theophilus

Let us find out a little bit more about the name Theophilus. Theophilus is a forename. We can note, first of all, that Luke names this man twice: at the beginning of the Gospel and in the Acts. It is obvious that in the person of this no doubt fictitious reader, Luke has in mind communities that have been affected by Paul’s preaching. These people would be Hellenists, that is to say, they would be influenced by Greek philosophy, but they would also have been permeated with a Hellenistic Jewish tradition.

In dedicating his work to Theophilus, Luke has a wider audience in mind. Theophilus is a figure of all the communities that will come after him, including ourselves. We are almost Theophilus persons. We feel almost in tune with the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles as presented by Luke. Think of the wonderful episode of Zacchaeus in the Gospel. Think of Pentecost, think of all the teaching of Jesus, the missionary journeys of Paul, etc.....we feel at home in Luke’s world. We need to ask ourselves why.

What did Luke have in mind in writing to Theophilus? Did he want to present him with a new synthesis that would help him to understand what was happening to him, to put in ordered form, perhaps, the instruction that he had already received? - because Theophilus was not a neophyte, even if he was a Christian of recent times, even if he was a third generation Christian. Luke himself was a second generation Christian. He had heard the Gospel, he had been instructed. But we realise that first instructions always need to be updated...every ten years, there has to be a new synthesis of faith because life poses new questions. So Luke wants to let Theophilus make a new synthesis: how can Jesus fit into not only the Jewish heritage, but also into all the aspects of Greek and

Roman heritage.

Theophilus **is a Greek name**. Dedicating a work to someone is a Greek custom. Nowhere in the Old or the New Testament is any piece of writing dedicated in this way. Theophilus is clearly part of this Greek cultural world, no longer the Semitic one. He does not come from Jerusalem or from any strictly Jewish background. He is a third generation Christian.

Theophilus is not just **a Greek name, it is also a biblical one: 'God-fearing'**. In the 1st century there was a new category of pro-Jewish people who were known as 'the God-fearing.' Captivated by the high moral code of Judaism, the 'God-fearing' wanted to be close to this religion while still remaining pagans. They were committed to observing some Jewish laws, notably those to do with ritual purity and love of one's neighbour. But they were not circumcised. Once they were circumcised they became part of the proselyte group.

So Theophilus represents more than just one man, more than a community, more than someone who is seeped in Hellenism: **he is the hinge linking two traditions, two cultures: the Greek and the Jewish**. Theophilus is astride two worlds and Luke is trying, through this personage, to bring together a new synthesis which could be acceptable to people from Greek paganism as well as those from Palestinian Judaism.

Daniel Marguerat, who wrote the first history of Christianity, has a word that defines something that is acceptable to two traditions and two cultures: he uses the term 'amphibology' (amphibious: can live either on land or on water), that is to say, an expression that can be understood by people who normally have nothing in common: on the one hand we have the Jews, and on the other hand, Greek philosophy. The name 'Theophilus' means that both parties will understand what Luke is going to say, for Theophilus means both 'the one who loves God' (Greek) and a 'God-fearing' man (Hebrew).

3. The term 'Kyrios'

In speaking of Jesus, Luke likes to use another well-known term 'Kyrios', which means 'Lord'. In the language of the people, the word 'Kyrios' was the title given to the Emperor. And as the 1st century moved to its close, the Emperor wanted to be considered as a god and venerated by the title 'kirios kai theos' (lord and god). Now who, if not Jesus Himself, is Lord and God? The word kyrios is an expression that is familiar, not just to the pagans, but also to people from Judaism because for three centuries God the Father has been given the title Kyrios. (This is the exact translation of Yahweh, Adonai). So Luke uses this term with Jesus in mind, the Resurrected Jesus, knowing that this can be understood in the culture of his time. This procedure could also be described as **the inculturation of words and concepts**.

In the person of Theophilus there is this **ideal reader**, representing not simply an individual but a whole section of the Church at the end of the 1st century, and

representing us, today. In writing to Theophilus, Luke wants to make him feel at ease with the many cultural trends and the general atmosphere of the changing world in which he was living. Luke's plan was to bring the message of the Good News into the double culture represented by Theophilus: Judaism and Hellenism. The task of inculturation, which Luke ventures to introduce in his work, is the same for us today. It would be interesting to evaluate everything that we owe to Luke, through Theophilus, in the way we regard ourselves as Christians of the 21st century. Today, we are doing exactly the same as Luke tried to do at the end of the 1st century: *How can we continue to say that Jesus is Lord, to our world today where there is such a mixture, where the old guidelines have disappeared and new ones are emerging?*

I - THE INTER-CULTURAL ASPECT *'Theophilus represents the meeting of cultures'*

1 - From the specific to the general

Some passages from the Acts of the Apostles will help us to understand how Luke was able to present the Gospel to Theophilus in a way that was culturally acceptable.

The passage relating the events of **Pentecost** (Acts 2) is part of the account we have of origins, just as the first eleven chapters of the Bible are. According to Luke's thinking, the Church was born at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Luke tells Theophilus what took place in a remote corner of the Roman empire, even if this was Jerusalem, an event that concerned the whole world, all the inhabited world known to him, the world he belonged to, the whole of the Roman empire. Luke presents Theophilus with solid roots that go far beyond the realms of time. This did not take place in the year 30 or the year 33, but at the very beginning, and it still continues today. In this way it is a story of beginnings.

The text

a) The people involved, time and space

1. Luke dates the **gift of the Spirit** as Pentecost. For the Jews, Pentecost was an important feast commemorating the giving of the Law to Moses. Luke is saying that the Holy Spirit replaces the Law. The Holy Spirit is the new gift, the new present that God is giving to mankind and, in this case, to Theophilus, so that they can live in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

2. This event which took place in a specific place in the Roman empire, concerns the whole world. If you re-read the account, pay attention to the words **all, everything**. This means the account is classified as **universal**, a major classification in Greek philosophy,

and particularly in Stoicism that pervaded the Roman empire. This small event concerns everyone and everything.

Who do we mean by 'All'? Not just those who are present at the event; the apostles, Mary and all those who have joined them in prayer, etc...but also those who are outside and who will be hearing the message. These latter are the 'table of peoples' present at the event. This list reminds us of the 'table of peoples' (Gen 10), the descendants of Noah, head of the new human race. In the 'account of the origins' given in the Acts, the list of peoples has the same function. If we laid out these nations geographically on a map we would see that they spanned the inhabited world of those times, from north to south and from east to west. So all the peoples that were known about in the Roman world are present when, through the Spirit, the new People emerges. If we study the list we find a symbolic element that reinforces this characteristic of universality; twelve peoples are named, and then a thirteenth. Twelve is the number of the apostles (and of the tribes), the symbol of totality and universality. But there is a thirteenth people targeted by Luke, and these represent Rome. To Luke's way of thinking, the Gospel will have achieved its objective when it reaches Rome. It will have come to the heart of the Empire: the Gospel will have reached the most important and prestigious city and so it will have reached the whole world. '**Twelve plus one**' is Luke's way of expressing universality. And to be more explicit, these include pious Jews, proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, **the whole socio-religious structure** is here represented.

Luke describes the event of Pentecost in a similar way to the account of what happened on Sinai as proclaimed and celebrated in the synagogues, that is to say, not simply presenting the biblical account of the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai or Horeb (Ex 20 and Deut 5), but introducing, too, rabbinical traditions of later times; some of these traditions were added to the biblical text. We find echoes of these in Luke's account:

- Mention is again made of noise, but it is a 'loud noise'. On the mountain thunder was heard.
- Mention is made of 'breath', spirit, wind, but also of fire. Rabbinical tradition taught that fire came from the tablets of the Law and that this fire, which would reunite the people, divided into 70 tongues. In this rabbinical tradition, the number 70 emphasises the fact that what happened on the mountain, the giving of the Law to Moses for the people, is really something that concerns all Israelites scattered throughout the world (70 is another number that represents the universal). The image of parted tongues of fire is a way of telling Theophilus that this event does not concern just one particular time in history or one specific part of the Roman empire, but it is of universal significance. This event which began in Jerusalem at Pentecost, continues today and will go on as long as people exist; it will continue to operate until it reaches 'Rome', that is to say, the ends of the earth, the final places that the Gospel has to be taken to.

b) Some explanation about the words ‘tongues’ and ‘languages’

We often recall from the Pentecost event that *‘They began to speak’* and *‘each one understood them in his own language’*. This means that by the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Good News is immediately communicated in such a way that the twelve peoples, plus the thirteenth, can understand it in their own language. This is very interesting from the point of view of inculturation; there is not much point delivering a message to people if we do not speak their language. It means that when the apostles were able to make themselves understood, every listener *‘understood them in his own language’*. So the language was intelligible.

There is a second characteristic feature of this language; it was a language of praise: *‘they began to praise the wonders of God’*. This had an unexpected effect since people said, *‘they are drunk’*. So the language was not entirely comprehensible. In other passages from the Acts and in the writings of Saint Paul, singing of the wonders of God came to be associated with what we now call ‘glossolalia’ or speaking in tongues, something that has been taken up by the Charismatic Movement in our times. It is a way of praising God that is not necessarily articulated.

So was what happened at Pentecost intelligible or not? Luke would answer yes and no. It is the same situation we had with the words *Theophilus* and *Kyrios*. These words can be used in two ways, there is a ‘double meaning’ (amphibology) here.

- On the one hand, Luke follows the same procedures in writing history as those used by all the great Greek and Roman historians: he presents facts in an ordered way and states causes and effects. (We might recall the plan he intended to follow in writing to Theophilus, *‘I am going to give....an ordered account’*).
- On the other hand, Luke is conscious of the biblical tradition he has inherited: there is a major player on the biblical scene, someone called God, who is described here as Spirit or Word. God’s language is different from human language – it is characterised by something that was practised at that time in Greek cities and sometimes in Christian communities, free praise, speech that is not articulated but which expresses the best things that the heart wants to say to God. So this was something that everyone could understand and Peter would clearly explain (cf the speech that followed). But Luke knows that language can never fully express the mystery revealed in history. Using language on two levels, Luke takes into account the Biblical and the Greek tradition, when he tells us about the origins of the Christian community.

Luke continues to instruct Theophilus in this way, saying to him, *“his event is not something that happened in the distant past, it concerns you, today. It is not meant just for one country but for the whole of the inhabited world. It can be understood, but it is up to you to make it accessible for the next generation. To give a full account of it you must let the Holy Spirit speak; he will give you another language which is not a language of words but one of praise, both are necessary for expressing the truth of this gift of the*

Spirit'.

2 - Luke's view of the world Theophilus lives in

a) A positive vision of the world

By writing to Theophilus, Luke allows him to look at the events relating to the origins of Christianity and, at the same time, to reflect on the world he is living in, that is to say, the Roman world. Luke presents a positive view of the world, **a world that is lived in**. We know that the aim of the Roman Empire was to occupy the whole of the inhabited world, which they divided into civilised peoples and barbarians. Luke's plan was to bring the Good News, not just to those parts of the world that the Romans already occupied, but beyond these frontiers. We remember that Jesus, before he left this earth, called together his disciples for the last time and said, *'You are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth'*.

In theology the word 'eschatō' brings to our minds the last days, but 'eschatō' really signifies limits or boundaries. The Roman dream was always to go beyond the boundaries, to push back frontiers, to go right to the barbarians. This powerful dream which shapes the outlook of all the elite, is part of literature, of stories and tales of epic adventures....

Luke will bring Theophilus not just to the Roman Empire, but will inspire him to go to its uttermost boundaries and even beyond them. We will see in the Acts of the Apostles that we will be travelling beyond frontiers before we arrive in Rome.

This peopled world is a **world at peace**, where one can travel about in relative security. The elite travel and so do Christian missionaries. Travel is part of everyday life, at least for the social class that Theophilus belongs to. Luke writes to him in excellent Greek. Theophilus will surely have read the lives of the great politicians; their life history is told round a series of journeys. Luke uses the same device in narrating the life of Jesus and the early missionaries. In the Acts of the Apostles we read of three missionary journeys by Paul the traveller. In his gospel, Luke shows Jesus making more journeys than the two other synoptics describe. Of course they remain in Palestine but in the course of ten chapters Luke tells of the long ascent from Galilee up to Jerusalem (Lk 9.51-19.47). Compare this with the other two evangelists who have Jesus journeying from Galilee direct to Jerusalem....

How was he to present these faith events in a way acceptable to the mind of the reader and in a way that his listeners would find credible? Using the image of a journey would seem to be the perfect way of doing this: he brings his audience into the Roman dream, and Theophilus is part of this universe. Jesus and the early missionaries are of the same calibre as the great heroes past and present of the Greek world (Ulysses) and the Roman Empire (conquests...).

In presenting his view of the world, Luke has a definite goal in mind, **Rome**, that

is to say, the City, the Capital, Civilisation. Luke admires Rome. He admires Roman structures, Roman cities and Roman powers of organisation. He helps Theophilus to be reconciled with the world in which he has to live. Luke sees Rome in a favourable light. Notice that he never speaks ill of those in authority there, except for one occasion when the Procurator has Paul thrown into prison. Luke tells us that this Procurator would have been happy to set Paul free if someone had offered him a little *baksheesh*. This is the only slight criticism we find concerning the important officials of the Roman State. On the contrary, Luke is pleased to give centre stage to those in authority: the centurion, etc.

It is in this world so loved and admired by Luke, that people like Theophilus are trying to find their way. These are the *God-fearing* people who have only recently come to the faith. Luke wants to be united with them and to strengthen them in their belief. They all belong to a high social and cultural level of society. Steeped in the philosophy of Stoicism, they want to live according to a higher ideal than that offered by other philosophies and religions of the Empire: Christianity represents the highest ideal.

b) An inherited vision of the world

This world vision that Luke is trying to construct for Theophilus is based on a threefold heritage:

– firstly, **an inherited view of Greece**

Luke will have the Good News pause at all the strategic points of Greek culture; for example, the most famous centre of Greek thought is in Athens on the Areopagus. There the Good News will come into contact with philosophy, with Greek culture that has been in this place for 6 or 7 centuries. Unfortunately this first contact ended in failure even though Denis the Areopagite was converted. *'We will hear you talk about this at another time'*. In spite of this failure, the Good News did at least manage to reach the heart of Greek culture.

– Next, **an inherited vision of Rome**

We know that the world of Roman culture was an organised one. We have only to think of the Roman army, Roman camps, etc. For the Romans, the world is essentially a place that needs organising. In writing to Theophilus, Luke wants to do something similar. He wants to set down in order all that he has learned: *'I will give you an ordered account'*. In the Acts of the Apostles, the Word of God will claim all inhabited lands and will not be limited by the distinction between civilisation and barbarianism. The world is divided but the Good News will go beyond any divisions between the civilised and the non-civilised, between civilised people and barbarians. The Good News will overturn some Roman ways of classifying people.

– Finally, **an inherited vision of the Septuagint Bible**

In writing his history of the early Christians, Luke is totally influenced by the Biblical way of writing. However, he writes in Greek, not in Hebrew. When he quotes the Bible he is quoting the Septuagint Bible which was translated three

centuries before his day. This was the version used in the synagogues of the diaspora and from now on it will be used by the newly-founded Christian communities. It is the Greek Bible of the Septuagint that Luke is handing on to Theophilus.

He has a good command of Greek and his style follows that of the Septuagint. For example, the structure of the sentence, *'And it came to pass while Jesus was journeying through Galilee, that...'* has many resonances of the Septuagint because it is practically a word for word translation of the equivalent phrase in Hebrew. Luke will imitate this style, not simply to pass on biblical teaching or to quote the Bible, but also to let Theophilus see that it is these Scriptures which, from now on, will be the reference Bible for Christians. He is equipping Theophilus with a written fund of knowledge that has achieved renown (over 3 centuries); it has gravitas and the status of antiquity that make it a fitting tradition in which to anchor his new Christian identity in a changing world tossed about at the whim of doctrines, philosophies and religions. By giving Theophilus the Septuagint, he is providing him with a solid framework of tradition that will not disorientate him as much as the Hebrew Bible would (besides, the Jews have monopolised this since the rift in the 50s). In doing this, Luke seems to be saying, *'From now on, these are your Scriptures. Are you looking for the sources and origins of your religion? You will find them here'*.

Conclusion

Our Theophilus stands at the crossroads of different cultures. He has left the shores of Jerusalem and now lives in places all over the Mediterranean and in Rome. He travels, he explores, and he does this with passion. With a religious identity rooted in Jerusalem and the Septuagint, Theophilus now has the necessary keys to following the Christian way, the origins of which Luke has described to him. Is this account of the origins true to history? We don't know, but we find something of an answer to the question in the 'personages' of Peter and Paul. We can see that Luke is turning his heroes into 'role-models'; these two men are presented as being united in their mission and in their way of presenting the Gospel, whereas history tells us that there were clashes between them. To achieve his objective, Luke switches the theological positions of both men. (Acts 15). The traditional teaching of Paul is now put into the mouth of Peter (no circumcision, it is through grace that the pagans come to God). What Peter taught is now accepted by Paul. (the few laws that the pagans must observe).

Even though he knows that relations between Peter and Paul were sometimes strained in the early days of Christianity, Luke has a special way of intertwining the elements of their teaching to say, first of all, that there has been no rift, and then to state that there is continuity between the earliest days of Christianity and the position it is in now. He offers Theophilus a role-model in the great leaders of the infant Church. This is his particular way of saying that there is continuity in the writing of Christian Scriptures, in spite of the difficulties encountered.

II - THE INTER-FAITH ASPECT

*‘Theophilus comes into contact with the many religions
that abounded at that time’*

1 - Judaism and Christianity

***Judaism**

On the religious scene, we have first of all Judaism; and Luke cannot escape this. If he speaks to Theophilus about the Christian way and teaches him what this entails, he is still obliged to set out the position of Christianity with regard to Judaism.

At the time that Luke was writing, people could speak of Judaism and Christianity. The Christians have held the Council of Jerusalem and the Jews the Council of Jamnia; two important theological events as these two different groups distance themselves from each other at the end of the first century. Christians become independent of the Jews, and the Jews reject Christians outright. So, after what has come to be called the Council of Jerusalem and the Council of Jamnia, we might speak of the re-foundation of the Jewish world and the foundation of the Christian world.

***Christianity**

The most important event that Luke points out to his reader is the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Within the structure of the Acts account, Chapter 15 is placed right at the centre of the narrative, as if to tell us that its contents are highly significant. At this event, which took place in Jerusalem, Luke has brought together the key figures in the first mission: Peter, James and Paul.

Paul remains silent and lets Peter do the talking. After Peter, it is James' turn to speak. Do they say the same thing? Not quite. Peter says, *‘I can see that the mission is making progress in all the cities and I am sure there is no longer any obstacle preventing people from accepting the Good News. Who are we to impose conditions on the pagans?’*, meaning, these should not be circumcised. Let us accept anyone God sends us as His doing. Let us welcome them unconditionally. Paul does not speak, he just agrees. In fact, Peter's speech is only an echo of what Paul has always held. Peter speaks for Paul and he takes up a word that is very significant in the latter's theology: grace. (cf all Paul's letters, especially those to the Galatians and the Romans). *‘It is by grace that we are saved’*.

It is a clever and yet an accurate way of presenting history. After a while, passions cool and past arguments are no longer put forward in the same way. So it is perfectly fair to have the traditional adversary accept what the other party had suggested. It is a very neat way of not sidestepping the problems that arose before Theophilus's time, and of solving them by presenting Peter and Paul as being in agreement over

essential matters: from now on, they become the heroes of the first Evangelisation (we inherit this, too, from Theophilus): from henceforth, Peter and Paul are bracketed together (cf their liturgical feast, June 29th).

James now speaks and he says that he agrees with both of them except that he thinks some rules should be imposed on the pagans who wanted to keep close to Judaism, that is to say, the ‘God-fearing’ ones. In Leviticus these rules were already applied to foreigners living in Israel, the implication now is this, *‘We accept that we now have foreigners living among us, but for us to be able to live side by side with them, they will have to observe some of our rules: rules concerning ritual purity, not eating meat consecrated to idols, avoiding immorality, not eating meat from strangled animals...’*. In some manuscripts (all on Chapter 15 of Acts), we can detect the following golden rule: *‘Do to others what you would wish them to do to you’*. James adds these few rules and he gives Paul the mission of spreading this Good News. Good News for whom? Certainly not for Paul or for the pagan converts to Christianity. Paul will never speak of these rules in the Acts (or anywhere else, and with greater reason!) and when, in Chapter 21, he comes to Jerusalem, he goes to see James. James explains to him some of these rules as though Paul had not been present at the Council of Jerusalem and as if he had never told him to have these rules observed!

It is a very clever way for Luke to say that he is quite sure that things did not really happen in this way, and he points this out in chapter 21. However, he persists in telling it this way in order to show that there has been continuity and that this Good News is also the work of the Spirit. And sometimes the Spirit writes straight with crooked lines....

Luke does not delete anything. In writing about past events, he is explaining to Theophilus in a subtle way, and without hiding anything, the great debates that took place in the first century. The nub of the problem, then, is to know whether, in order to be a Christian, one has first to become a Jew. There are several answers to this and two of them are given below. It is a way of saying that the Jewish world is our heritage; a heritage which, however, is no longer handed down through circumcision. Luke is in complete agreement with Paul on this.

To sum up, Theophilus knows that being a Christian does not place him outside the Jewish tradition. He is one of the *God-fearing* but a *new type of God-fearing* person: he is not circumcised and not even obliged to observe ritual practices since this is the teaching of the Acts of the Apostles. But the Romans still regard him as being part of the Jewish world. In fact, within the Roman empire, anyone who is not a Jew must necessarily be a pagan. Now the Jews are recognised by a statute of Roman law. They are recognised as a people and authorised to practise their religion (*religio licita*): this is not so for Christians. Luke is anxious to say that Christians pose no threat to the Roman empire, and at the same time, he tries to tell Theophilus that he is living **within** the empire and **within** Jewish tradition. There is no uneasiness or no great distortion between Theophilus and the Roman world. By writing his history in this way, Luke is showing the Roman empire that Christians are not dangerous and he is proving to

Theophilus that he is not living outside the law.

Theophilus is banned from the synagogue but he remains faithful to the Book of the Promise. The Septuagint is now his holy book, his Scriptures. He belongs to the new People of God and is one of them.

In chapter 15 James speaks, and he quotes at length from the prophet Amos, using the Greek Septuagint and not the Hebrew Bible. This quotation makes people understand that in the Book of Amos, it was written that God would choose for himself a people from among the pagans. God has raised up a people that has two faces. This is a theological problem that has not been cleared up, even in our own times!

The confrontation with Judaism still leaves the problem of links with Israel, a question that still arises today. In the Acts, Luke suggests a response and he never completely leaves the world of the synagogue. Even when Paul is a prisoner in Rome, his first meetings are with Jews, as had been the case on many previous occasions. The message seems to be clear, '*Since you do not want to hear the Good News, it will pass to another people, the pagans*'. The same thing had already happened at Antioch in Pisidia (chapter 13), but it did not stop Paul preaching first of all to the Jews in all the towns he passed through. When Paul was no longer there, the dialogue had to be continued; a dialogue that proved difficult for 2000 years but was reopened after the Second Vatican Council and the wonderful document *Nostra Aetate*.

In this, Luke is very much Paul's heir. Paul had many conflicts with the Jews but his final theological statement was addressed to them, '*All Israel will be saved*'. (Rom 11:25). We are not sure how that phrase is to be interpreted. But Luke is basically Paul's heir when he has the Good News taken to places where Jews assembled. Indeed, if there is **one** Word of God, it cannot be meant to be addressed to everyone except the People of the Promise! Ever since the days of Paul and Luke, this has always remained the outstanding theological problem to be solved.

2 - Pagan philosophies and religions

- a) Luke brings Theophilus to an encounter with **pagan religions as well as the philosophies of the Greek world** (the Areopagus).
- b) Then he brings his listener into the **world of magic**, for example, the incident of the magician Elymas in Cyprus (Acts 13). Elymas tries to prevent the conversion of Sergius Paulus. Paul causes Elymas to go blind and the magician has to go about seeking people to lead him by the hand. When the consul sees this he is converted. The significance of this episode is that the proclamation of the Good News means that people no longer need have recourse to magic. An interesting point here is that the incident of the magician Elymas is described in a way that is similar to the account of what happened to Paul earlier: Paul on the way to Damascus is struck blind and he needs someone to guide him. Paul will find this guide when he reaches his destination, Damascus, and it is Ananias who will restore his sight. Elymas, too,

becomes blind....but only for a time!

What is this world of magic? It is an unfulfilled world. It is a realm that Paul, himself, has inhabited. It is a world of blindness (the person cannot see clearly). Luke is the evangelist of **seeing**. When he depicts Elymas in this condition it is really Paul that he is describing. It is interesting, too, that in this chapter Paul has a change of name: before now he was called Saul but now his name is Paul. Finally, this world of magic is a description of Paul's blindness, a blindness that has been cured. Magic must give way to the Word.

- c) After magic, Luke brings Theophilus into **the world of superstition and idolatry** at Lystra (Acts 14). Paul and Barnabas cure a sick man and the people take Barnabas for Zeus and Paul for Hermes. The missionaries tell the people, '*Stop this foolishness and turn to the living God*'. The message that Christianity brings is that this person's dignity is restored but not through traditional religions. And Paul goes on to say, '*We are only men like yourselves*'. So we have to demythologise human relationships that are tainted by superstition. We must, on the contrary, proclaim the Christian way, which is the way of healing.
- d) Then Luke brings Theophilus into contact with **the spirit of divination**. In the city of Philippi, Paul meets a young servant girl who has the spirit of divination or the spirit of python (Acts 16). This was Christianity's encounter with the world of oracles. In this region it was the Delphic oracle that people consulted. Python was the serpent guarding the Delphic oracle and the word python was later applied to all forms of soothsaying. When the woman had heard Paul and Silas preaching, she called out to all the people, '*These men are servants of the Most High God and they are proclaiming to you the way of salvation*'. She continued to talk like this over many days. Paul exorcised the spirit in her and she was no longer able to divine spirits. Her masters were furious when they saw their hopes of making money were to vanish and Paul was put in prison. Paul's God does indeed bring salvation but, with Christianity, there is no need for people to have recourse to oracles or divination.
- e) At Ephesus, an important city in Asia Minor, Luke will introduce Theophilus to yet another world, that of the **goldsmiths** (Acts 19). Paul's preaching would spell ruin for the goldsmiths because the Good News caused people to abandon the great goddess of Ephesus, Artemis, who, in turn, had supplanted the great Anatolian goddess, Cybele. Paul's preaching was more powerful than any divinities in Anatolia and all Asia Minor.

So Christianity was not afraid of any religious system. Christianity reached out to every aspect of worship found in the Roman empire: divination, oracles, the great gods and goddesses. The main symbolic channels of the pagan religions, therefore, are visited, evaluated, and outclassed. Evangelisation leaves no corner of the empire unvisited: the Word must go to Rome, but not without first seeing how the people on the way, live and think!

- f) Before it reaches Rome, the Christian message comes to the **barbarians**. This is the

famous story of time spent on the island of Malta (Acts 28). The missionaries were obliged to land there: it was cold and raining. They had to look for firewood and hidden among the bundle of sticks was a viper. Paul was bitten by it. All the people said: *'this is an evil man, he is cursed and he is going to die'*. But Paul did not die; he picked up the viper and threw it into the fire. Then the people said: *'this man is a god'*. During this stage of the missionary journey the Word has now penetrated beyond the frontiers of civilisation, the world that was not part of the Roman empire's organisational system, a place beyond its confines and one as yet untouched by Roman civilisation and ways of thinking. In Malta, Christianity has an early encounter with the barbarian world. It has gone beyond the limits set down at the outset of the journey.

To sum up. Luke brings his hearer to visit all the places of pagan thinking and beliefs in order to show that these have been superseded, so these places are waiting for the Word. He teaches him not to scorn these things but to take them for what they are, that is, systems of thought and belief that are deficient and cannot, of themselves, bring salvation. Salvation is the supreme good that people in the empire want from a divinity. From now on, it is the Christian religion that will bring this salvation.

In our own times we need to reflect deeply about salvation? What is salvation? In our modern culture, what do we mean by 'a desire for salvation' or 'being saved'? When Luke teaches about Jesus the Saviour, that has strong resonances; there were many gods and goddesses whose special function was to provide healing; for example the cult of the god Asclepius. Religion was expected to bring healing. The God that Luke preached to Theophilus was certainly a Saviour God.

3 - The Christianity that Luke sees in the world of Theophilus

Finally, what sort of Christianity does Luke present to Theophilus? Luke tells him that Christianity gives him a new religious identity, one that is different from his Jewish identity: he is a *God-fearing Christian*. Luke will provide him with a reference source book, the Septuagint which is now his canon of Scripture. And in giving Theophilus the Gospel and his written account of the history of early Christianity, he is handing on to him, in embryonic form, the Christian canon, *'these will be your Scriptures, O Theophilus, I give them to you'*. It is a real passport to life.

This first canon is in direct continuity with the times of the Septuagint Promise and Hellenic Judaism. Today, when Jewish scholars are debating what Judaism was like in the first century, they no longer look on Paul as a renegade. All agree that Paul was a wonderful representative of the vibrant Judaism that existed in this vast Roman empire. We might recall that 10% of the population was Jewish and that Jewish communities were established in all the big cities of the empire. It would be wrong to think that Palestinian Judaism represented all Judaism; there was Qmram, Jerusalem, Alexandria, the Hellenic Judaism of the diaspora.....

By giving Theophilus this identity, Luke is telling him that he is part of Israel's heritage. He is providing him with a new identity card, a new passport. This should be

sufficient to guide his conduct in life and help him to forge ahead. Thanks to this reassurance, Theophilus knows that he belongs to the new Israel. In his own person he is the embodiment of Gamaliel's judgment at the beginning of the Acts. Gamaliel came to a wise decision that helped to solve a difficulty. Speaking of Peter and John, he said, *'Leave them in peace. If their religion comes from God it will continue to exist. If it does not come from God it will perish'*. This judgment by Gamaliel resonates all through the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, everything could have perished ten times over: Jerusalem, then the persecutions in Judea, in Samaria..... But on each occasion, what looked like defeat evoked, in fact, a new religious impetus and a new evangelisation, Gamaliel's judgment is proving to be right and this tells Theophilus that what is happening is God's doing.

III - LUKE'S OMISSIONS **A truncated view of what is universal**

There are always things that people leave unsaid. Even if Luke wanted to give a complete and ordered history of Christianity, there are oversights in this work, or rather there are omissions. It might be said that Luke's omissions are eloquent.

- When speaking about Pentecost, Luke says that there are twelve peoples representing the whole of the inhabited world, plus a thirteenth people. But we might regret the fact that he tells us nothing about the evangelisation of the Parths, Medes, the Elamites and many others. It is rather frustrating that he only deals with the evangelisation of a small part of the Roman empire. Even though Luke describes Paul's great journeys, these only take us to Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor and Europe as far as Rome. And even if this is still quite considerable coverage, it is only a tiny part of the programme he set himself.
- When he tells of Paul's conversion, he says that Paul preached in Damascus and Arabia. If Paul stayed in Arabia for three years, we would find it hard to imagine him keeping quiet for that length of time. That is Luke's elliptical way of telling us, *'things happened but I have nothing to tell you about them; they are of no interest to you, Theophilus, they are not part of your history'*.
- When Luke tells us that as Philip was on his way from Jerusalem to Gaza, he met the eunuch or official at Queen Candace's court, a man who was probably the treasurer of the great kingdom of Ethiopia, he is letting us know, in passing, that the Gospel reached Ethiopia. We would have liked to know whether this mission was preached on only one occasion following the Roman and Greek pattern. We would like to have learned something about the Semitic world of the Arabian coast, Ethiopia and Egypt. Luke knows that there were things happening here but he skips over them. He knows that there were twelve apostles and that these did not shut themselves away, they were tireless evangelists. We begin to see that things were happening around James in Jerusalem. But this was Jerusalem! Luke does not say much about it! Most

probably because the world of Theophilus is centred on Rome, not Jerusalem any more.

So it is rather a truncated vision of the world. We have seen that Luke is writing a prodigious historical work for Theophilus, he wants him to recognise, love and **accept his world**, and he particularly wants to give him a **new identity** in this world. We realise, however, that this does not represent the entire inhabited world during this era of the great Roman empire. Why could there not have been other inspired Lukes in Antioch, Alexandria or Babylon?

Conclusion

The way that we think of Christianity makes us all “Theophiluses.” We, too, are inheriting from Luke the early history of Christianity, a wonderful history that we delight in reading over and over again.

The work is well written and Luke introduces us to Christianity with:

- the different schools of thought at this time: Judaism, Stoicism...
- different centres of philosophy; Athens...
- different places of psychic interest: Delphi...
- different religious worlds; the world of divination and of the classical gods

Today, we, too, have all these worlds at our doorstep, we find them in the places where we live, even though they may take on different forms. And even if the Christian presence there is just a symbolic one, it is meaningful for different organisations in the district, for multi-lingual areas and for various social and religious traditions. We can be in no doubt that in our day the road between Jerusalem and Rome passes, today, from the parish to the places where these people live; maybe, too, from our religious communities to everyday life in our district, to the world of work and to different associations.... Or again, Christianity may touch other social and faith communities and reach out to people who have different ways of thinking and different important traditions. In our times, one of the most important traditions we come into contact with is that of Islam, though in some places it can be Judaism, too. Perhaps the fact that the three great religions have a common ancestor, the father of the people, Abraham, will open up possibilities. Maybe Abraham has still more to teach us about how we can live together as brothers and sisters.

By travelling across the Roman world, that global terrain visited by Luke and his listener, Theophilus, we can come to understand that we have the same task ahead of us, the same voyage to make. Unlike Theophilus, we do not have a written history; it is up to us to write that history, but I believe it will still be a great history if, like Luke, we are able to see the positive aspects of our world that is influenced by globalisation.

**Some points to reflect on,
using these biblical texts**

* God promises us the earth as our dwelling place. It is not a question of possessing this earth but of accepting it as a gift, living there as brothers and sisters, and working to make sure that everyone participates in solidarity, mutual aid and sharing.

* God promises to give us language so that we can develop our project of living together in the world. This project often starts by our mastering another language (cf work done in various districts and by various associations, to let people learn French so that they can cope with life here, have access to schooling, etc.).

*We must make sure that globalisation does not become “Babelian” where people use the same words, have the same thought patterns and live within an organised system that hems them in like a tower so that they no longer need to be mobile (the internet can reinforce the idea of a settled sedentary life for the elite) and where it is the most vulnerable people who become nomads as they wonder from place to place looking for work. Such a system is not acceptable.

*On the contrary, Pentecost teaches us the importance of speech and different languages, in other words, people will be moved by the same inspirational force but in different contexts and different countries. Pentecost is the story of one single inspirational force animating all nations so that people will serve life and overcome the forces of death such as particularism, exclusive attachment to the interests of one group or class, or communism. The challenge that we have to take up is that of living in unity while respecting diversity. Pentecost is the story of one inspiring force helping us to build up the Kingdom and to respect differences.

Father Michel Garat
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Saint Vincent and globalisation

Notes taken from a cassette recording (spoken style)

You will not be at all surprised to hear me confess that I have never found any of St. Vincent's letters, conferences or talks that deal with globalisation! I am going to try and rediscover in his experiences some convictions, intuitions and gospel values that could be guidelines for us and smooth our pathway, today, in the context of globalisation. Before we re-examine St. Vincent's experiences, I would like to put before you three reflections:

1 - Globalisation is an irreversible process

We are all very much aware of this. So it is not a question of whether we are for it or against it, or of knowing whether our times are more favourable for preaching the Gospel or less so, than in the past. I don't think there is much point in trying to answer that particular question. I think it would be more useful to weigh up the new challenges that our times raise for the Church, for our communities and for society itself, and then to reflect on how we are going to face them.

- What are the effects of globalisation in its present form?
- Is it on course to satisfy all the expectations it might raise?
- Is it not creating great frustration among poor and overlooked countries that are being abandoned to their fate, and among the most vulnerable people in our own country?
- Is it going to serve primarily the interests of the great powers?
- etc.

This first observation leads me to lay down a condition which is of a spiritual nature. We are called to love the world, our world, *'this world that God loved so much that he sent his only Son to it'*, (Jn 3). It is into this world that God is sending us as witnesses. If we love this human world we will not criticise everything, argue wholesale and be too quick to judge.

2 - Christians have something to say on the subject of globalisation, and so have Vincentians.

What is that message? It is summed up in the theme chosen for an assembly of different Christian movements at Valpres, near Lyons, in January 2004: 'The Christian judgment on globalisation' (ACM). Other meetings are scheduled. The participants were a diverse group and they did not all have the same ideas. Some had as their first priority personal commitment and converting people, others put more emphasis on pressurising authorities in the name of gospel values. But over and above these divergences and differences, the participants had a common aim: to formulate and proclaim a strong, clear

Christian message that would energise Christians but would also be addressed to the whole world. I quote the words of the ACM President: *'We denounce the consumer society where everything can be bought for a price, even bodies and souls. We denounce a globalisation where, in spite of all efforts, some countries and continents cannot even begin to take part. We condemn the changes that have led to all these ways of acting contrary to a spirit of solidarity'*. And he went on to say, *'Denunciation must be followed by proclamation'*. In fact, any prophetic utterance has both to denounce and to proclaim. Denunciation by itself is not very effective.

3 - We live with the daily effects of globalisation, not just its influence on economics but also its cultural and religious repercussions

We have moved from being a traditional type of society to a pluralistic one, and the guidelines that were in operation in the past for a traditional society no longer have the same influence today. People speak of the disappearance of guidelines, a crisis of meaning. Who would dare to say today, *'We have always done it like this and this is how it should continue to be done'*?

The cultural and religious mix in society and the impact these make, present a great diversity of ideas about life, death, morality, outlook, conduct and beliefs. This means that it is now supposed that nothing is to be imposed as an absolute; everything can be treated as relative and open to debate. I think this is particularly true for the younger generations. Whether these young people are from a recently immigrant family or from one that has been here for a long time so that they have been French for several generations, they all have something in common: they all lack the firm points of reference known by their parents, and even more so, by their grandparents. What guidelines can we give them to build their lives on if they do not have solid ground as their foundation? What would really be worthwhile for them.

Has Vincent de Paul any perspectives to offer, any markers? I will now make bold to ask him this question. The answer will, of course be my own personal one, my reading of St. Vincent. It is necessarily a limited response, but you will be able to add to it.

I offer you three points for reflection:

- The poor have priority
- We must do God's will.
- We need to globalise charity in order to humanise globalisation.

1. The poor have priority

I am not going to spend too much time developing this point even though it is at the heart of Vincent's experience. We know that it was through his experience, particularly at Gannes-Folleville and Chatillon (1617), that he became convinced of *'the eminent dignity of the poor'*. This was not his own phrase, it was one used by Bossuet. But Bossuet was a follower of Saint Vincent de Paul because he was a member of the

Tuesday Conferences.

Structures, be these political, economic, social, cultural, religious or ecclesiastical, bypass the poor. This was so obvious to Vincent de Paul that he could say to the missionaries: *'I pray God, and I make this prayer several times a day, that He will annihilate our Company if we are no longer able to help the poor to find salvation.'* It is not the poor who should have to adapt to institutions and structures, but the other way round. Remember the phrase from your earliest Rules, *'As far as your works of charity will allow you'*. The reference point for everything is works of charity, not the Rule. Our objective is the human and spiritual promotion of the poor. We have to recognise that in the history of our communities we have, indeed, taken some wrong turnings, we have failed to make necessary adjustments or renewals, and have done this in the name of fidelity to tradition, or rather to traditions. And yet, at the beginning, Vincent de Paul, was not afraid to join with Louise de Marillac, in thinking up a new sort of community of women who, for the service of the poor, would have as their cloister the streets of the city, for cell a hired room, for chapel the parish church, and for veil holy modesty. Such a thing must have seemed impossible in the 17th century. A short time before, Francis de Sales had failed in his attempt to do something similar with the Visitation nuns. On behalf of abandoned infants, Vincent shattered the notion, so strongly and so widely held, that these were children of sin and tainted by impurity. On behalf of the victims of war, he sent the Daughters of Charity on to the battle-fields to care for the wounded, a daring thing to do at that time.

He is deeply convinced that the poor have to come first, and consequently everything has to be considered and organised around them, it must come from them and be carried out with them, not simply for them, because failing this, they will always be the forgotten people of history. Do we not see this in the attitude of Jesus who denounced the interpretation of Sabbath observance which would forbid a man to be healed on that day, or the practice of consecrating one's goods to God and disregarding the needs of one's parents? Or again, the law that would allow the woman taken in adultery to be stoned? And why did he do this? Because he is invested with a higher authority than the law and the religious leaders who are there to safeguard it; he is God. And he invokes a higher standard, that of love. So love for the man who needs to be healed takes precedence over the law which forbids all work on the Sabbath. *'Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath'*. I think the same can be said for all structures and all institutions: they are made for man, not man for them. Saint Vincent, too, considered this criterion of love to be more important. *'Let us love God, gentlemen, let us love God, but in the sweat of our brow and the strength of our arms'*. And we know that he gives different meanings to the word charity: it is respect, gentleness, pity, compassion, cordiality. This sure belief that people must come first and that the poor should have priority, is still as relevant for Vincentians, but also for the Church, and even for society. We have been told that society advances when it does not neglect its weakest members. Unfortunately, that conviction is often contradicted when people refer to destiny, leading us to think that progress cannot be achieved without loss, without violence, without some being left abandoned along the way. It is very sad, but it is inevitable! We know that this was certainly not what Vincent de Paul believed: his ideal

for society and for the Church was to reinstate the poor in their rightful place, that is to say, to give them first place. In the person of the poor he recognises both their human dignity and their dignity as children of God. *'Turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith, that the Son of Man willed to become poor and that he is represented for us in their person'*. For this reason, an encounter with the poor becomes a privileged way of encountering God. *'Another motive – a Sister has mentioned it already – (you see, Sisters, I am only repeating what you have already said), is that by serving the poor, we serve Jesus Christ. O my daughters, how true that is! You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as we are here. A Sister will go and visit the poor ten times a day, and ten times a day she will find God there. As St. Augustine said, what we see with our eyes is not so certain, because our senses sometimes deceive us, but the truths of God – never! Go and visit the poor convicts in a chain-gang, you will find God there; take care of little children, you will find God there. O my daughters, how delightful that is! You go into poor homes but you find God there. O my daughters, I say again, how delightful! He accepts the service you give to these sick people and, as you have said, he regards this as done to himself'*.

In his spiritual journey, his encounter with the poor, particularly in 1617, is a challenge to his faith. And we know the two passages from the Gospel where he sees the situation being repeated. The poor are abandoned, even by the Church, and this is particularly the case in country parts. In Luke 4:16-18, he reads the prophecy of Isaiah that Jesus applies to himself: *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor...Today, this Scripture is being fulfilled in your hearing'*. So we must continue to do what Jesus came on earth to do. And he asks the missionaries, *'What did Jesus Christ come on earth to do? To help the poor. And what else? To help the poor'*. The image of the poor person was very much downgraded in the 17th century. Now, St. Vincent de Paul reads in Matthew 25, *'Whenever you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'*. These two texts are like his two special doors into the Gospel and they are the source of his commitment.

Saint Vincent committed himself to establishing seminaries, as advocated by the Council of Trent. But he didn't do this just because the Council of Trent had asked for it; it was because during his missions in country places he quickly came to realise that the missionaries' work would only be a flash in the pan if there were not in place *'charitable pastors', 'men of the Gospel', 'labourers who would carry out the work'*. That is why he undertook this formation work among the clergy; he wanted to train priests, charitable pastors for the country people who, at this time, were the most abandoned members of the Church. We can think back to his struggles against Jansenism, particularly when he was part of the Council of Conscience. He wrote letters to the bishops, several letters to some bishops, almost summoning them to denounce Jansenism. He would certainly have done this as a matter of faith, but even more so because in Jansenism and its 'disdain' for the human person, for a creature who is nothing in the sight of God, he recognised the danger this posed to reforming society and the Church. If man is worthless, he is incapable of doing anything.

Vincent de Paul has a wonderful understanding of the poor person, of his dignity

and the justice that is his due. To illustrate this I will just remind you of the rule of the Conference of Charity: the clean shirt that the sick man has as much a right to as the wealthy man has. So when visiting the sick, the most important thing to ask the person is not, first of all, about his health, but to enquire if he has a clean shirt. If he hasn't one, then one will be brought to him. And the extraordinary amount of detail about the way the sick should be approached, how their table was to be prepared, how they were to be served, the care to be taken that they had everything they needed: whether they could cut up their own meat or not, what they were able or not able to eat. I think that things could not be better done if one were preparing the table of someone of high rank. And then the recommendation that showed great sensitivity: *'remember always to start by visiting someone who has somebody with him.....and to end with those who are on their own so as to be able to spend more time with them'*.

The higher demands of love, love for lowly and poor people, respect for their dignity and the justice that is their right, signify that fidelity to the Vincentian charism does not mean we have to continue and keep on doing what was done in the past and which was certainly an appropriate response at that time, but maybe is no longer so today. We are well aware that we must always resist the temptation that comes to all institutions, including the Church and our own communities, to reproduce ourselves or to be too quick to label as breakaway or deviant anyone who strays from the beaten path, for fear of losing our identity, But isn't this precisely to risk losing it? It is fidelity to our Vincentian charism that obliges our communities to be constantly renewing the way they see the world of the poor and the commitments they need to make. This is how we do God's will.

II - Doing God's will

We must never forget that Saint Vincent is first of all a believer, a man of God. He is not simply a philanthropist even if many statues show him with a tiny infant in his arms and with his hand on the head of another child. He is first and foremost a believer, a man of God.

Because he heard the call of Christ in the person of the poor, ever afterwards his spiritual experience was one of seeing Christ and the poor as intimately related: *'Whenever you did it...'*. And his most fervent wish was to be faithful in doing God's will, *'God's holy will'*, *'his good pleasure'*. He would often repeat, *'This is what I believe, this is my experience'*. His faith means living in union with the Blessed Trinity so as to be conformed to the divine will in everything. *'Perfection does not mean having ecstasies but rather in doing God's will'*. (XI, 37). And experience teaches him that God speaks through events and most particularly – this is something he becomes utterly convinced about – when these events concern the poor. That is why he is able to say from experience that the poor evangelise us.

His spiritual journey is marked by events connected with the poor. These events become for him, like the active presence of Jesus Christ in his life, a word, a place of revelation, a place that represents a call, and the very groundwork of his commitment. I

believe that he saw in this the working of Providence.

The basis of his idea of Providence, something that he referred to on many occasions, is trust in God who speaks and acts through events. Trust makes us ready to respond and this availability leads to action and commitment. And if '*we should not anticipate Providence*', to use his own words, this does not mean, as has sometimes been interpreted, that we should be slow to act or that we should not be audacious. His experience and the wide scope of his works would seem very much to contradict such an interpretation. Notice that he uses this expression, '*not to anticipate Providence*' several times in writing to a confrere or in speaking about this same confrere who asked permissions after he had presumed them. He also uses the same words with regard to Rome because he had some experience of the mysterious workings of the Vatican '*In Rome, one has to go softly, softly...*' so it is better not to proceed too quickly if one wants to achieve one's goal. Not anticipating Providence leads us to take our time and think about events, analyse them, reinterpret them in the light of faith in order to be attentive to what God is saying to us today, calling us and sending us, so that we can know the right response we should make. In this we need to share our thoughts with others and listen to them (cf the vow of obedience which is basically obeying God and doing his will, seeking together to know that will and responding as a community).

God speaks to us through events and in them we can be more certain of knowing God's will when they affect the poor. This was Vincent de Paul's firm conviction.

At this point I would like to recall three Vincentian convictions that we need to have when interpreting the event and the social facts about globalisation, and of letting ourselves be guided by Providence:

- See the poor and have direct contact with them
- Visit them in their own homes
- Learn to read.

1. See and have direct contact

'I have seen these poor men (the galley slaves) treated worse than beasts'. We have to have '*first hand knowledge*' of those most in need. We might think back to:

- the studies that he had carried out in devastated Provinces to gain first hand knowledge of which people were most needy, the ones who should be given food, those who should be provided with tools because they were strong enough to work;
- the enquiries he made about the galley slaves to see whether their rights were being respected;
- the detailed report he made on the situation of the foundlings. He did not get this information from any files but he knew these children, he had first-hand experience of them

He witnessed, was aware of, and had first-hand experience of these situations of poverty and ruin, the degraded image of the poor person in 17th century. He recognised the injustice of the condition of the poor and understood the humiliation they felt at

having to hold out their hand to beg for what was really their right. He never had a superficial view of these things because he didn't stop at first impressions. He saw and he witnessed at first-hand. He knew that we have to go beyond appearances for these are often deceptive. He told the Daughters of Charity (Coste IX, 32) *'We must not think about what seems to be their limited intelligence because sometimes they are so crude and vulgar that they scarcely look or think like reasonable beings, but turn the medal and you will see, in the light of faith, that the Son of God who willed to be poor, is represented for us in these poor people'*.

He has a very wide outlook. He can move very quickly from a particular situation to seeing the whole picture, as happened at Chatillon where, seeing the plight of one poor sick family, he can envisage, in the Rules, the other sick people and also those who will need help later on. He sees the galley slaves, the foundlings, the victims of war...

Vincent de Paul urged his priests to go beyond any narrow limits: *'But what sort of men will they be who will strive to turn us away from those good works we have begun? They will be free-thinkers, free-thinkers, free-thinkers, who seek for nothing but pleasure and amusement: who, provided they have a good dinner, do not trouble their heads about anything else. And what else? They will be...It would be better if I did not say it. They will be men who coddle themselves (as he said this he placed his hands under his armpits), men whose outlook is limited, who confine their views and designs to a fixed circumference within which they shut themselves up as at a fixed point; they are unwilling to leave this, and if they are shown something outside of their experience, at once they withdraw to their inner place like snails into their shells. Note that on saying this, he made certain gestures with his hands, movements of his head, and spoke in a contemptuous tone of voice which expressed even better what he wanted to convey than did the actual words he used.'* (XII, 92).

This 'seeing', this 'knowing at first-hand' colour everything else: our work and our commitment, and enable us to make the best possible response.

2. Go and see them in their own homes

Vincent said these words in the context of caring for the sick in their own homes. In order to have an understanding of the world of the poor today, it is obvious that we must not be content to classify them according to the categories of the 17th century or of years past. It is true that a good number of poverty and destitution situations still exist, but they present a different face now because the social context has altered so much. And poverty has taken on new forms, new poverties are emerging.

Vincent de Paul's insistence that we go to the poor in their own homes is still relevant today. He was referring to sick people but we can see that it applies to all forms of poverty. Vincent explains that going to poor people in their own homes was something new. Going out to where people are and not bringing them to us, in the sense of putting them into categories according to what we think, in advance, that we know about them and their needs. This means that we have to be very close to them, give them

a lot of attention and listen well to them if we are to hear the voice of the voiceless and be aware of new factors that make people vulnerable. It means going out to these people, going where nobody else is there to help and nobody goes to their assistance, and afterwards leaving them when other people or society take over their care. This role of acting as substitute for society raised a lot of doubts in the past. But are we to allow people to become more and more vulnerable on the pretext that society is responsible for caring for them? Monsieur Valette spoke about this in his talk. I think, in fact, that Vincent de Paul would send us to people and places that nobody else goes to: 'the poor', 'the really poor', 'everywhere'.

3. Learn to read

In the explanation of your earliest Rule it is stated, *'You must use well any time you have left after serving the poor; never be without anything to do.* (That does not mean that you have to be on your feet 24 hours out of 24. Relaxation and rest are also necessary and commendable! The earliest Rule obliging the Sisters to rise at four o'clock presupposed that their charitable works would allow them to go to bed at ten o'clock and so their bodily needs would be met). *Learn how to read, not for your own benefit, but so that you can be sent to places where you can teach others. Do you know what Providence might ask you to do? Be always ready to go when holy obedience sends you'*. That ongoing formation process was already written into a Rule Book in the 17th century!

You no longer have to learn to read as Marguerite Naseau and the village girls had to do in the early days of your Company. But wouldn't it be a good thing if you were to learn to read continually, that is to say, to use reading to deepen your faith, your knowledge of Scripture and the Vincentian charism? Should we not learn to keep on reading so as to understand social questions in all their complexity, and globalisation, matters that cannot be understood in depth through slogans or snappy statements and formulas.

Today, Saint Vincent would certainly be asking us, in the context of globalisation, to be particularly aware of the consequences this has for the poor, the lowliest people and the most vulnerable. He would urge us to investigate the causes of poverty and to courageously denounce anything that is harmful to the poor. I base this assertion on the fact that Saint Vincent refused to take on the Chaplaincy of the General Hospital where poor people, beggars, the destitute, mendicants were locked up...there were between four and five thousand such people in Paris. They were locked up because they posed a threat, it was thought that they could set off epidemics or riots. The 'great enclosure' initiative would allow the streets and the squares of Paris to be kept clean. It was also thought that this regime would allow the poor to reform their lives and to receive religious instruction. Vincent de Paul would not countenance this deeply degrading image of the poor, which refused to recognise their human dignity and their self-respect as children of God.

Learning to read something about the phenomenon of globalisation and its impact on the poor and the most vulnerable is, for Vincentians, indispensable, if we are to make an appropriate response to their problems. It will lead us to renew some of our responses

and to invent others. At stake here is fidelity to the Vincentian charism, in other words, fidelity to the Gospel, to Christ the Evangeliser and Servant of the poor, fidelity to God's will, and ultimately fidelity to the poor, to the people they are and the conditions in which they live today, to their expectations, their hopes and also to what causes them genuine, not supposed, despair. Seeing the poor, 'being in close contact with them' and 'going to visit them in their own surroundings' are, without doubt, two conditions needed for 'learning to read'.

III - The globalisation of charity in order to make globalisation more human

I would like to suggest three points for reflection:

- Everywhere
 - humanising globalisation: finding ways of living together
 - having a holistic approach to people
- and, finally, 'love is infinitely inventive'.

1. Everywhere

The globalisation of charity that I have been speaking about is something that Vincent de Paul had in mind when he used the word 'everywhere'.

- Everywhere: *'We must take God's love everywhere'* said Saint Vincent, and he asked his Daughters to be ready to go anywhere, *'wherever obedience sends you'*. If to the Indies, go to the Indies...
- Wherever there is an urgent need, because *'we must hasten towards misery as we would rush to a fire'*.
- Everywhere: on the galley ships, on the battlefields, in country parts, in the towns, and even to faraway places, everywhere....The Daughters of Charity would go to Poland and the Missionaries to Barbary: Tunis, Algeria...and even Madagascar.

Everywhere does not necessarily mean going to distant places, to a far-off country. Everywhere can simply mean being where you are, where your community is. Everywhere implies being ready to come out of yourself, to leave behind the beaten track and to seek out the poor and the underprivileged. Saint Vincent would add, *'those who are truly poor'*. Everywhere, ...thinking up new ways of being present and close to people.

The word everywhere no doubt conjures up for you and also for us members of the Congregation of the Mission, a factor that Saint Vincent was unaware of in his day, namely, the international aspect of our respective communities. This presence everywhere, in so many countries and in every continent, is a blessing, and in different ways and at different levels, our lives have one and the same objective: to be for and with the poor, the really poor. It is a blessing if our respective communities can allow themselves to be challenged and moved to action by what is happening in other places, because I think that our communities in France have always to struggle to carry the weight of a long tradition. This tradition is something very valuable of course, but it can also be insidiously, and unconsciously, a brake on creativity and inventiveness.

Being everywhere, but of course, in a spirit of humility: that is a Vincentian virtue for the lay Confraternities, the Daughters of Charity, and for the Priests of the Mission. Our situation in France, with fewer resources and ageing personnel, obliges us to be humble. It stops us from thinking in any way that today we would have all the possible answers to the challenges of our times, to the challenges of poverty and distress, and that we could have every competence in facing and relieving this suffering. It is also an opportunity for us to work in collaboration with others.

Does not the globalisation of charity mean, for us, thinking rather more in terms of the Vincentian Family? Each part of this family expresses some facet of the richness of the Vincentian charism, but no single part expresses it completely. In France we are just beginning the process of recognising and collaborating with one another. Perhaps we have too strong a sense of each group's autonomy. Of course this does not mean that we should restrict ourselves to just collaboration within the Vincentian Family: this would eventually dry up and it could, perhaps be seen as extremely pretentious. But why should not the Vincentian voice, uttered in a variety of tones, not be able to make itself heard at international and national level, and wherever this is possible, in local districts and towns, without prejudicing collaboration with other organisations, be these Church organisations or those of other religions, with believers or non-believers? The Vincentian charism gives us an understanding of the poor, a sense of their dignity, a sense of justice and commitment with the poor. No group has the monopoly of this, and neither does the Vincentian Family. Why should we not offer our charism to others, and, wherever possible, offer it together?

2 - Humanising globalisation

In developing this point I will be basing my remarks on the Vincentian conviction that in the unfolding of history the poor person should be at the centre of events, not on the margins. So we have to find ways of living together.

We mentioned earlier the cultural mix that keeps us on the move and allows us to remain open, while at the same time, it reveals the need to fight against racism, violence and xenophobia. As well as this intercultural meeting of minds, there is also an inter-cult or inter-faith encounter. This provides a challenge for our times, a challenge for the Church and a challenge for us. This encounter and this dialogue are not optional extras, they are imperative. It seems to me that Henri Tessler, Archbishop of Algiers, is absolutely correct when he says that *'the successful outcome of the Islamic-Christian dialogue depends on the balanced outlook of many of our societies'*. Inter-faith meetings and dialogue are not confined to the Islamic-Christian dialogue but it would seem that this represents the most difficult and delicate area of negotiations today. It is a dialogue between believers. But we must not forget, and our own history teaches us this truth, that religion can become a banner that we brandish in the face of others. And this always leads to scorn, rejection, aggressive attitudes and even violence. Defending the true God can cloak desires for conquest and unfortunately, history is studded with examples of intolerance that is practised in the name of religion. Once again, we should never forget our own history because doing this could sadly mean we run the risk of repeating

mistakes.

The problem was not as urgent in the 17th century as it is in our day. However, we should call to mind what Saint Vincent thought about relationships with Protestants and Huguenots. He was firmly convinced, and he couldn't think anything different in those days, that Protestants and Huguenots had to be brought back to the true faith. However, he forbade his missionaries to contradict their ideas in Protestant assemblies, as was the custom in those days. In the recommendations he made to a brother who had nursing skills and who was sent to Madagascar, we note Vincent's advice to give impartial service and not take people's religion into account when caring for them. On the ship, he was to care for Protestants as well as Catholics. People are not won over by trying to convince them by arguments but by showing kindness. When speaking of the attitude of Catholic prisoners in Barbary, men whose attitude was far removed from that of the Gospel, Vincent spoke of the example that Muslims give by their faith and their sense of prayer.

There can be no authentic dialogue (this is true for inter-faith dialogue but also for inter-cultural dialogue and indeed all forms of dialogue, including dialogue within our own communities), without a deep respect for the other person, for his convictions, his beliefs and his faith, and we have to want to understand him and have a better understanding of his traditions. We know the wonderful formula that Vincent de Paul gave to the Daughters of Charity: *'Where respect is lacking, there is no gentleness, and where gentleness is lacking, there is no charity.'* Respect for the other person is fundamental and the basis of everything. How many misunderstandings arise from ignorance of matters or putting a wrong interpretation on them! Dialogue can only take place if those engaging in it respect one another and refuse to impose their own point of view, their belief or their idea of truth.

There can be no authentic dialogue, either, without a willingness to be questioned and challenged but all this has to be done completely on a reciprocal basis. Each person has the right to expect this of the others. Similarly, authentic dialogue demands that those taking part be willing to see themselves as humbly searching for God and for the truth and not as possessing these. When people present their spiritual experience as the only possible authentic one, it leads to sterile confrontation. In fact, genuine dialogue is between believers who are searching for the Absolute as they follow different paths. A firm commitment to this type of dialogue is a service to society as a whole. In the face of religious fundamentalism and the violence that this can provoke in our times, it seems to me that believers from different religions have to meet a real challenge because some of our contemporaries are saying that religion is the source of sectarianism, intolerance and even violence: this has always been the case and it remains so. I think this is a challenge that has to be faced by all denominations of believers today.

3 - Taking into account the whole person, having an integral view of the poor

Again, it was the experience he had in 1617 that gave Vincent de Paul his particular vision of people, of every aspect of the person and every level of their

existence. That is why, in speaking to the Missionaries, he referred to evangelisation by word and by works, *'and this is the most perfect way of acting because it is what Our Lord did'*. And he never envisaged any aid given by the Confraternities and the Daughters of Charity except service that catered for spiritual and corporal needs. This was written into the Rules of his first foundation and it is also written into the Rules of the Daughters of Charity."

'By word and by works', or in other words, by rendering corporal and spiritual service, was already in the 17th century a Vincentian hallmark. And behind the actual words that Vincent de Paul uses, I believe we have a very interesting vision of man in every aspect of his personal and collective existence:

- man with essential needs: food, shelter, work, health etc, which for Vincent constitute the corporal aspect of service, the "by works" part of evangelisation
- but also, man with his deepest desires; peace, justice, fraternity, solidarity, respect, etc., man with his questioning about the meaning of life and death.., man with his questions about God, and all this constitutes the spiritual dimension of service, the "by words" part of evangelisation.

It would be a mistaken over-simplification to ascribe to 'the missionaries, evangelisation through missions' and to the 'Confraternities and the Daughters of Charity, service and care'.

Saint Vincent is convinced that it is important for all of them to serve people in an integral way. In a conference to the missionaries he echoes something that he must certainly have heard: *'There are some who would say that we were founded, not to assist the poor but to evangelise them, to instruct them and minister the sacraments to them...but I would answer them by saying we must assist them, and see that they are assisted in every way...'* Saint Vincent is convinced that people have to be helped on every level, including their environment. It could be said today that this environment includes globalisation and that is why we have to humanise and evangelise globalisation. Today we would probably use the term integral development but this expression was not part of 17th century vocabulary. In Saint Vincent's mind, promoting every aspect of human well being is a matter of justice. *'There is no charity without justice.'* He wrote to the Superior of the community at Marseilles, a community that was sent to care for the galley slaves: *'God will give us the grace, Monsieur, of softening our hearts towards these wretched men and of realising that in helping them we are performing an act of justice, not mercy'*. Being open to the poor and promoting every aspect of their interests is first of all a matter of justice. It is a response to something the poor have a right to.

It is Vincent de Paul's opinion that the poor should also take some responsibility for improving their condition. *'We would like to see that all poor people, men or women, who have no land, can still earn a living by giving the men implements for their work and providing the girls and women with spinning wheels, flax or wool for spinning. And this provision should only be made for the very poorest people'*. (VIII, 73). He wrote this to Bother Jean Parre who was responsible for distributing aid in Ile de France. To another Priest of the Mission who was responsible for the poor people in the town of Sedan, he

wrote: '*When a man has enough physical strength to work, you should buy him some tools connected with his trade, and then nothing further*'. (IV, 183). We might remember what Abelly, his first biographer recorded about a house that was founded for the care of old people. These were to be given a little work to do and the women provided with wool and thread. That would give them a little employment and the money they earned would be passed on to them so that they would not feel dependent and living on aid from others. We might think, too, of the advice he gave about helping young boys to learn a trade so that later on they could be responsible for their own future.

We can see that Saint Vincent's experience has a twofold dimension: an immediate response: people are given food, care and a roof over their heads, and action with regard to structures; political action because if it is necessary to attack the problem of poverty in order to relieve it, it is necessary, at the same time, to attack the causes of poverty in order to put an end to them.

It is society that he wishes to transform by mobilising people's energies, including the great ones of the Kingdom. There will even be a Confraternity at Court and its President will be the Queen. He organises them and gives the organisations a structure so that the response to poverty will be efficacious and lasting. So schools will be set up for little girls who are too poor to attend the Ursuline schools which only accept rich girls as pupils. The prisoners awaiting transfer to the galley chain gangs live in the most abject conditions; '*I have seen them treated worse than animals*', so a house is bought for them and their treatment is more humane. The time limit prisoners serving in the galleys is not generally respected because the navy, the pride of the Kingdom, is short of manpower, so, together with the priests from the Blessed Sacrament Confraternity, Vincent's priests will keep a close watch on the time the men should serve. Vincent also takes part in the work of hospital reform and he organises the care of sick people in their own homes. The wounds inflicted by the wars of the Fronde have to be bandaged up but Vincent de Paul also undertakes a political mission by going to Mazarin and asking him to restore peace.

Love is infinitely inventive

I would like to make three points by way of conclusion

1. Globalisation is irreversible but it is a process that is just beginning and is not finalised. We are well aware that the face of globalisation we see today does not hold out the promise of eternal life. What will it be like in the future? It will be what people make of it. By handing on his personal experience to us, Vincent de Paul tells us we must continue to see, to know the poor at close quarters by going to see them in their homes, and by learning to read, in other words, by remaining continually open and available to what is happening now and what could happen in the future, including the unexpected. Even the best thought out plans and projects cannot provide for unexpected events except by including a section called 'The unforeseen'. We have to be alert and on the look out to notice what is coming and how it might be dangerous for the poor and the most vulnerable.

2. Love is infinitely inventive. It is God's love first of all that is infinitely inventive and this love is the source of any love that we are capable of...No response that we make can exhaust the possibilities of love. This means, then, that we cannot remain fixed in any one type of response or commitment, as though this were love's final word. This openness can only make us free.

3. We have taken up the challenge to love, but we are to love in the way that Saint Vincent has told us to do: *'In the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow'*. We give a name to love: God. We believe that God is the source of our love, that love goes ahead of us, that love is the very foundation of our being and the dynamism of our existence. In our secularised societies we can no longer speak of God in terms of need, of necessity. This would be to label God as utilitarian; the being that we have recourse to when we are in need and then discard afterwards. In our secularised societies modern man does not need to refer to God in order to understand humankind, or to understand the world. In a world where love is often replaced by selfishness, and this is true of nations, too, (violence, conflicts, terrorism...) in a world where even love itself can be thought of simply as a consumer product, there is an urgent love for this witness to gratuitous love, love which gives for "nothing", for nothing else but love, love of people and love of the vulnerable.

It seems to me that in our times there are three strands to the proclamation of the Good News.

- Participation in the struggle against all forms of poverty and destitution. If the Church, if the faithful, did not join in this struggle, it would be a waste of time to talk about a preferential option for the poor, to speak of God's love, his love for the poor.
- Mystical experience, that is to say, the experience of putting one's trust in someone, in the other person, purely out of love, not from necessity but simply out of love. This is a viable and a very special way of speaking about God today.
- Inter-faith dialogue that I spoke about earlier.

Finally, if the world has need of witnesses to the God who is Love, it also needs people who will witness to hope. Hope does not come about of its own accord. There have been many examples of disappointment and disillusionment. I am thinking of the Second Vatican Council and the document *The Church in the world today*, which shows the way people were thinking at that time: human progress was going to diminish poverty and destitution, and bring about peace and justice in the short term. Today, there is a certain feeling of disillusionment and disenchantment. However, it is hope (whether this has its source in Christianity, some other religion, or humanism), which sustains people, allows them to keep on their feet, to make progress, to truly live, to reject any ideas of fatalism or passive resignation; to be committed and to take action. Saint Vincent believed in God and therefore he believed in humankind. He believed in the poor and in their ability to make a new start; he also believed that the men and women of his times were capable of taking up the challenges posed by poverty. If he had not had that faith and that hope then his only other option would have been to show resignation...and in that case, we would not be here today, at least we would not be here as Vincentians. Witnessing to hope means also means showing people that this hope brings results. In

the Gospel, Jesus does not simply proclaim the hope of God's Kingdom that is coming, he lets people see that their hope is justified: miracles, driving out of demons, proclaiming the Good News to the Poor. We have to translate into human terms what is meant by the Reign of God, it is justice, peace, love, reconciliation....

Being witnesses to hope also means pointing out all the things that are going well, even if this message does not speak as loudly as bombs do. I would like to echo the words of some young priests working in the outskirts of the city, who said at a national meeting, *'We have to be able to see the tiny flowers that force their way through the concrete'*.

Father Christian Sens, CM

NB

The six conferences on GLOBALISATION were given by M. Valette, Father Garat and Father Sens, during a session organised in February 2004, by the Sisters engaged in the Mission to the Workers, which was held in the Mother House.

News from the Provinces

VISITS BY SUPERIORS

Mother Évelyne Franc

Visit to the Province of Madagascar

On **Monday, 24 May 2004**, Mother Évelyne Franc arrived at Tolagnaro, Fort-Dauphin. Sister Madeleine Havasoa, Visitatrice welcomed her with these words;

Mother Évelyne, when a relation comes from a distant land the first word we say to them is “tonga soa, vita tsara ny lalana”, you are welcome! It is true that no country is too far away when those we love live there, and this is specially true for you who have travelled so many thousands of miles to come and meet us. As we welcomed each of our Superiors General, Mother Lepicard, Mother Guillemin, Mother Roge and Mother Elizondo, the Province felt its heart throbbing with joy as it was carried back to the very earliest days of the Company. Even in those times, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise showed their concern and love for the poor Malagasy people. One day, a Sister said to me, “Every time I read the name Madagascar in Saint Vincent’s Conferences, I cannot understand why he should have shown such interest in so small an island lost in the Indian Ocean.” I think that the answer to this question is the one that Saint Vincent gave to the first Sisters on 3rd April 1651, “From all eternity God’s thoughts and designs were on you.” In 1655 he said to them, “In Madagascar our Priests are asking us to send them Daughters of Charity....so that these people will be given the Faith.” Today we are very happy to welcome you to Madagascar where many missionaries gave their lives. Year after year the seed has germinated, flourished and given rise to other shoots that have blossomed. So the seed of the Province was sown right from the start of the Company. We think this is a sign of God’s special predilection for us.... All the Sisters are waiting to see you, the ones who had the joy of coming here to meet you, and the Sisters who had to remain at home because their houses are very far away from Fort-Dauphin or Fianarantsoa. We ask the Lord to bless your time here in the Province and we pray for the African Visitatrices’ Encounter which was one of your reasons for coming to our country.

After this initial greeting, Mother Évelyne was invited to view a slide presentation of the history of the Province. This presentation was full of the vivid colours that typify our country, the beauty of the landscapes, the gleam in people’s eyes, the joy they feel in sharing and offering hospitality, the wisdom and the patience of the people in this country... All these wonderful things in Madagascar show that God is continually at work in his creation. However, in spite of the country’s natural resources which include rare species of flora, cattle breeding, fishing, or mining for precious stones, production is inadequate due to a lack of organisation and training. This year, drought and the cyclones caused great devastation and wiped out all the crops. Poverty, famine, rudimentary housing, deforestation, inadequate infrastructures and sanitary conditions,

have led to Madagascar being classed as one of the poorest countries on our planet. However, the Christian churches are doing all they can to help the government to work for peace and to improve standards in the country. Currently there are 265 Sisters in the Province, 34 houses, 6 Seminary Sisters and 29 Juniorate Sisters.

After this, Sister Évelyne addressed the Sisters and she quoted from John Paul II's letter *The Church in Africa and its Evangelising Mission* (1995); "Africa is blessed with a vast range of cultural values and priceless qualities that it can offer to the Churches and to all humankind..."(no. 42) She ended by saying , "*In spite of the tragic situation in which the poor find themselves, we must live in hope. God loves us as He loves all people. He needs you so that his loving designs for Africa can be accomplished.*" Then we shared with her our experience of the spiritual life and the joys, difficulties and problems we meet with in community life and in the service of the poor.

In the course of her meetings with various groups, Mother Évelyne strongly emphasised certain points from the Action Lines, particularly our relationships with others, in order to encourage us to live these out in a better way.

- "Let us give a new impetus to our spiritual life." This is an urgent necessity for our times. It is the spiritual life that gives quality to our lives and our commitments. This is primarily a personal responsibility. Prayer is absolutely essential for our spiritual life. It allows us to make our days of service, relationships and prayer, occasions for experiencing God. (A.L. p. 7). The way we live our Vows in order to become more Christ-like, and to serve the poor, also reflects the quality of our spiritual life. We should foster an atmosphere of silence which is indispensable for making progress in the spiritual life. Let us pay attention to the Spirit who is at work in people's lives and in world events, and let us discern the values and the counter-values in our present cultures."
- Community life is a place of union, which springs from deep spiritual experience. It is a place where Sisters find renewed strength, where there is reflection, sharing and support which leads to a better service of the poor. In a country where "the cry of the poor" rings out so clearly, it is important that we be deeply rooted in community if we are to live out the service of the poor according to our vocation: not just giving organised and efficient service, but seeing this service as a way of meeting Christ. It is important that we create a joyful atmosphere where diversity is accepted and seen as a source of enrichment (A.L. p. 7). Animating community life is not the duty of the Sister Servant alone, it requires awareness, charity, participation and sharing, on the part of everyone, so that we can work together for the good of the poor and recognise Christ in them. Each Sister is responsible for building up community life, accepting her companions with their individual life-story, their joys and their talents....seeing them as a gift from God, as emphasised in the new Constitutions we will soon be receiving. Without this spiritual journeying which we have called "giving a new impetus to community life", all other efforts to promote unity will be of little use. We are being asked to "go a step further, to do more." This is not a question of doing something extra, it is a matter of developing and deepening something we are already committed to.

- Let us intensify our collaboration with the laity (A.L.p.6) and with the NGOs that are becoming more numerous in the bushlands of Madagascar. Lay people bring us their experience: working together leads us to give a better service to the poor. Learning foreign languages, keeping in mind that knowing French facilitates communication between the Province of Madagascar and the Company.

In the dialogue that followed, other questions were raised about youth ministry, finding more creative ways of reaching out to young people, using modern technology to do good things with them, etc.....the need for personal or community spiritual reading and the importance of discerning together the pitfalls of the mass media.

Tuesday, 25 May

The Vincentian Family had prepared the liturgy for a solemn High Mass which was concelebrated by our bishop and 8 priests. This was followed by a joyful celebratory meal enjoyed by a large number of people. In the retreat room, the 34 houses of the Province with the date of their foundation, were represented on a huge painting of a tree symbolising the Malagasy journey. Mother Évelyne spoke to the Sisters under ten years vocation and said, *“You are the hope and the strength of the Province...it can happen that there are problems at the beginning of community life and there is a danger that Sisters may forget all the roots they have put down during their time in the Seminary. You are responsible for your vocation, it is in your heart and in your hands. As young Sisters you will have to face up to some difficulties but if you overcome these your faith and your love will be strengthened. As Saint Louise said, it is ‘Jesus Christ crucified’ that we follow...we must constantly strive to overcome our tendencies to selfishness.”*

Wednesday, 26 May

Father Director said Mass for the Seminary Sisters who will be leaving for their apostolic formation stage at Antanimora, Bekily and Tsihombe. In her message to them, Mother Évelyne explained that this apostolic stage is an opportunity to experience the unity of life that a Daughter of Charity finds in her vocation as she combines a life of prayer, community life, and a life of apostolic service. In the afternoon, the Provincial Council had another meeting with Mother Évelyne and after this we left for Saint Vincent’s house in Tolagnaro and for Ampasy where the lepers performed a dance of welcome.

Thursday 27 May

Before confiding Mother Évelyne’s return journey to the protection of Our Lady, Sister Marie Thomas thanked Mother, saying, *“Your presence here has stimulated us to reflect on our fidelity to our vocation, in line with the current needs of the poor, of our local Communities and also our own personal needs so as to revitalise and improve the offering of ourselves that we make to God.”*

Sisters Ruffine Ralaivo and Marie Morin
Daughters of Charity

VISITS BY SUPERIORS

Sister Margaret Barrett, Assistant General

Visit to the Province of Los Altos Hills

On **15 April, 2004**, Sister Margaret Barrett, Assistant General, arrived in San Francisco to begin the visitation of the Province of the West, Los Altos Hills, California.

Sister opened the visitation by assuring us of her prayerful support for the Province and the courageous and many different ways in which we faithfully carry out our mission to serve our brothers and sisters who are poor. In particular, Sister spoke of our commitment to providing quality, compassionate health care for the poor in our hospitals; our commitment to providing quality, affordable education by sponsoring ten schools, and our ongoing commitment to our social agencies and the many outreach services they provide.

Sister wanted to visit our communities and ministries so a rigorous schedule was planned for each day. Arriving in Los Angeles on the morning of 19 April we travelled to Maryvale, one of our social agencies, where we were taken to the city of Duarte, the site of the new day care centre where children from low income families are cared for while their parents are at work. Next, we travelled to East Los Angeles to visit Our Lady of Talpa School where we were greeted with enthusiastic songs from the first graders. After this we visited Mother of Sorrows School in South Central Los Angeles. In each of these schools the poorest children in the area are well served.

Next day, Sister Margaret visited three of our health facilities: St. Vincent's Medical Centre, where she was given a tour of the Guest Centre where families of patients due to have transplant surgery are given accommodation, St. Francis Medical Centre, where Sister visited the neo-natal unit in which new babies who are high risk cases are treated, and finally, the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital, where Sister witnessed at first hand the gentle, compassionate care provided for the mentally ill. All three hospitals are located in very poor areas of Los Angeles.

In the evening, Sister Margaret met the Daughters of Southern California. She strongly urged us to go "even further", to be transparent witnesses to the Gospel, to treasure our belonging to the Company, and to deepen our awareness of the Company's internationality. Sister's talk was followed by questions that caused us to reflect.

Next morning Sister paid a visit to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal School, the largest of our elementary schools. The school and the parish are very Vincentian in character.

On 25 April, Sister Margaret met the Bay Area Sisters at Seton Provincialate,

where we talked about our hopes, dreams, joys, challenges and concerns. Sister encouraged us to continue on our missionary journey to the poor, with generous hearts and giving hands.

On the following Tuesday, we went with Bishop Patrick J. McGrath of the diocese of San José, to visit St. Patrick's, a school where we have recently taken over the direction. St. Patrick's is located in downtown San José, an area where the population statistics are constantly changing. The children who attend the school are from recent immigrant families from Mexico, Central America and Vietnam. The parish church serves as "cathedral" for the Vietnamese community of Santa Clara Valley.

On Thursday, 29 April, Sister visited O'Connor Hospital in San José and St. Louise Hospital in Gilroy which caters for the needs of a large community of agricultural workers. Then there was a visit to St. Vincent's in Santa Barbara. St. Vincent's was formerly a safe haven for children suffering from Down's Syndrome. Because of legislation passed in the 80's, the children were directed into the mainstream of the local schools system and the Sisters at St. Vincent's changed the work there to meet the needs of young women who are unable to live safely in society. We have now collaborated with 'Mercy Housing' to build living accommodation for the elderly and for low-income families, on our property at St. Vincent's.

On 4 May, a visit was made to Seton Medical Centre in Daly City, where Sister met the management team and toured the Elizabeth Seton New Life Centre where the competent and compassionate staff provide pre-natal, delivery and post-natal care for women on low incomes.

The following Thursday Sister visited our ministries in San Francisco: De Marillac Middle School, Sacred Heart Cathedral Secondary School, Our Lady of the Visitation School, and Broderick House, an in-patient home for women and their infants affected by drugs.

Our final ministry visit took place on Monday, 10 May, when Sister visited St. Elizabeth Seton School in Palo Alto, Rendu Centre in East Palo Alto, and Villa Siena in Mountain View. Each of these establishments serves the needs of the very poor: children who live in one of the most devastated areas of northern California, mothers who are trying hard to learn English as well as parenting skills, and the poor, sick, elderly people who are able to live out the rest of their days in a safe and affectionate environment.

After holding a second meeting with the Provincial Council, Sister Margaret ended her visit to us on 11 May. We were greatly enriched by her presence, her challenges and her encouragement. A Visitation is always a time of grace that helps us to appreciate how much God blesses those who lovingly work for the poor.

Sister Joan Gibson
Echoes correspondent

VISITS BY SUPERIORS

Sister Blanca Libia Tamayo, General Councillor

Visit to the Province of Ecuador

The republic of Ecuador lies to the north-west of South America and has the Equator running through the centre of the country. It is bordered on the north by Colombia, and on the south and east by Peru; on the west is the Pacific Ocean. This is a country of contrasting scenery, climate, flora and fauna which are as varied as the regions that have fine beaches, the mountains with their majestic volcanoes and everlasting snow, the brilliant green of the Amazon region, and its Galapagos archipelago which all form part of humanity's patrimony.

Its population is close to 12 and a half million. Most of the inhabitants are Catholics. The capital is Quito, a metropolitan region that is a reliquary of colonial art. The socio-economic and political situation is a very difficult one; 68% of Ecuadorians live in poverty and 83% of these are to be found in the rural areas of Amazonia. Unemployment and the adoption of the dollar have added to their poverty. Young people have no childhood because they are set to work at a very early age and migration leads to family break-up and children being abandoned.

The Company of the Daughters of Charity has been in Ecuador for 134 years. The first group of ten Sisters and two Vincentians arrived from Paris on 18 July 1870. In accordance with the terms of the contract agreed between the President of the Republic, Dr Gabriel Garcia Moreno, and the Superiors General; the Sisters were to take charge of the administration and work of the State hospitals. Very soon afterwards, the Sisters took on the work of caring for foundlings and teaching poor young girls. Vocations increased at a rapid rate and works for the poorest of the poor soon developed.

At present there are 60 houses and 427 Sisters, 42% of whom are over 70, 34% are aged between 50 and 70, and 24% are under 50. The Sisters are engaged in teaching, health care and socio-pastoral works. The 11 Seminary Sisters and the 12 postulants are God's gift to the poor and the promise of a service that will continue, given the support of Vincentian lay people.

On **9 July 2004**, Sister Blanca Libia Tamayo, General Councillor, arrived on Ecuadorian soil. About a hundred Sisters were waiting for her at the Provincial House. During the celebrations to mark her arrival, Sister Blanca Libia laid a bouquet of orchids at the feet of Our Lady's statue as she placed this visit under Mary's motherly protection. Thanks to the general report compiled by the Sisters of the Curia, Sister Blanca Libia was very quickly able to have an overall view of the situation of the country, the Sisters and the works. She was then given the programme for her visit: meetings, visits to local communities, personal interviews with each member of the Curia, the Sister Servants and any Sisters who wished to speak to her.

The meetings:

With the Sister Servants. At the Provincial House in Quito and at the Providence College in Guayaquil, Sister Blanca Libia stressed some aspects of the mission of a Sister Servant: her office is part of God's Plan and it is a service of love. Her mission is to build up unity within the community. She makes a commitment with God, with the Company and with the poor. One of her tasks is to work at the formation of the Sisters. She must also be concerned about the formation of lay people and about the vocations ministry which is the key to the future. Her fidelity will support union among her companions and she will encourage the process of revising the works.

With the young Sisters. The Gethsemani Retreat House, situated 13k away from the capital was resplendent for the young Sisters' arrival and these had prepared a joyful welcome for Sister Blanca Libia. The General Councillor strongly emphasised that vocation is a call from God which implies a personal response to be his servant. The world challenges us and asks us to think about the way that we are, or are not, servants. Let us be women of faith, she said, and act according to God's will; may you young Sisters have the patience and the hope to see the seed grow. The Company urges us to live out the love of Jesus crucified and to walk alongside the poor. The essential point about our vocation is that we give ourselves totally to God in a gospel spirit of humility, simplicity and charity. Let us be very careful to nourish our love for our vocation and our membership of the Company. Sister Blanca Libia next went to the "Marillac Oasis" where the elderly Sisters gave her a warm welcome. Then the Ladies of Charity welcomed her at St. Catherine Laboure school. Most of the children taught here come from rural areas and there is a canteen where more than 700 children are served every day.

With the Sisters. During the meetings held in Quito, Guayaquil, Cuenca and Manta, Sister Blanca Libia invited the Sisters to think of a world that is in constant competition with regard to its products and to contrast this with the vocation of a Daughter of Charity which is measured by quality of life. The Church is asking us to launch out into the deep and the Company is urging us to take the path of revitalisation.

Visit to the local communities. During her time in Quito, Sister Blanca Libia had the opportunity to visit:

The Vincentian district. This estate was the first property acquired by the Company for abandoned children. Currently, and in response to many needs, there are several centres here for child care: Saint Vincent de Paul Home; a permanent creche for children whose mothers are in prison; another nursery for children from the Home and for those whose mothers are working. There is also Mary of Nazareth School and Saint Catherine Laboure residence for old people and the postulatum.

Bethlehem House, where Sisters offer up the limitations of old age as a sacrifice for the Company and for the poor. The eldest Sister of the house, who is 98 years old, made a speech to Sister Blanca Libia.

The Missions which are based in the eastern part of the country: the missionary house of Our Lady of Fatima and Saint Vincent de Paul's Mission at Tena. The Sisters work for the evangelisation, human development and education of the people, most of whom belong to this region. Then Sister Blanca Libia travelled to the Pacific coast, near the Colombian border, to visit two houses that are part of the Esmeraldas Vicariate: the

Divine Providence Hospital in the small town of San Lorenzo inhabited mostly by coloured people, and the Annunciation Dispensary in a marginalised district which gives aid to the poor.

On 7 August, the visit ended with some recommendations by Sister Blanca Libia and a speech of thanks from the Visitatrice, Sister Zoila Guevarra. Everyone was impressed by the simplicity, openness and approachability of Sister Blanca Libia. Her example was an invitation to us to live our vocation more deeply, to look on it as a gift from God and a task that demands conversion and renewal in our charism so that we can better discover Christ in our own lives and in the hearts and lives of the poor. We thank the Lord for this time of grace.

The editing committee

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of Madagascar

2nd Encounter of the Visitatrices and formators from the African continent

Following on from the meeting of Visitatrices and formators from Africa and Madagascar, held in Cameroon in 2001, a second meeting took place in Fianarantsoa, Madagascar, for formators from the African continent and this was held from **30 May to 9 June 2004**. 24 Sisters attended: Mother Évelyne Franc, General Councillor for the African continent, 8 Visitatrices, 12 formators, 2 secretaries and a translator. These Sisters came from the Provinces of Cameroon, N. Africa, Mozambique, Congo, Eritrea, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Madagascar.

On **30 May 2004**, Mother Évelyne opened the session, pointing it in the direction of fidelity to the spirit of the Company in our spiritual, community and apostolic life. We have to be on our guard not to fall into the spirit of activism, we must find ways of making our community life more creative and, after the example of Rosalie Rendu, be committed to following a prophetic path. Sister Évelyne ended by saying that the Company is counting on Africa, on the Sisters' dynamism, youthfulness and vitality...and added that the Company is also at the service of Africa.

In the afternoon, Sister Wivine Kisu set out the particular aim of this meeting, which was to gain a deeper understanding of important aspects of formation and to compile a formation manual for the Provinces of Africa and Madagascar. *'If the Sisters receive good formation they will be able to 'do even more.' The poor need this 'extra', something that is not just in the material but in the spiritual order of things'.*

On **31 May** we celebrated the feast of Our Lady's Visitation, the first anniversary of Mother Évelyne's election and the feast of all Visitatrices throughout the world. Archbishop Rabemahafaly, of Fianarantsoa came to celebrate Mass for their intentions.

1st topic: Inculturating African and Malagasy cultural values into the different stages of formation.

Father Benjamin Ramoroson, spoke to us about *'inculturation of African and Malagasy cultural values into the different stages of formation'*.

Methodology. When we talk about inculturation we have to be able to discern how we can be people who are totally consecrated to God and at the same time not be alienated from Malagasy culture. Has faith in Jesus Christ really penetrated African or Malagasy culture? We have to live out the process of inculturation all through life and not just in times of formation. Inculturation must not simply be a matter of folklore, of adaptation or of return to the past. Inculturation means God coming down into our lives. By the Incarnation, Jesus is fully God and fully man. Consecrated life must be seen as

fidelity to Christ, and to the gospel, to the spirit of the Founders, to the life of the Church, as well as fidelity to the world and its needs.

Formation in Africa and Madagascar at this time of globalisation. There must be a solid and inculturated formation so that young people can respond to their vocation. Globalisation affects the sort of people we are and our identity because it brings rapid changes that we find hard to keep up with. We are witnessing radical changes which affect traditions in particular. We know the place that traditions have in African and Malagasy culture. If we have a clear idea of our identity as followers of Christ we have to ask ourselves how to incarnate that following of Christ and live it out within our own culture. The conflict that arises is mostly on an emotional level. So to answer these problems we have to find a programme of human formation that leads to genuine maturity and combine this with a deep level of spiritual formation. More than anything else, consecration is a state of life, and our choice of this state is a personal experience.

Inculturation and the Vows in the Malagasy situation. Culture needs to be purified in the light of Christ. We might study the meaning of poverty, chastity and obedience within the culture but then we need to look at these in the light of the three evangelical counsels of the consecrated life. So it is not a question of producing a programme of inculturated formation but of finding a model which gives priority to human and spiritual formation that will lead people to have a genuine experience of Christ.

2nd topic: How can we accompany young people today?

The Jesuit priest, Father Urbain, shared with us his experience as formator and spoke about *'how we can accompany young people today'*. With regard to vocation, he said, we need to be aware of three movements: God, in his love, calls the young person, the young person responds to that love (so the relationship between this person and God has to be fostered) and the young person's desire to serve the Lord which arises from that relationship, and the desire to witness to God's loving mercy. The main difficulty today is to give priority to this third movement.

Education and formation. We have to make a clear distinction between education and formation. A child is educated because he does not know about life but an adult, on the other hand, does know what life is about and undergoes formation because he is able to reflect, choose and make a decision. It is young people themselves who are primarily responsible for their vocation and formation. During the different stages of formation young people need to be strongly reminded that they must view consecration as a total gift of self and that this presupposes a life of gratuitous service and a spirit of sacrifice.

Vocation or something one chooses to do. A distinction has to be made between vocation and choosing a state of life. In the case of vocation, God is the objective and the religious life is the way of finding God. On the other hand, when someone chooses a state of life, the objective is the religious life itself, and the means to this is God. Someone who has a vocation lives in peace, joy and a spirit of availability.

The person who simply opts for the religious life lives in fear and anxiety, and feels a prisoner. True vocation and choosing a particular calling have to be explained to young people and it has to be realised that both can coexist in the early stages. It is the formator's task to help the young person to find God. A person's temperament cannot be changed but the important thing is for a person to discover what they are like at the deepest level of being. If someone finds it impossible to forgive others this raises questions and if this is due to some emotional problem then we should exercise caution.

Idealisation and disappointment. When we make a choice it is usual to idealise that situation. A young woman who chooses to enter the Company of the Daughters of Charity idealises the Company; time passes and then she has to face reality and there can be disappointment. If they have good accompaniment young people will mature, but if that support is inadequate they either leave because they are disillusioned or they stay but feel rebellious, in other words, there is failure. Today there are six characteristics that the person accompanying needs to keep in mind: over-sensitivity, fear, psychological hang-ups, hypocrisy, a tendency to prejudge, and insecurity.

The double role of the person offering spiritual accompaniment. The one who is accompanying must first of all help young people to respond to the Lord's call: in other words, accompany them and lead them to Christ, not to the formator. Leading young people to Christ requires a lot of love on the part of the formator as well as much patience, humble attentive listening, and deep spirituality. The formator's role is not to watch over young people in order to control or supervise them; it is not to judge and criticise them; to moralise, to dominate or to make decisions for them. The person who is accompanying young people must also help them to love the Congregation in which they will be responding to God's will. In the Seminary, young people will have no other spiritual accompaniment except that provided by the person responsible for their formation who has a responsibility to her Congregation. People do not speak about their life in general to the spiritual adviser but talk about spiritual matters and their prayer life.

Obedience and dialogue. Formators must have a clear understanding of the distinction between obedience and dialogue. In religious dialogue, it is not a question of defending anyone's particular interests. We need to realise that we are all servants of Christ's mission. Our self-giving must be total. Obedience and religious dialogue are based on faith, hope and love. If we do not have to defend any particular interest we will seek only what is in the interest of true love. The local Superior has an important role with regard to young Sisters sent on mission. Communities that are sent a young Sister from the Seminary tend to expect her to be perfect but initial formation is an ongoing process. It is for the Sister Servant and the Sisters in charge of formation to help this young Sister but all the Sisters of her local community are responsible for her formation by the example and the witness they give.

Given our differences, how can we live together? The life of God himself is one of communion and union within diversity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are united in one same love. Jesus Christ teaches us to live out our diversity through love that proceeds from the Cross. Accepting differences demands patience, forgiveness and humility. So it means accepting injustice and repaying this with kindness. Forgiving people is an unequal ratio, it represents a cross. The Blessed Trinity call on us to live in union with one another. If we are failing in love, we are acting in a way that is contrary to that of the Blessed Trinity. We cannot accept differences unless Jesus is with us. He

is at the heart of our community and our spiritual life.

To sum up, formators have to witness to God's love and mercy. Their daily lives must be able to express the deepest levels of spiritual experience.

3rd topic: The poor, participants in their own development

Using a visual display illustrating different forms of poverty in the world, Sister Antonia Sanchez shared with us her experiences. She said, *'Bringing up to date St. Vincent's words, 'To be a Daughter of Charity means doing what the Son of God did when he was on earth', we are urged to be open to situations of poverty and to practise 'affective and effective love'. She gave us a working method to follow. Before taking action we have to be very honest with ourselves and with the poor. The best service we can offer the poor is to live in truth. Then, we are to take action together with them, helping them to assess their situation and seeking together a way of emerging from it. The poor person has a right to freedom and to being treated with discretion. In any development project we have to begin by teaching people how to participate, then sensitising them and helping them to discover, understand their difficulties and to make decisions themselves about the way a particular problem could be solved. She ended by repeating to us these words of Sister Rosalie Rendu; 'There are many ways of practising charity. The little bit of help that we give to the poor cannot last long – we have to think of helping them in a more lasting way. We have to think about what they are able to do, their level of education, and so help them to find a way out of their difficulties'.*

4th topic: The Action Lines

Using a Power Point presentation, Sister Wivine spoke to us about the Action Lines and then invited us to think of three dreams for our Province and then produce a plan for making these dreams come true.

Conclusion

We shared ideas about each Province's formation plans through group work, formal and informal sharing sessions, and we all found these enriching. We arranged for our third Encounter to take place in Mozambique.

Sister Ruffine Ralaivo and Sister Maria Morin
Daughters of Charity

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of Slovakia

2nd inter-Provincial meeting of Seminary Directresses from Eastern Europe

'...We must spend a lot of time on the formation of young girls, both as regards their own development and teaching them everything they need to know in order to serve the poor'. (Saint Louise, 17th July 1656).

On **25 August 2004**, the Directresses of the three Polish Provinces (Cracow, Warsaw, Chelmno), together with those of Slovenia and Albania, met together in the Provincial House of Nitra with two General Councillors, Sister Rosa Maria Miro Miro and Sister Zofia Daniscakova. This Encounter, which lasted four days, was a time of intensive formation and sharing testimonies. Although these were all Slav countries, we couldn't function without translators and this reminded us that we need to learn other languages. Sister Rosa Maria spoke several times on the question of initial formation. We have noticed how strongly young women desiring to enter the Company these days are influenced by the characteristic features of the times we are living in: blatant consumerism, family problems and a dilution of gospel values. We reflected together on how we could come closer to young people and support them on their vocation journey.

We also shared ideas about obedience, freedom, autonomy, community life, differences between the generations, training people to take responsibility, a spirit of faith and of mortification, formation after the Seminary, the Vows of the Daughters of Charity..... Working in groups we spontaneously shared our experiences derived from concrete situations.

These days of reflection were interspersed with some visits since the cathedral was in the grounds of Nitra castle overlooking the town, and we also visited the grotto of the hermit Svorad on top of Zabor hill and we were able to meditate on the Stations of the Cross at the big Calvary of Nitrad at the other end of the city. One evening the Seminary Sisters from Slovakia provided a very entertaining recreation. Afterwards, Sister Rosa Maria invited them to speak about their vocation and then she shared with them some strong convictions about their lives as Daughters of Charity. On the final day we visited the community at Rajec where the Sisters care for the elderly and sick people of 'Thanksgiving House' and look after abused women or single mothers and their babies at the 'Home for Life'. From there we left for the basilica of Rajecka Lesna where there is a huge wooden crib (8.5 metres wide and 3 metres high), called 'Bethlehem', and representing the different regions of Slovakia and their trades.

All the Sisters were very grateful for this meeting which was a real help to each of them, a time of formation and of mutual enrichment through sharing experiences. Now

we have to do everything we can to provide the best possible formation because as Mother Guillemin said, *'Our chief concern is formation and everything must be sacrificed for this'*.

Sister Anna Blehova
Echoes correspondent

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of Thailand 3rd Encounter of the Asian Formators

The third Encounter for Asian Formators was held from **29 May to 9 June 2004** in Thailand, formerly known as the kingdom of Siam. 31 formators came from the eight Provinces of Asia and they represented nine countries: Taiwan-China, India North and India South, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, Thailand and Vietnam. The theme for these days was '**Revised Constitutions...Revitalised Formation**', and the aim of the session was to allow those participating to study the recently revised Constitutions, particularly the section on formation, keeping in mind the culture of Asia.

Sister Josefina Estremera, Visitatrice of the Province of Thailand, welcomed the Sisters and said a prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking Him to guide them during these formation days. Then Sister Maria Teresa Muedra, Visitatrice of the Philippines Province and Coordinator for the Asian meetings, opened the Encounter and evoked the lotus flower, that meaningful symbol of the Second Encounter for Asian Formators, to remind the Sisters that *'when we come and go, we always carry our roots with us, as well as our identity and the virtues of our vocation'*. A period of prayer set the tone for this Encounter. First of all, the flags of the participating nations were placed in a circle round the Paschal Candle, in pots full of soil from Ban Chiang, a historic place in the Northeast of Thailand. Linking the flags together was a chain of 'dokrak' flowers which in Thai culture symbolise love. During the celebration of the Eucharist, Fr. Danilo Abogado CM, Director of the Province of Thailand, reminded us that when people are united they are a life-giving force. The same can be said of the assembled formators.

Sister Ratana Sriwarakul, Provincial Councillor who has responsibility for the young Sisters in the Province of Thailand, used a multi-media presentation to put this Encounter in the context of the two earlier ones and to show that it was an extension of these. Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor for Asia, spoke about the Constitutions and linked them to historical events. Her presentation made the formators feel a certain pride in taking up the heritage handed down by the Founders and by earlier generations. Every day the Sisters took part in various activities: Eucharist and prayer, reflection, conferences and times for relaxation. Each day provided an experience of the varied cultures of the participants who were united in the same Vincentian vocation. A beautiful inculturated liturgy brightened our days and the participants were able to celebrate the Eucharist in one of the nine languages of the Provinces represented here. Incense, flowers and candles, as well as mimed movement, added an extra touch to these different celebrations of inculturated liturgy.

Three speakers helped the Sisters to reflect on and discuss the following topics:

- *'Participation, co-responsibility and subsidiarity stimulate communities of women religious. Formation in creativity and responsible decision making for the formators*

- *of Asia*’ by Sister Guadalupe Bautista, a Good Shepherd nun from the Philippines.
- *‘Solidarity, justice and mission, today’s challenges for Religious in Asia’*, by Brother Anthony Rogers, Brother of the Christian Schools.
- *‘Providing a formation based on values. The experience of God in formation and discernment’*, by Sister Marie Eugene, an Apostolic Carmelite from Bangalore, India.

These three speakers helped the Sisters to have a broader view of formation in Asia. Then Sister Julma took up these same themes but this time she dealt with them from a Vincentian perspective, and particularly in the light of the revised Constitutions and Statutes.

When the Encounter came to a close, the Sisters felt like Peter, James and John who, after their experience of the Transfiguration, wanted to stay on the mountain for ever. But just like the apostles, the formators understood that they had to return to reality and give concrete expression to what they had learnt during the session. To do this the Sisters regrouped according to Provinces and tried to see how they could orientate their lives and their formation programmes for the coming year.

After sharing their conclusions, the Sisters assembled for the closing ceremony at which they presented symbols of what they had given and received during the Encounter, and Father Danilo Abogado sent them on mission. After thanking the different people responsible for organising the session, Sister Julma spoke of her hopes and related these to the symbols used during the Encounter:

- *the pearl at the bottom of the sea*: may we have the courage to take the necessary risks involved in committing ourselves to a deeper understanding of the Gospel and the Vincentian charism in order to discover the mystery of God in the hearts and lives of people.
- *fire*: may our hearts continually be on fire with passion for God and for the poor
- *the lotus pond*: may we perseveringly make one of these convictions part of our own life and the lives of the Sisters we accompany.
- *the ripples in the water of the pond...the waves of the sea*: may we be Daughters of Charity who are dedicated to discerning
- *a hymn entitled, ‘Find us faithful’*: We will try to live out these words in such a way that those who come after us will indeed find us faithful.

When this Encounter came to an end the participants felt themselves better prepared to face the challenges of formation in the light of the revised Constitutions. Once again they gave thanks to the Lord and expressed their gratitude to all who had made it possible for them to have this wonderful experience of God.

Sister Violeta Cecilio
Daughter of Charity

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of Cracow

International Meeting of the Visitatrices from Slav countries

On **16 September 2004**, the Visitatrices from Slav countries and the Regional Superior of Albania assembled, with Sister Zofia Daniscakova, their General Councillor, for an International Encounter. This was an important event for us because until now the Visitatrices from these countries had had very few opportunities to share their experiences.

There were two stages to this meeting. The first stage was devoted to formation. After a day of prayer before the icon of Our Lady, Queen of Poland, in the Marian sanctuary of Czestochowa, work began with a presentation of an overall view of the life and works of the Provinces. Then the Sisters shared their experiences, Sister Zofia spoke about the new Constitutions, and Sister Barbara Selih, Visitatrice of Slovenia, shared her thoughts on some of the topics discussed at the UCESM (Union of Conferences of Major Superiors), one of these topics being 'How can we build fraternity and solidarity in a multicultural Europe?' Then Sister Zofia spoke about the Pontifical Document entitled *Principles and Norms of Evangelisation and Ecumenism in former Soviet Territories* and then invited us to compile projects for the future.

During the second stage of the Encounter we were able to visit five communities of Daughters of Charity in Ukraine (formerly part of the Soviet Union). Ukraine, which extends 1316 km from east to west, and 900 km from north to south, has a population of 50.8 million. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the Soviet Union saw the emergence of independent republics. Ukraine gained independence in 1991. In Ukraine, particularly in the west of the region, there are numerous groups of Poles, Slovaks, Romanians and Hungarians. The Orthodox Church has the largest following, Catholics are in the minority. After being forced to leave the country during the Second World War, the Daughters of Charity have been back there since 1992. The Kharkov community was founded by the Province of Warsaw, the communities of Sniatyn and of Storozniec by the Province of Cracov, and the communities of Dolhe and Svaljava by the Province of Slovakia. A total of 15 missionary Sisters and 11 indigenous Sisters under 10 years vocation, live and work there.

During our visit the Sisters shared their experiences of service. Each house has its own special characteristics. At **Kharkov**, a city of 1.7 million inhabitants, the Sisters collaborate with the Vincentian priests who have built a Church here and a Vincentian Centre which includes a home for the children of sick families; it is here, too, that different parish groups hold their meetings. Kharkov is a university city with many

foreign students, so at the church of Saint Vincent de Paul Mass is said in English, French and Russian. The Sisters look after children and young people, do catechetical work, direct the Marian Youth Groups, visit the poor and the sick and they also do sacristy work.

Sniatyn is a small town of 17,000 inhabitants. In the town itself, and in the outlying districts, there are homes for handicapped children who are Chernobyl victims, and for the elderly. These centres are home to about 800 people. The Sisters collaborate with the parish and with different international organisations on different projects. Thanks to these projects they are able to provide a better life for children and also to train lay staff. The Sisters here also do catechetical work, animate various groups of young people and visit the sick and the poor. At the end of the 19th century the Company had several houses in this town. It was here that a young Sister named Marta Wiecka worked. One day she offered to replace an employee, the father of a family, who had to clean the room occupied by someone with the plague. She caught the disease and died in 1904, at the age of thirty. Her beatification process is underway. Many people of all religions visit her grave which is described as 'ecumenical' because she looked after sick people no matter what their religion was.

At **Storozyniec**, a town of 15,600 inhabitants, the Sisters work with the Vincentians and pay regular visits to the 14 villages in the surrounding area. They engage in pastoral work which includes visiting families and the sick. The AIC groups are very active here. The members work on specific projects to help the poor and they ask the Sisters and priests to help them. These projects include equipping a hairdressing salon, building a bridge so that children will be perfectly safe going to school, buying livestock, implements and seeds for poor people who in turn are encouraged to share the results of their labours with others and help to feed those most in need.

At **Dolhe**, a town of 8,000 inhabitants, there are three churches side by side; a Catholic church, an Orthodox church and a Greek-Catholic church. There is a very good relationship between these three churches and they give very good witness to the people. The Sisters here visit the sick, do catechetical work, animate youth groups and look after the church. There are three hospitals here for patients suffering from tuberculosis. A doctor took us to visit one of them; out of the 90 patients there, 80% have tuberculosis of the bone and 20 % have pulmonary tuberculosis. According to this doctor, it can now be said that there is a real epidemic of this illness which is due to malnutrition and lack of vaccination. The doctor works very well with the Sisters, caring for the sick as best they can. In spite of everyone's efforts there is a shortage of medication, dressings, etc.

Finally, we met the young people and representatives from the SVP Conference in **Svaljava**, which has a population of 35,000. Three Sisters (a fourth is expected very

soon) live in a parish house. The Sisters direct many groups of children and young people and they are also involved in catechetics. They collaborate with lay people in organising aid for the most needy and they visit people in their homes. May God be blessed for the wonderful insight of our Founders who encouraged the Sisters to take to the world's highways in search of the poor and to see in the faces of these people the true face of Christ.

Sister Anna Brzek
Echoes correspondent

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of the Near-East

Bam, pearl of the desert!

Bam is in a high altitude region of Iran and it is a popular place with tourists. On 26 December 2003 the region was devastated by a huge earthquake. Early estimates put the number of people dead at 30,000. The old city suffered extensive damage. Sister Fabiola, a missionary Sister in the Near-East Province, spent several weeks working with the victims of the earthquake in Bam, Iran.

BAM: a town of palm trees and date palms, a town of sunshine but also of torrid heat and merciless sandstorms....

BAM: where the 'knats' (underground irrigation systems) bring a plentiful supply of water so that people are able to live in the desert.

BAM: where men work hard to make the palm trees bear fruit and so provide their "daily bread" and where the women take good care of their homes and their children.

BAM: a place where knives are commonplace, where motorbikes roar at 100 km an hour and where there are drugs and trafficking.

BAM: where 'Arg', the military fortress of which they are so proud, is a reflection of their culture.

BAM: a town destroyed on 26 December 2003 by an earthquake which caused the death of thousands of people and destroyed many homes and properties...only the many palm trees there survived the disaster.

BAM: where thieves take advantage of this catastrophe to loot houses and strip aid lorries of their contents.

BAM: where the dead have to be buried in mass graves and the injured transported by car or plane to different towns in Iran, which means that families are scattered all over the country.

BAM: a town which has been turned into a campsite with tents set up in the streets in the midst of the devastation. The survivors trust in God to give them the courage to go on. In spite of the torrid heat, the dust, and the lack of water, the women keep their children and their tents clean.

BAM: a town which receives a lot of aid, proof of the national solidarity shown by the people of Iran, and where there are many NGOs, a sign of international solidarity. People of every race and nation work together, day and night, to co-ordinate the relief work. Each national or international group is working to bring in supplies of food and water and to provide health care, housing and some schooling for the children.

BAM: a town where we find tenderness, love and sympathetic listening; where more than 4000 orphans have been welcomed into host families. Iranians and NGOs join forces to find teachers and textbooks.

BAM: a town where the Iranian Church branch of Caritas has been at work since the earliest days of the disaster. We have worked with International Caritas, the bishops, Salesians, Christians, people of Bam and the Daughters of Charity, to help families, children, the injured, as well as newborn babies; and to be the "voice of the voiceless" for

people who cannot move out of the area to go through administrative formalities. The leader of our small Caritas team was an Italian, there was a permanent Iranian member, some young Christian lay people, a Daughter of Charity who was a nurse, a driver, a cook and two Muslim men. Each day our numbers range between two and ten. When the food distribution has been completed we store reserve supplies of water in schools: we also work with “Handicap International” to help the handicapped and continue the work of building schools. Every day we pray together, asking God to give us the strength we need for our work. Because of this great network of solidarity we are able to say that BAM is also a place of grace where we learned the humility so often recommended by Saint Vincent. *‘It is only our love that will enable the poor to forgive us for the bread we give them’.*

Sister Fabiola Weiss
Daughter of Charity

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of Switzerland

Working alongside illegal immigrants

In Switzerland it is reckoned that about 300,000 people are in the country without legal documentation. The authorities know about many of these people and the children have a right to schooling. Many pay their health insurance and employment contributions but do not always enjoy the benefits of these. In our country they do the hardest jobs that no Swiss is willing to do, and they work for a mere pittance. That is why the authorities close their eyes to these people being here but at the same time leave them in their illegal situation and therefore the constant anxiety of possible repatriation. It was when they occupied the church of St. Paul in Fribourg that we Daughters of Charity became aware of the unjust and inhuman conditions in which these people have to live. We were very touched by their distress and so we contacted all the religious communities in the city (there are many of these in Fribourg). Eight communities, representing male and female religious, responded to our appeal and since then we have met on a regular basis to share our experiences, learn more about the problem and take various steps to improve the situation. Several people who are involved in defending these people came “to light our lanterns.” Some communities (including our own) accommodated homeless families in defiance of current legislation. Several religious were convicted and so were some lay people. We supported them when they were tried for refusing to pay fines because they had only been acting in a humanitarian way. We also collaborated with a member of ‘Medecins sans frontiere’, the organisation responsible for opening a health centre specially for these illegal immigrants and other people on low income. Several of us went on protest marches, attended press conferences, signed petitions or went to events organised for these illegal immigrants. Three of our Sisters belong to the Solidarity Movement for these people and attend the meetings. In spite of all the difficulties that beset us, and in the face of almost total indifference, we continue our struggle, convinced that these people deserve all our concern and solidarity. ‘When injustice has a human face, it becomes even more impossible to justify it.’

Sister Bernadette Porte
Echoes correspondent

NEWSBRIEFS

The AIC at the 57th DPI/NGO Conference (Conference of non-governmental Organisations associated with the Department of Information of the United Nations)

Anne Sturm, International President of the AIC (Germany), Rose de Lima Ramanankavana, International Vice-President (Madagascar) and Madeleine Morrissey (USA) chief representative of the AIC at UNO, New York, were chosen to represent the AIC at the 57th Conference of the Information Department of UNO for non-governmental organisations, held at UNO headquarters, **New York, from 8th to 10th September 2004**. The aim of this General Assembly was to set out the objectives for development plans during the millennium. Mr Kofi Annan, Secretary General, will address the 2000 delegates expected to attend the session: “Millennium Development Goals; Civil Society takes Action”.

Celebration in the Province of Hungary!

The history of the Province of Hungary is closely linked to that of the Austrian Province. In 1853 Mother Leopoldine Brandis sent some Sisters from Graz to Hungary and in 1905 she entrusted the direction of the Province to Sister Fries Cherubina, former Visitatrice of Salzburg. Throughout all the years of the communist regime (1950-1989) the Sisters lived a clandestine existence. From 1990 onwards they were able to openly witness to God in community life. On 2nd September 2004 Sister Rufina Leitenbauer, former General Councillor, was installed as Visitatrice. A few weeks before the installation took place, workmen from the house had built a car, the “mamamobile” to represent the Province of Hungary. The 4 wheels symbolised the 4 Vows, the steering wheel the three virtues, and the number plate (29.11. 1633) symbolised the Constitutions and Statutes; the two front headlamps represented Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. When they got into this curious car, the Sisters were faced with a challenge: how were they to steer the Province of Hungary? (Province of Hungary)

History of the Company

SOURCE MATERIAL AND NEWS

At the Mother House

Commemoration of the 3rd Centenary of the death of Sister Mathurine Guerin 1631- 1704

Sister Mathurine had been in the hearts and minds of the Sisters from the ‘main house’ for many days. On Monday, 11 October 2004, the Sisters ‘solemnly commemorated’ her time on earth and they did this in three ways::

1st part: The liturgy of Lauds and the Eucharist were in honour of St. Louise de Marillac who trained Sister Mathurine so well. The opening hymn, ‘The Lord chose good village girls’ was a very appropriate choice for the occasion and the words went on to say, ‘come, work and pray.’ And even if Sister Mathurine has not yet been canonised, Father Javier Alvarez, Director General, brought out in his homily the holiness of this Sister’s life.

‘We are commemorating Sister Mathurine as though she were officially recognised by the Church as a saint. This isn’t the case just yet, but we are sure that she really is a saint because she lived out that key phrase from the Constitutions, ‘totally given to God....for the service of the poor.’ This phrase sums up her whole life.

What does commemorating Sister Mathurine signify? It means speaking about her and thanking God for her virtues; it means that we rejoice because although she is not officially canonised or recognised as ‘Blessed’, we believe that she is a saint. Sanctity is not a matter of doing extraordinary things but of doing what the Lord asks of us at each stage of our life. In other words, and according to the expression used by Saint Vincent, it means ‘doing God’s will.’

We all have at least some idea of the life of this unofficial saint. May I briefly recall for you some facts. She was born in Brittany, France. At a very early age she wanted to offer herself to God as a Carmelite but the Lord’s plans pointed her in a different direction. She discovered her true vocation to be a servant of the poor during a mission preached by the sons of Saint Vincent.

After overcoming her parents’ resistance, she achieved the most important goal in her life, that of entering the Company. She joyfully remained there all her life in spite of the difficulties she encountered. For example, during her first mission (the service of the poor in the parish of Saint-Jean en Greve), she fell ill. In the second place to which she was sent (Liancourt), she was the victim of unjust calumny. ‘I put my trust and my hope in God. He alone is my justification’ she would say. Indeed the accusations were soon proved to be untrue. For some time she acted as Saint Louise’s secretary.

She showed the same generous spirit in her work as secretary as she had done in the direct service of the poor. She never lost sight of the main sources of support for her

spiritual and apostolic life, and her self-giving was rooted in God, Jesus Christ and the poor. She also served the poor as Sister Servant in two local communities; one at Fere (in Aisne) and the other at Belle-Isle. In the last named place she started a new work and coped with all the difficulties this involved. As in previous appointments, she gave herself entirely to the spiritual and material service of the poor. Sister Mathurine had a deep understanding of Saint Vincent's teaching about the integral service of the poor. In the place just mentioned, she had a chapel built to serve the spiritual needs of the poor. History tells us that she personally took part in the work, carrying stones and other materials needed for the construction of this chapel.

We know that she served the Company, the Church and the poor, as Superior General, an office she held for a total of 21 years. Her mandate did not run consecutively but she held office at three different times. She was the second Superioress General after Saint Louise. As in all her previous employments, she fulfilled this office with humility, integrity and devotedness, as well as with admirable foresight and truly wonderful dedication. We could say that she had 'a vision of the future.' And this is true because it is to her that we owe the Common Rules being set out in chapters just as they have been handed down to us, as well as the first civil register of Sisters, the Minutes of the Elections, the practice of sending Circular letters to the Company, a catechism adapted for the Sisters' use, and the Book of Customs.

What can we Vincentians learn from her 300 years later? I would like to stress two aspects of her life that can be an example for us because they are very relevant today:

- **Her deep spirit of faith and trust in Providence** which led her to see God in events and in daily life. Saint Vincent's teaching on 'Divine Providence' and on "Doing God's Will" certainly left their mark on the faith she had been brought up in by her family. Her intensive prayer life and her service of the poor must surely have contributed to deepening her spiritual life. I am sure that the peace and serenity that characterised her life were the result of that faith vision which led her not only to believe in God but also to experience Him in her life and to find Him in her various works for the poor.*
- **A great love for the poor, for the Company and for God.** Perhaps the most important of these was her love for God. Today's gospel that we have just heard, tells us 'remain in my love' and these words could well mirror her life. Sister Mathurine remained in God's love but she lived out this love in the way that every Daughter of Charity should do; in commitment and in the service of the poor. Our attention is also caught by her love for the community and the Company in spite of all she had to suffer. We know that the only source of that love was God. This made her a joyful woman who found fulfilment in her vocation and who became a saint in heaven."*

The Offertory procession was also very moving. Twelve Sisters, of different nationalities, carried to the altar symbols of the marvellous work done by Sister Mathurine in accordance with the teaching of Saint Vincent and the careful formation she received from Saint Louise. *'If the love of God is a fire, then zeal is its flame'* was the theme of the presentation. A Sister comes forward with a Sister 'candle bearer' while the

symbolism is explained.:

- *From 1660 onwards, this flame has continued to pass from hand to hand, lighting the way for Daughters of Charity. Mathurine Guerin was the first to hand on this flame by collecting and arranging in order the insights she had received from Mademoiselle in order, she said, that these should always be remembered, and so we had the first text of the **Rules of the Daughters of Charity**, signed by Rene Almeras and sealed with his seal.*
- *And so as not to lose the memory of so much zeal in the service of the poor, we have another 'light' given to us when Sister Mathurine lets us know the names of all the Servants of the Poor, in **the first Civil Register** to be compiled in the Company.*
- *And the list of names of the Superioresses General who are responsible for handing on to the Company this fire of love and the zeal that is its flame, is something that Sister Mathurine started with the **Minutes of the Elections**, starting with the name of Sister Mathurine Guerin and continuing down the centuries into the third millennium and the year 2003..*
- *But it is not simply a question of putting people's names on record; the most important thing is to pass on to everyone a spirit that can bring the fire of God's love into the heart of every Daughter of Charity. This was the aim of the **Circulars of 1 January and 2 February** which all Superioresses General use to rekindle the flame of zeal in the heart of the Company.*
- *There can be no fire without the wood to feed it and no love of God without the prayer that sustains it. Mathurine Guerin produced the **first Book of Prayers** to nourish the spiritual flame that would blossom, in the heart of each Sister, into ardent zeal for the service of the poor.*
- *And since community life is the central place where Sisters mutually rekindle their zeal and their love of God, Mathurine Guerin presents the Sisters with some practices concerning community living in the **first Book of Customs** which is the equivalent of our 'Community Plan' today.*

Before Mass came to an end, a message was read out from Pope John Paul II who sent his blessing, and everyone was moved by this.

2nd part: Presentation of the results of each group's reflections.

The Community assembled in the Conference Room for an audio-visual presentation: *'In the past, Mathurine Guerin listened to God. We, too, listen to God in our times'*. The first part of this presentation illustrated the different stages in Mathurine's life, how she found God in the midst of humiliation and contradiction, the various works she was engaged in, her relationship with externs, the help she gave to the poor, and her 21 years of governing the Community. *'By God's grace, Sister Mathurine's high office never had an adverse effect on her virtue or lessened her spirit of humility'*, said Fr. Chevremont at the end of the Conference on the virtues of Sister Mathurine Guerin. The second part of the presentation put into common the results of the Mother House's different working groups' reflections on the life of this Sister who was totally given to God, to the poor, and to the administrative and spiritual organisation of the Company after the death of the Founders. Each group shared its findings once again during a

service which allowed Sisters to be challenged on a personal and community level. The results of this group work were projected on to a screen so we were all able to follow this intensive spiritual sharing. Vespers ended with this prayer of thanksgiving: *'Blessed are you, Lord, for so many wonders in our Company: our holy Founders, Mathurine Guerin and so many other Sisters who remind us today of the faith and spiritual teaching, the source of enlightened faith and burning charity, handed down to us by the Founders'*.

3rd part: The festive meal together

Before the Sisters went to St. Joseph's refectory, Mother Évelyne and Father Javier gave them all a booklet commemorating this special day. In the refectory the Spanish Sister sang a resounding Benedicite. At the midday meal the Sisters from the Slav Provinces and the English-speaking Sisters had created a festive atmosphere and the closing grace was sung in Italian. After singing a song in round, all the Sisters joyfully took part in evening's events ; then a letter was read out, addressed to Mathurine Guerin, Avenue of the Blessed, the Eternal City, and this reminded her that *'everything that was achieved must not go up in smoke and that she should have a word with Saint Vincent and Saint Louise about this'*! Finally, the lights were put out and candles were lit while we listened to some music which was the prelude to Mother Évelyne's message encouraging us to persevere in the fervour we feel at this special time.

As this day of commemoration ended, our hearts were full of thanksgiving. We had come to know in a more profound way that the Founders worked through people that the Lord had called to put his plan into action. Sister Mathurine corresponded with grace and grace will not fail us today. In the difficult times that all the Provinces are experiencing today with the poor whom they serve, let us repeat after Saint Vincent, *'If you abandon yourselves to the guidance of Providence, God will take care of you'*.