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Spiritual Life

FR G GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

To the Daughters of Charity, messengers of hope

Advent 2004

Dear Sisters,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever! In this, my first Advent letter, I would like to share with you three reflections and offer a practical suggestion about how to apply them to your life as followers of Jesus Christ, Evangeliser of the poor.

Three reflections

The subject matter for this Advent letter is based on comments I received concerning my circular of 11th September.

1. Someone gave this beautiful reflection on what I wrote about 'gift-giving' and giving ourselves as a gift to others: if all of us who are called to be faithful to St. Vincent's spirit could think of ourselves as gift to those whom we serve, whether this be in missions *ad gentes*, popular missions, parish work, administration, hospitals or teaching, what a wonderful thing that would be. Ask yourselves, sisters, 'Do I see myself as gift?' Christmas, for which Advent is a preparation, is traditionally a time of gift giving. During Advent, reflect on your own giftedness and the way you give yourself as gift to those you serve.

2. Someone else asked me a question with regard to my reminder that Saint Vincent asks us to be part of the Universal Church. I was asked what we should do in situations where the people with whom we work and share our ministry, are in conflict with the official teaching of the Church. What should be our position with regard to them? My response to this person is the response I make to all of us who desire to live the Gospel in a radical way. We are called to be compassionate to everyone. In our relationships we see, as Jesus did, first of all the person, and we share from our hearts the love he has for them. When I was in the Seminary someone once made a comment about the special nature of our Vincentian formation. We are taught first of all to see and love a person as a person, and then help them to come to an understanding of what the Church teaches with regard to their particular situation. During Advent we should reflect more deeply on the Incarnation of the Word of God: '*And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us*'. (Jn 1:14). The Gospel clearly shows us that the greatest expression of God's love for humanity is that he became one of us. We are called to reflect God's love and compassion for humanity in and through our gestures of compassion, our deep feeling for and with those who suffer. **Let us make this Advent a time for reflecting on the quality of our compassion, particularly for those who are most abandoned.**

3. Another observation: someone took up the appeal I made in my letter to conform our lives more radically to the lives of the poor, allowing the poor to be our teachers. This took my reflection a step further by pointing out that our formation should take place in the context of having direct experience of the poor. This Advent we are invited to have a deeper love for the Lord who chose to show his love by being born in poverty and we should allow ourselves to be conformed to the image of Jesus and the image of the poor. I recommend that your initial formation programmes, and even your ongoing formation programmes, provide ample opportunity for contact with the poor and that the emphasis should not be so much on ‘what can you do for them?’ but rather on ‘what can you do with them?’ so that you may come to know and love more deeply the Lord Jesus who speaks to you through them. **Let this Advent be a time of renewed commitment to walking more faithfully with the Lord and therefore walking more faithfully with the poor.**

A practical application

During Advent, I ask you, sisters, to be more in tune with the Word of God that the Church presents to us day by day. We all know that at this special time of the year there is a richness in the Word of God that calls us to personal and communal conversion, giving us at the same time the grace to edify the people we live with and inviting us to be instruments of transformation in our world of today.

I encourage all of you to share the Word of God during Advent.

The practice of *lectio divina* is simple and we all know and use it. You can do it very easily, perhaps before retiring for the night, by reading over God’s Word and finding the theme that the first reading and the Gospel have in common. Reflecting on the Word of God before going to sleep at night and again on waking in the morning, will lead you to ask yourselves this question, “What is the Word of God saying to me in my life at present? Your personal reflections can be enriched by Biblical commentaries such as the Vincentian Family website’s ‘daily commentary’. The Saint Vincent de Paul Society’s website offers a similar reflection on the Gospel during this time.

I encourage you to share the Word of God in community during Advent.

Perhaps the best way of doing this would be to share with one another on the Sunday readings. A good practice might be for you to gather for an hour to listen to the Word of God for the following Sunday and then share on that Word, asking yourselves what it says to you on a personal level and as a community. After sharing on the Word for an hour or so, you could spend some time talking about your experiences during the week. Be joyful and take pleasure in one another’s company. This is a real way of deepening your communal reflection on the Word of God and living out that Word in community.

I would also like to encourage you, Sisters, to come together during Advent,

with people who share your apostolate, or to join other groups of the Vincentian Family in reflecting together on some theme that the Word of God highlights during Advent.

I was amazed at the way people can easily relate the Word of God to their own life situations. It is a beautiful faith experience which I find very edifying and it can help us all to meet challenges. What is the Word of God saying in terms of your own personal circumstances? In terms of your family situation? In terms of the area in which you live, your country or the world in which you live? What is God's Word saying to each of these? What is God's Word calling you to do personally or as a faith community, or as members of the Vincentian Family? As we all know only too well, more often than not we are evangelised by those whom we are called to evangelise. Let us reflect on God's Word so that it can challenge us, as a Family, to be a prophetic voice for the poor.

These are some suggestions that I am offering you, Sisters, during this season of Advent. The Word of God is powerful in itself. Let the Spirit speak to you and lead you as individuals, as members of a community, together with the people who share your ministry and as the Family of Saint Vincent.

May Mary who was ever attentive to the Word of God, help you to be obedient to the voice of the Spirit. Through her intercession, I ask the Lord to bless you and to fill each one of you with all the joy and peace that He comes to bring us at Christmas and throughout the New Year.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,
G. Gregory Gay, CM
Superior General

MOTHER ÉVELYNE FRANCOIS, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

To all the Daughters of Charity

Letter dated 26th November 2004

My dear Sisters,

The celebration of our family feasts on 27th, 28th and 29th November, takes on a special character this year. **27th November** falls on Saturday, the eve of the first Sunday of Advent, just as it did in 1830 at the time of the apparition of Mary Immaculate to Saint Catherine in 1830 and the revelation of the miraculous medal with the invocation, 'O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you'.

The feast of **28th November** has to give precedence to the Advent Sunday but Saint Catherine who, like Mary, spent her life in prayer and silent waiting and in lowly and hidden service, will be very close to us. I imagine that in heaven she must be rejoicing with us in a special way this year, on account of the celebrations on **8th December** to mark the **150th anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception**.

As you know, **on 29th November this year, 2004**, our **revised Constitutions** approved on 25th March 2004 by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, **will come into force**. This will mark the opening of a new page in the history of the Company. I invite you to draw some conclusions about the connection there is between the dates 25th March, 26th, 27th, 28th, 29th November and 8th December.

Since the Company has traditionally been linked to Mary from its earliest days, I think that we should entrust to her this new stage which is about to begin on 29th November 2004, the anniversary of our foundation.

We know that **Saint Vincent and Saint Louise had recourse to the Blessed Virgin** in the major, important steps they had to take, as well as in the events of their daily life:

'When the Mother of God has been invoked and taken as patroness in important matters, everything can only go well and contribute to the glory of Jesus her Son' (St. Vincent, Coste XIV, p. 623).

'And since you allow us to call you Mother and you are the Mother of mercy, the

channel through which all mercy flows, and since it is our belief that you obtained from God the establishment of this Company, be pleased to take it under your protection'. (St Vincent, Conference of 8th December 1658, 'On the Rosary').

'Let us take Mary as the model for our daily lives and bear in mind that the best way to honour her is by imitating her virtues'. (Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, M33, p. 777).

When we receive the Constitutions on 29th November, let us turn to Mary and learn from her how to follow the path traced out in the Constitutions: *'It is a spiritual path, a communal way'. (Letter of Introduction to the Constitutions, p.8) 'The Constitutions hold up before you Mary the Mother of Jesus, as the model of this spiritual way. She, more than any other, created space for God in her life'. (Ibid, p.9).*

More specifically, I ask you this year to offer the novena in preparation for the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin, in union with Daughters of Charity throughout the world. Our common intention will be to live this new stage in the presence of the Lord with all our resources of faith, mind and heart, so that the purpose of the Company, the service of Christ in those who are poor, may be lived out with greater intensity.

Since my last letter of 15th August I have had the joy of meeting many of you during my journeys to India, Hungary, Belgium, Brazil, Spain and Italy. These visits, which enabled me to greet many Sisters, share some of my convictions with them, and reply to their questions, led me always to give thanks for what I saw was happening in communities and what the sisters were doing for the poor. I was also impressed, on each occasion, by the desire to go further and to move forward, a desire which was very evident to me in each Province. In India, Brazil, Spain and Italy, I also had the privilege of taking part in inter-provincial meetings of the Councils of these Provinces.

These visits, as well as those which the General Councillors have made in many Provinces, enable us during Council meetings to share at a deep level, to have a clearer knowledge of the Company and a better understanding of its needs, especially with regard to exchanges at international level.

May our family feasts, the feast of 8th December and the season of Advent unite us in the joy of belonging to the Company with Mary as our only Mother.

I would like to end with an extract from the 8th December Act of Consecration,

*O Immaculate Virgin,
The Holy Spirit filled you with grace
and inspired your canticle to the Saviour of the Poor.
May He fill the Company with apostolic courage
and the spirit of humility, simplicity and charity,
and give its members the strength they need*

to live, in a radical way, the evangelical counsels.

*In this way, the Company will fulfil its role within the Church
as servant of the Poor, today and in the years to come.*

Amen.

Assuring you of my prayers and my affection devotedness towards each one of
you.

Sister Évelyne Franc,
Daughter of Charity

Welcoming the revised Constitutions

The date chosen for the coming into force of the revised Constitutions was 29th November, the day when we commemorate the foundation of the Company. This event marks the end of the discernment process which began in May 2000. The Domestic, Provincial and General Assemblies had, as their objective, the renewal of the Constitutions and the theme for all of them was ‘revise in order to revitalise’. The Company has tried to be a wise pilgrim and choose the best path, something recommended by the prophet Jeremiah, ‘*Put yourselves on the ways of long ago, enquire about the ancient paths where the good way lies, walk in it and find rest for your souls*’. (Jer 6:16). And indeed, throughout all the stages of this process, the Company has made great efforts and used a variety of ways to produce a modern constitutional text that is fluent in style, balanced and well able to express in our times the Vincentian charism. So the 29th November will be set down in the Annals of the Company as a point of arrival, and therefore a day of joy, of congratulations and of celebration.

The 29th November is also a day that marks a departure. It is primarily a point of departure. The revised Constitutions would not be of much use if they simply remained a fine and well printed book containing well constructed sentences and a very strong Vincentian flavour. A pilgrim cannot be content to simply see the route on a plan or on a map. She has to personally make the journey, become involved, experience weariness, lose her way, go back on her tracks, consult her compass, make enquiries, rejoice in discoveries, build up experiences. So the pilgrim has to make her own, the pathway traced out by the Company, that is to say, by the Holy Spirit himself. The theme behind the revision of the Constitutions, “revise in order to revitalise” is a message that has more to say after 29th November has passed. This text which has been defined and approved by the Church must now penetrate us both personally and as a community and it must become part of our lives. If we do not apply these Constitutions in some depth to our lives then there is a risk that we will continue to live at a superficial level and our lives will be rather shallow. So the Company is asking us to profit from ‘the wisdom of the occasion’. This is what we hope will be the principal fruit of the work of revising the Constitutions. Let us call to mind Father Maloney’s reflection at the beginning of the revision process when he wondered if it was worth while organising so much effort and putting so much time and energy into the work: ‘*will it be worth it – and he answered his own question – only if this process helps the sisters to deepen their commitment to following the spiritual path of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac*’.¹ In 1966 Mother Guillemin said something similar when work began on drawing up the Constitutions, a task that would continue until 1983: ‘*all the decisions can be taken*’ – she said at the time – ‘*all the Constitutions can be renewed, revised and updated, but if each Sister does not make this effort to become holy, all the rest will be of little use*’.²

With the introduction of the new Constitutions, the Company is asking us to revitalise our lives, to accept the Constitutions, study them, assimilate them and interiorise them in prayer, so that the spark of Vincentian life may shine again or shine more brightly. This will be a good opportunity for you *'to renew your first fervour'* as Saint Louise strongly recommended to the first sisters.³ The previous Superioress General, Mother Elizondo, explained in detail what she understood by 'revitalising'; *'as the word says, to revitalise does not mean to begin again, neither does it mean excluding what already exists or being scornful of our origins, it means rather that we have to continue to breathe new life into the Constitutions, a life that is capable of responding through our charism and at every moment, to the needs of our times. To revitalise is to hand on a new fire, give fresh ardour to earlier values so that these may retain all their force in spite of being somewhat diminished over time, and in the face of new situations where they have to be developed. The process of revitalising could be compared to pruning dead branches which is done to allow the sap to circulate better in the young shoots and make these stronger.'*⁴

A BOOK OF LIFE

I am going to take up some of the statements made in the working document presented to the Visitatrices at their Encounter in Rome in May, 2000, recommendations that helped ensure the smooth running of the Assemblies held with a view to revising the Constitutions: *'These (The Constitutions) are a treasure that we have to guard carefully', 'a precious gift of the Holy Spirit' 'a heritage that God has placed in our hands for us to administer wisely and to add to'*. A good understanding of what the Constitutions are will help us to give a good welcome to these revised Constitutions. Why do we describe the Constitutions in such high-flown language? It is because they do indeed contain the 'spiritual patrimony of a Congregation'⁵ that is to say, its founding charism, spirituality, mission and good traditions.⁶

The Constitutions are so important for the Company and for the Daughters of Charity that we can safely say that this book is of greater value than the writings of the founders. The reason for this is obvious: the charism that the Holy Spirit inspired in Saint Vincent and Saint Louise is incarnated and institutionalised within the context of France in the 17th century. Since then the socio-cultural and religious context has changed very much. The present Constitutions have not only kept faithfully to the inspiration of the founders, but they have also enriched the Common Rules, the Statutes of Fr. Bonnet (1711) and the Constitutions of 1954 and 1983, with contributions from a new biblical exegesis, progress in spiritual and moral theology, and the development of the Church's teaching on social matters. The writings of the founders and the Common Rules are still the inspirational source from which we must continue to drink and find nourishment. But the present Constitutions contain the designs of the founders adapted to the history of our times.⁷ And the Constitutions conclude by affirming that *'The Constitutions are to be faithfully observed by all the Sisters as being for them the expression of the will of God'*.⁸

Between 1655 and 1658 Saint Vincent gave several conferences in which he

explained to the first Sisters the Common Rules. Let us remember some of the things he said, which could help us today to realise the importance of the revised Constitutions: *'they are the sure path for arriving at that state of perfection that He (God) wishes us to attain, the way that will lead us to heaven'*.⁹ Our Founder ended by saying, *'they (the Rules) are in conformity with the Gospel'*, *'they are the paths along which He wishes to lead you; the path that God has traced out'*.¹⁰

We know that in the days of our founders, some Sisters thought that the religious state was a more demanding and more perfect way of life than that followed in the Company. Saint Vincent's response to this is very clear: *'your rules are in conformity with the Gospel. They are replete with the holiest practices which Our Lord taught'*.¹¹ On two occasions he repeated the words of Pope Clement VIII, *'Show me a religious who has kept his rule and I will not require any miracles before canonising him: if people testify that he has kept it, that will be sufficient, I will add his name to the catalogue of saints'*.¹² The Rules come from God and they all lead to God: *'by observing them you can attain sanctity without being Carmelites, and simply by following your own vocation you can come to perfection'*.¹³ *'If you are truly faithful in living this way of life you will be good Christians'*.¹⁴

I could quote other sayings of Saint Vincent but I don't think this is necessary, given the clarity of his thinking on this subject. The Church, for its part, says that *'religious are to find their supreme rule of life in the following of Christ as proposed in the Gospel and as expressed in the Constitutions of their own institute'*.¹⁵ The Church regards Constitutions as something of an identity card. That does not mean to say that they add anything new to the Gospel. They try to be a sort of commentary for the concrete and existential situation of each Institute.¹⁶

These very simple reflections will be enough to help us realise the significance, value and importance of the revised Constitutions for the Company and for every Daughter of Charity. If we think our particular vocation in the Church and in today's world is important, if we have a proper appreciation of our life plan, if we love our Company and are careful not to disappoint it, if we try to serve the poor as well as we can, if we wish to find out and follow God's plan for the Company, we cannot set aside this "book of life." Because it is just that, we should read it attentively, meditate on it and continually strive to assimilate its contents. We will find in it not a history that we already know about but a history that is ever new, a life plan that every Daughter of Charity has to put into practice day after day. It is a pathway that shows fidelity to and correspondence with a Word of God that is constantly making demands. The Constitutions have to be read and meditated on with a lively faith, encouraging hope and never failing charity because they present a theological life plan. Each Sister, each community, each Province and the whole Company are called to be connected to the evangelical life that pulsates in every article of this book which may not have many pages but has very solid contents, and they should do so in such a way that the best commentary on the Constitutions will come from the lives of the Sisters and of the communities.

FROM PRINTED CONSTITUTIONS TO REVISION OF LIFE

The theme for the work of revising the Constitutions was *'revise in order to revitalise'* and it has still more to say to us after the presentation of the new Constitutions. If, until now, we have concentrated on the first word 'revise' we now have to put the emphasis on the second word 'revitalise'. Also we have here a coincidence that is truly providential: the Constitutions will be presented at the beginning of Advent. Furthermore, Advent 2004 will have a special significance for the Daughters of Charity. If the call to hope is addressed to all Christians, for the Daughters of Charity the pathway of hope is marked by their joyful acceptance of the revised Constitutions. If God speaks to us through life's events we must reflect in order to find out what he expects of us after this 'family' event. Perhaps the first thing we need to do is to create that inner space which we might call 'hope'. It is here that the new wording of the text of the Constitutions will cause to spring up within us the seeds of joy and hope. We have to reject prejudice and wrong thinking as temptations and even as real assaults on hope.

During Advent 2004, the Company speaks to us about 'revitalising' when it gives us the revised Constitutions. How are we to answer this call to hope and put these revised Constitutions into action? These can certainly be a real burst of oxygen that can help us to grow in our vocation but this will depend on the way we use the Constitutions. They point us towards the ideals in our way of life, the updating of our family charism, as well as our spirituality, our mission and our good traditions. So the Constitutions have to become the primary source book of spirituality for the Daughters of Charity, their prayer book. What is there to be done when we find there is a big gap between the ideals presented in the Constitutions, and the life we are leading? Obviously, the solution is not to water down the ideal, to dilute its wine. On the contrary, we have to find a new impetus and give a new drive to our way of living so that this will find new vigour in the life-giving words of the Constitutions. **What are the stages in revitalisation that we are being urged to find in the revised Constitutions?** Here are some of them.

Revising our vocational option

All of us, of course, have made the choice to respond to our vocation. It may be that this choice needs to be reaffirmed or (God forbid!) that we have forgotten that we did make this choice. There are some signs that can indicate this: for example, apathy, spiritual torpor, prayer that has become just a matter of routine, service that is simply carried out on a professional level, living in community without an evangelical sense of being sisters, a tendency to live a settled life in community, having a middle-class outlook, seeking security....all this inner turmoil that leads to a deep sense of dissatisfaction; the author of the psalms has experienced the results of infidelity. The suffering and discouragement he felt were intense, if we are to judge by the forceful imagery he uses; he says *'I am smoked as dry as a wineskin'*. It is not simply a question of preserving one's vocation intact but of living it in a vibrant, dynamic way. Mummies preserve all the physical attributes of the dead person but they lack the most important element, life. We mustn't have the idea, either, that the dynamic living out of one's vocation is something directly connected with being young. I know young sisters who live their vocation purely as a matter of routine and I know old sisters who are full of life and a vibrant joy that one could truly envy. It has to be said that vocation has nothing to

do with one's human circumstances; it is the work of grace, which increases in proportion to the generous response given. Saint Vincent is our example in this.

How are we to revitalise the way we live out our vocation if this is dormant, extinct, dying....? To act against relaxing inertia and against routine, the real moth that eats away at our lives, we need to bring to mind and deepen (preferably in the context of prayer) the encounter that Jesus had with each of us at one time and which we experienced very clearly and with absolute certainty. There can be no doubt that every vocation is based on a personal encounter with Christ who has the power to convince and attract us and elicit from us a clear and definite 'yes'. The eloquent witness of the prophet Jeremiah is a model of this: *'You have beguiled me, Yahweh, and I allowed myself to be beguiled'*. (Jer 20:7). It is true that we can always practise further discernment with regard to our vocation but all of us who have made a specific choice of vocation did this after discernment. Saint Paul tells us, *'God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice'*. (Rom 11:29). It is a question here of 'revitalising'. There is no better way of doing this than to recall, during prayer, the choice we made of a particular way of life, something that is as important to us as life itself. When I have a clearer view of my vocational journey and embark on it once more, it will continue to nourish and bring fulfilment to my human existence. This is the wonderful power our vocation option has. If it continually underpins our ordinary everyday life, we will experience harmony, peace, consistency, unity and enthusiastic joy in all that we undertake. If there are mistakes, inconsistencies or things that distract us (and there will surely be these), we will be aware of them and understand what causes them. We will also know how to overcome them because we have a clear objective.

Every article of the Constitutions and all the pages of this book should lead us to revitalise our Vincentian option. In short, the Vincentian charism and our Vincentian option are one and the same thing, just as water in a vessel is the same water that is in the source it came from. I was very happy to see that Father Quintano offered a similar reflection when he said, *'Revising the Constitutions in order to revitalise can be the same as saying revitalise your vocation option and the ardour of your first fervour'*.¹⁷ If the water in the vessel of our vocation has been stagnant for too long and has lost its freshness, now is the time to renew it. There is no better way of doing this than by praying the Constitutions and, in so doing, praying about one's life.

Deepening our convictions

The biblical image of the man who built his house on a rock so it was protected against floods, hurricanes and torrents because it had solid foundations, (cf Lk 6:48) helps us to understand that we have to build our lives on solid truths. A way of life that sees us content with the average, the mediocre and superficial standards around us, is not to be compared with resistant concrete. The same is true of our emotions and feelings; these help to colour our inner landscape but they are not the solid hard rock that is capable of sustaining an edifice in all its complexity. But the theological principles embodied in the Constitutions do give consistency to our lives. Here are just a few examples:

- *Christ is the Rule of the Daughters of Charity. They endeavour to follow Him as Scripture reveals Him to them and as their Founders perceived Him: Adorer of the Father, Servant of His Loving Plan, Evangeliser of those who are poor.*¹⁸

- *The Founders considered community life one of the essential supports of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity. This life in common is lived in a local community, where the Sisters accept one another in faith, with simplicity of heart. They bear joyful witness to Jesus Christ and continually strengthen one another with a view to mission.*¹⁹

- *The Sisters find Christ and contemplate Him in the heart and life of those who are poor, where His grace is ever at work to sanctify and save them.*²⁰

- *At the school of the Son of God, the Daughters of Charity learn that no type of distress should be foreign to them. Christ appeals constantly to their Company through their suffering brothers and sisters, through the signs of the times and through the Church. Multiple are the forms of poverty and multiple the forms of service, but one is the love bestowed on those whom God has 'called and assembled'.*²¹

- *The Daughters of Charity, given to God for the service of Christ in persons who are poor, find in this aim their unity of life. Service is for them the expression of their total gift of self to God in the Company and gives it its full significance. It is at the same time a vision of faith and the concrete expression of that love, whose source and model is Christ. It is this following of Jesus the Servant that Saint Vincent and Saint Louise recommended to the sisters.*²²

For these solid convictions to exist there needs to be genuine communication: communication between the truth that is written down and the truth that is assimilated, between the book and life, between the formula and experience. How can we help these truths to increase within us so that they become assimilated in the form of solid convictions. There are two means or two occasions that are appropriate for working on these truths; personal reflection and times of meditation. These are two excellent "workshops" which can become complementary. When a sister puts what is written in one of the articles of the Constitutions into the first person, or when she tries to check the connection between this article and the message of Jesus and with Christian thought in general, or even with Vincentian teaching, there can be no doubt at all that she is strengthening the foundations of what she is building.

Continually asking ourselves what is God's will.

Every Vincentian should be continually asking themselves this question; *'Lord, what is it you want of me, of my community, of my Province, here and now in this particular situation?'* This is what Saint Vincent did. The sister who tries to discern the will of God is someone who understands and lives her vocation in a dynamic, not a

passive way. God's will invites us to learn more about our vocation and follow it with enthusiasm, to the point that we can say with absolute certainty, *'each day is the first day of my vocation'*. However, there is a condition attached to this: every day I have to hold fast to God's fresh and sometimes disconcerting plans for me.

Every Daughter of Charity understands that the Constitutions reflect, here and now, God's will for the Company because we find in them as nowhere else, the present day understanding of the Vincentian charism with its spirituality and fine traditions. This concern for passing on the contemporary understanding of the charism is something we can see in every page of the Constitutions, in the book's 96 articles and 76 Statutes. A Daughter of Charity who is thoroughly steeped in the spirit of the Constitutions, will have her life coloured by discernment and by a charism appropriate for her times. Furthermore, some articles explicitly ask us to work with our eyes wide open and our ears ready to hear, always on the look out for the signs and happenings which show God is at work. For example, article 12b says: *'Faithful to this spirit, the Company makes every effort to be available and ready to respond creatively and courageously to the calls of the Church and the urgent needs of the poor, while respecting cultural differences'*. And another article states: *'Authority and obedience, lived in co-responsibility and subsidiarity, commit them to a common seeking and humble, loyal acceptance of God's will, made known to the Company in many ways: through the cries of those who are poor, the calls of the Church, the signs of the times, and the Constitutions and Statutes'*.²³

The spirit of the Constitutions is the absolute opposite of that reflected in the phrase, "It has always been done this way." Instead, it is completely in line with the gospel parable of the talents (cf Lk 19, 11-28). Audacity is just as much needed today as it was in the time of the Founders. *'The charism of M. Vincent'* - said the Pope in his message to the General Assembly of 1997 - *'is of burning relevance for our time...and it is up to you to give it life wherever you are sent. Daughters of Charity, have the audacity of your Founders and make the Church more and more present in the world of the poor...In your Provinces and in your houses welcome the good values of the peoples you serve in order to discover in them the gifts of God'*. We cannot respond to this appeal for openness and audacity if we share the mistrustful and suspicious outlook of a perverse world that sees a future devoid of all possibilities. God is not the world's enemy, He manifests himself in it; the world is His temple. The 1997 General Assembly, in accordance with the document *Gaudium et Spes*, clearly states that there are *'seeds of the Word and values to be found in all cultures and among the Poor'*.²⁴ In order to be able to discern, that is to say, to distinguish between values and non-values, as well as to read the signs of the times by which God always indicates the path to be followed, there must be constant, deep and ongoing formation. Without this formation (self-formation, systematic formation, ongoing formation.....) there cannot be the audacity and quality service that the people of our times expect from us.

Rebuilding community life.

The only thing to do is to let ourselves be guided by the Constitutions. *'Community is built day after day by each Sister's gift of self and commitment. It is a*

milieu based on affection, which fosters human and spiritual growth, as well as apostolic creativity. The sisters, united in the conviction of responding to the same call, accept one another with esteem, respect and trust. This faith vision disposes the heart to true friendship and the acceptance of differences which, far from being divisive, are mutually enriching'.²⁵ 'Reconciliation and mutual forgiveness, so strongly recommended by the Founders, help them to overlook what might have been an obstacle to unity and evangelical witness...In this way, the community becomes a communion where each one gives and receives, and where each sister places all that she is and all that she has at the service of the others'.²⁶ Or we could hold fast to what is written in Sacred Scripture, 'A new commandment I give you, that you love one another. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another'. (Jn 13:34-45) 'You are God's chosen race, his saints, - this time it is Saint Paul speaking - he loves you and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another, forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love'. (Col 3: 12-15).

These are very beautiful texts but it can happen that the reality is very different. Just as a poor quality community life leaves people worn out and embittered and as it negates or at least considerably diminishes opportunities to evangelise, a good quality community life spreads its benefits all around and the first people to feel these benefits are the members of the community itself. In his message to the 1985 General Assembly, Pope John Paul II said, *'If the witness of individuals is of value, the gospel witness of a community is even more far-ranging and has a greater impact'.²⁷* All that has to be said about community life has been said in the Constitutions. It is not a question of whether we want community life or not. Only a Sister who truly believes in the Word of God, who is convinced that she needs to follow to the letter the path traced out by the Constitutions, who will be totally open to the Spirit of the Lord, and who recognises that unity and fraternity are God-given gifts that have to be continually fostered without people giving way to discouragement – only a Daughter of Charity like this will be able to genuinely build up community life. A Sister who would impose conditions does not truly love the community and does not desire sisterly union. When there are failures in relationships and confrontations take place (and this will happen), a sisterly community will be able to take the appropriate means to remedy the situation: correction and pardon.²⁸ A community that is able to ask pardon is a saved community.

The new Constitutions should help us consolidate sisterly union, a family atmosphere, mutual esteem and personal charity. For this to happen, a sister must compare the way she is actually living with the general outlines laid down in the Constitutions. If we are constantly blaming others for not having a community spirit, if we do not openhandedly sow love, understanding, dialogue, pardon, tolerance, communication.....if we begin to look outside community for what we are not building within it, if there is destructive criticism, if we harbour prejudice and if we label people, then we may continue to be proud of having fine texts about community life but we will also bear a heavy responsibility for these texts being ineffective. This year, with the introduction of the new Constitutions we have the opportunity to “begin again” and, if

necessary, have a different attitude to community life. Every sister should make the effort to have a different approach to community, to see each of her sisters as though for the first time. These attitudes that a sister adopts on a personal and individual level will spontaneously give rise to sisterly union.

Living the ‘Vincentian mystique’ or the ‘mystique of charity’

This is lived out through the responsible service of the poor, a service which takes on added depth through prayer. To really grasp the Vincentian mystique, we have to understand the equation that Matthew presents to us in Chapter 25: the poor are the sacrament of Jesus Christ. This is at the heart of Vincentian thinking. This first principle gives rise to others: to serve the poor is to serve Jesus Christ himself, who suffers, agonises and rejoices in them; the service of the poor is a genuine encounter with God, just as prayer and the sacraments are meant to be. Let us think of Saint Vincent’s very clear message to the first sisters: *‘in serving the poor you serve Jesus Christ, and that is as true as we are present here. A sister will go ten times to visit the sick, and ten times she will find God in them’*.²⁹

The revised Constitutions contain many passages that lead us towards this integrated spirituality. For example: *‘Through faith they see Christ in those who are poor, and they see those who are poor in Christ. They serve Him in His suffering members ‘with compassion, gentleness, cordiality, respect and devotion’*.³⁰ *‘The same love inspires and directs their contemplation and their service; in faith, they know that God awaits them in those who suffer’*.³¹ It often happens that sisters complain, *‘I have tried in vain to see God in the poor but have not been able to do this because the way they behave does not lead me to think of God but rather the opposite’*. What answer can we give to this difficulty? The poor are the sacraments of Jesus Christ, not because of the way they behave but simply because they are poor. Very often the poor are thieves, manic, unpleasant, ungrateful, terribly selfish.... Today, more than ever, we cannot expect them to be angels because our society produces some very degraded poor people. However, they do have one thing in their favour and this is the only reason why they are God’s favoured ones; the fact that they are poor. ‘Seeing God in the poor’ sums up the whole mystique of charity, something that is beyond human reasoning. The only thing that can help us to understand this mystique is the divine logic of gratuitous love. God wishes every human being to live in dignity. That is why God has such love for the life of a Daughter of Charity, which she offers to Him without any reservation.

It is extremely important that the Daughters of Charity should live the *‘mystique of wide open eyes’*, to use the words of J.B. Metz, because this phrase holds the secret that gives unity to their lives. The Company is continually asking us to strive after this unity. We know that in the spirituality of the Company, Christ and the Poor, contemplation and action, prayer and service are elements that converge and are closely linked. Moreover, I am convinced that being rooted in this integrated spirituality and putting it into practice, will be the antidote to some forms of weariness, being worn out, and even ‘stress’. There can be a good explanation for this: psychologists say that it is not the amount of work to be done that causes anxiety but the way people view the work.

So there could be two people doing identical work; one person may end up worn out by it and the other person not. The Daughter of Charity who is seriously trying to put her spirituality into action is far removed from such an unhealthy dichotomy. Moreover, if she lives in the presence of God and finds Him in her work, she is connecting with the divine energy. To sum up, it is not easy for someone to become 'burnt out' if they work in the Vincentian way, so to speak, even though people may be very busy and have a lot of work to do.

CONCLUSION

When the process of revising the Constitutions began, Father Quintano used a striking comparison to shed some light on what was about to happen. He made a comparison between the task in hand and the four stages of a pilgrim's journey: the starting off point (proposition approved by the 1997 General Assembly), the road to be travelled (preparatory work carried out by all the Provinces), the goal set (Local, Provincial and General Assemblies) and the point of return (personal commitment to the revised Constitutions).³² We have now come to this last stage in the journey. This is the most crucial stage because all the ground covered up to now will not count for anything if the revitalisation of the charism does not extend to communities, to Sisters, and to Provinces. Father Maloney had previously foreseen this stage and he said that after the Constitutions were revised we would need at least '*one or two years for the Revised Constitutions to be translated, distributed, studied and interiorised*'.³³

Deepening our understanding of the Constitutions must not be thought of simply as a matter of studying the texts and the norms. Of course the charism needs normative and juridical backing and this support has always been in place. But we have to be on our guard that the norms do not stifle the spirit or become an obstacle to the Company's aims. The Regulations and Common Rules that have been in force from the very beginning also contain norms. But Saint Vincent said that these were like wings for a bird. The full text of this quotation can be found on page 10 of the Introduction to the Constitutions.

The Company has made a big effort to renew the wineskin that contains the new wine but the wineskin of the Constitutions demands and expects the new wine of our vocation. Let us remember the words of Jesus, '*New wine, new wineskins*' (Mk 2:22). In future articles we will continue our in-depth study of some aspects of the revised Constitutions.

Father Javier Alvarez, CM
Director General

Notes

- ¹ Father Robert Maloney, *Importance of the Constitutions and Statutes in the life of the Company*. “Echoes” July –August 2000
- ² Mother S. Guillemin, Talk given to the Sisters making their retreat, August 1966
- ³ Saint Louise, 26th July 1644
- ⁴ Mother J. Elizondo, *Called to revitalise*, “Echoes” July-August
- ⁵ Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 2b, *Code of Canon Law*, c 578
- ⁶ Cf. M. Diaz Presa, *Las Constituciones, Publicaciones Claretianas, Madrid, 1988, 19-31*
- ⁷ Father F. Quintano, *The Constitutions*, Echoes, February 2001
- ⁸ C.96a
- ⁹ Saint Vincent, Coste, IX, p.310
- ¹⁰ Saint Vincent, Coste IX, p.314-316
- ¹¹ Ibid p.314
- ¹² Ibid, 468
- ¹³ Saint Vincent, Coste X, p.110
- ¹⁴ Saint Vincent, Coste IX, p.127
- ¹⁵ Code of Canon Law, C.662
- ¹⁶ JMR Tillard, *The Principal Rules for the revision of religious life*, Paris, 1976, 108
- ¹⁷ Father F. Quintano, *Revise in order to revitalise*, “Echoes”, March 2001
- ¹⁸ C.8a
- ¹⁹ C.9
- ²⁰ C.10
- ²¹ C.11a
- ²² C.16 a,b
- ²³ C. 31b
- ²⁴ General Assembly 1997, *A New Fire*, p.5
- ²⁵ C.32a
- ²⁶ C.32b
- ²⁷ General Assembly 1985, *At the Crossroads*, p. 12
- ²⁸ Cf. C. 20a; S.2
- ²⁹ Saint Vincent, Coste IX, p.252
- ³⁰ C.10 b
- ³¹ C.7b
- ³² Father F. Quintano, *Revise in order to revitalise*, a.c. 92
- ³³ Father R Maloney, a.c. 285

150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE DOGMA OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

150th anniversary of the Church's promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception

Devotion to Mary, handed down to us by the Founders, has always been a big part of the Vincentian Family's heritage right from the beginning. Because of its special vocation in the Church and in the world, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise rooted the Company in devotion to Our Lady and they did this in a special way. The apparitions and the message of 1830 reinforced this attachment to Mary, enriched it and gave it contemporary relevance.

When he founded the first Confraternity of Charity at Chatillon on 23rd August 1617, **Saint Vincent** wrote, *'And when the Mother of God is invoked and chosen as the Patroness for important undertakings, everything cannot do otherwise than go well and redound to the glory of her Son, Jesus, these said Ladies take her as the Patroness and Protectress of their work'*. He solemnly inaugurated the Confraternity approved by the Archbishop of Lyons on 8th December the following year, *feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God*. Vincent does not separate Mary from the rest of his spirituality and he asks us to take the Mother of God as our model in every aspect of our spiritual and apostolic life.

Saint Louise's devotion also leads her to imitate Mary and to contemplate her in the mystery of her relationship with God in faith. *'I am yours, Holy Virgin, in order to belong more perfectly to God'*. Louise's devotion is also one of praise, particularly for Mary's Immaculate Conception. She takes delight in finding in this privilege someone who is the perfectly transparent image of the divine. Louise contemplates the link between this mystery and that of the redemptive Incarnation. We recall her strong devotion to Mary when, during her pilgrimage to **Chartres** on 17th October 1644, she entrusted the infant Company to Mary and asked her to be its only Mother and to keep it faithful to the mission confided to it by God.

Many articles have been written about the Blessed Virgin and still more remains to be said and done if we are to penetrate more deeply the mystery of her presence in the plan of salvation and in our own lives. This edition of the Echoes sets out to join with the Church in honouring and commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. We invite some theologians of our own times to speak to us and:

- remind us of the part played by the 1830 apparitions in the history of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception;
- shed new light on the Blessed Virgin in the mystery of her Immaculate Conception;
- present an interpretation of Mary Immaculate's appearance to Saint Catherine

Labouré on 27th November 1830, an event that foreshadowed the institution of the feast on 8th December 1854;

- recall the Marian schedule of John Paul II's pontificate. On 15th August, this year 2004, the whole Church, in the person of the Holy Father who went on pilgrimage to Lourdes, has paid homage to Mary Immaculate.

These reflections on Mary Immaculate are an in-depth response to John Paul II's call to the whole Church in the third millennium to renew their understanding of its mystery and that of the Christian life which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, leads people to the heights of holiness. *'The dogma of the Immaculate Conception is, in my opinion, 'the most evangelical of all Catholic dogmas' it teaches us the primacy of grace. In her Immaculate Conception, the Virgin Mary speaks to us of the importance of allowing ourselves to be loved and moulded by God, in order to correspond with His plans and to live according to His life'*, declared the Italian theologian, Father Bruno Forte.

Pius IX, Pope of the Immaculate Conception

This article appeared in l'Osservatore Romano, 13th February 1990

Every year the month of February brings round the anniversary of the death of a great servant of God, someone that many people hope will be beatified. That person is Pope Pius IX whose cause moved a decisive step forward some years ago with the solemn declaration by the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints on 6th July 1985, in which they recognised the heroicity of his virtues. (This introduction was written in February 1990).

Pius IX's pontificate lasted so long – 12 years – and so many events took place during it, that one could highlight many aspects of this period. But one of the highpoints of this pontificate that this article would like to briefly recall, was and will always remain, the solemn definition in 1854 of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

A contested truth

This definition which was so long in coming, might make people wonder – why was it necessary to wait 18 centuries before proclaiming a truth contained in Christian revelation? Indeed, the articles of the Creed were all formulated and agreed upon by the first Councils.

This abnormally long wait could be explained as follows: in the course of Church history, the Immaculate Conception was subject to something that is so prevalent today, the process of contestation. It is a truth that was not always or not universally accepted – a 'contested' truth – and not contested by obscure theologians whose names are no longer remembered, but by some of the most famous theologians. We need only recall the famous letter of St. Bernard (who hymned the praises of the Blessed Virgin) to the Canons of Lyons, protesting strongly against the introduction of this feast into their church. We need only cite the greatest 'scholastics', Alexander of Hales, St. Bonaventure, St. Albert the Great and even St. Thomas Aquinas, who all appear not to have accepted the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This may go some way to explaining the confusion and perplexity that Church authorities experienced in this matter for centuries. Before 1476 the Roman Church did not celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Religious Congregations were divided on this issue; the Franciscans were in favour of it, the Dominicans opposed it.....

What was the difficulty exercising the minds of these 'contestants?' First of all,

there was the universality of original sin, a doctrine so strongly inculcated by St. Paul in his epistles: then there was the universality of redemption and it seemed impossible to make any exceptions to this, even for the Mother of God. With regard to the first point, the Council of Trent gave important enlightenment by declaring it was not its intention 'to include the blessed and *immaculate* Virgin Mary in the decree relating to original sin'. On the second point, some theologians introduced the distinction between the redemption of victims of original sin, and the foreseen 'preservation' from original sin that the Virgin Mary enjoyed in view of the redemption that was to come.

The Miraculous Medal

In spite of these disagreements, the feast of the Immaculate Conception gradually spread throughout the Church. During the 19th century something happened that historians did not perhaps pay as much attention to as they should have done, something that played a big part in spreading this devotion: the mission that the Blessed Virgin entrusted, in 1830, to a young novice of the Daughters of Charity in rue du Bac, Paris, a novice who was to be the future Saint Catherine Labouré. During the apparition she was told, 'Have a medal made according to this model. Those who wear it will receive great graces'. The medal was modelled on the Blessed Virgin, portrayed with outstretched hands from which came rays of light, with the inscription; O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you. Of course it took the sister some time to convince her confessor, and for her confessor to convince the Archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur de Quelen. The first medals were finally made in 1832 and were immediately asked for and distributed in all parts of France and soon throughout the whole of Europe. With the medals came so many cures and conversions that soon they came to be known simply as 'miraculous medals'.

With the precision and intellectual discipline of a historian, René Laurentin consulted the archives and made his calculations. He came to the amazing conclusion that during the 10 years between 1832 and 1842, more than a hundred million 'miraculous medals' were made and distributed. So from this many million lips this invocation resounded right across Europe, 'O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you'. Laurentin had no hesitation in seeing in this 'one of the most widespread phenomena of social communication to exist before telecommunications came into being'.

And as if in some way to add the final touch to the 10 years analysed by this theologian, there took place in a church in Rome, the most spectacular of all the miracles obtained through the miraculous medal. A young Jewish man, son of a rich banker, happened to be passing through Rome. He was engaged to be married and spent the time until he was of age to marry, travelling. Religion was the last thing he had on his mind. However, a Catholic friend persuaded him to wear a miraculous medal round his neck. With this friend he went into the church of Sant' Andrea delle Fratte and suddenly saw the Blessed Virgin appearing to him in the same pose as that depicted on the medal. As though struck by a thunderbolt, he fell on his knees, burst into tears and asked to be baptised. Later on he became a priest and, together with his brother who was also

converted, founded two religious congregations for the conversion of the Jews. This man was Alphonsus Ratisbonne.

If we keep in mind this historical background we can more easily understand how, from the beginning of Gregory XVI's pontificate (1831-1846), many bishops had petitioned the Pope to define the Immaculate Conception as a dogma of faith. One of the most ardent petitioners was Gregory XVI's own Secretary of State and former Nuncio in Paris, Cardinal Lambruschini, who did not have the consolation of seeing his efforts rewarded: the ship would only come to port in the time of the next Pope, Pius IX: and Cardinal Lambruschini died a few months before the dogma was defined in 1854.

The definition in 1854

Pius IX took a personal and decisive part in the matter of the definition and showed particular concern that it should be promulgated. At the beginning of his pontificate he appointed a Commission of 20 theologians to study the question of whether the Immaculate Conception could be defined as a dogma of faith. They were not unanimous in their findings. But the reservations that some of the theologians had were more to do with the timeliness of proclaiming the dogma than with the dogma itself.

Pius IX had another obstacle to face; the novel way of proceeding to proclaim the definition – the fact that it was being proclaimed by the Pope alone, without a Council being convoked. Pius IX approached this question early in 1849 at Gaeta where he had to take refuge after the tragic events of 1848; the assassination of his Minister, Pellegrino Rossi, and the revolution in Rome. In these circumstances it would have been impossible to convoke a Council even if he had wanted to. But Pius IX had the idea of using a 'written Council' and this was achieved through the encyclical *Ubi primum* of 2nd February 1849, in which he asked all the bishops in the world for their opinion on the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. He received nearly 600 replies; about 550 bishops declared themselves in favour of the proposition and about 50 said that they were opposed to it or they were uncertain. So Pius IX multiplied the consultations and Commissions. He had the text of the definitive document drawn up again; this was done first of all in the Bull *Deus omnipotens et clemens*, prepared by the Jesuit, Perrone, and then the Bull *Quemadmodum Ecclesia*, drafted by the Jesuit Passaglia. Pius IX was not satisfied with either version. Bishop Pacifici then produced two further projects: *In mysterio* and *Deus cuius vitae*. It could be said that right up to the eve of the definition, the text was debated, added to, modified and submitted to the Cardinals before finally taking shape as the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, and the defined dogma was proclaimed at St. Peter's on 8th December 1854, in the presence of 200 cardinals, archbishops and bishops, and a vast number of the faithful.

We have the very precious testimony of Pius IX himself regarding his feelings on that occasion. Three years later, in 1857, when he was on his way to Imola, during his travels across the papal States, he wanted to visit the children's hospital he had founded when he was a bishop, and which he had entrusted to the Good Shepherd nuns of Angers. 'Most Holy Father', the Superior said to him, 'would it be too indiscreet to ask you what

you felt in your heart as your voice proclaimed Mary to have been conceived without original sin?’ Pius IX did not need the Superior to insist. He explained, ‘When I began to promulgate the dogmatic decree I felt that my voice would not be strong enough to make itself heard over the vast multitudes crowded into the Vatican basilica. But when I reached the point of formulating the definition, God gave such power and supernatural energy to his Vicar’s voice that the whole basilica resounded with it. And I was so overcome by this divine assistance that I was obliged to stop speaking for a while and let my tears flow freely. Moreover, while God was proclaiming this dogma through the mouth of his Vicar, God himself put into my mind such a clear and deep understanding of the incomparable purity of the Blessed Virgin that, lost in the depths of this comprehension which no words could describe, my soul was flooded with strange delights, delights that are not of this earth but only to be experienced in heaven.’

Mary and Bernadette: heaven’s response

The Pope’s daring initiative resounded strongly all over the world. The most devoted sons of the Church were the first to rejoice. ‘Oh, how wonderful!’, cried the Cure of Ars when he heard the news, ‘I always thought that this ray of light was missing from the splendour of Catholic truths’. But the most remarkable fact, and something that up to now has been unique in the history of the Church, was that confirmation of the Pope’s decision came from Heaven itself. Four years had not gone by when the rumour spread that in a village in the Pyrenees, a young girl had been visited by a mysterious ‘Lady’ who entrusted to her a mission. The event was treated with the greatest suspicion by the local clergy. ‘Let her tell us her name’, demanded Father Peyramale, the parish priest. The child replied, ‘When I ask her, she smiles and does not answer’. Then, one day towards the end of the series of apparitions, the child feels brave enough to ask again, and to ask three times for the ‘Lady’s’ name. This time she was given the answer that startled the whole Church: ‘I am the Immaculate Conception’. These words meant nothing to the child but they certainly had meaning for the priest to whom she immediately repeated the answer. He was so overcome that he felt faint and was on the point of falling. There could be no further doubt, either about the child’s sincerity because she could not have invented words that she didn’t understand, or about the identity of the mysterious ‘Lady’. The actual words she used disconcerted some theologians but if we think about it, we can understand that by using these words the Blessed Virgin wanted to highlight the unique character of her privilege: she was not *a* but *the* Immaculate Conception; such a thing had never happened before and would never happen again.

We wish we could know what effect it had on Pius IX when he learnt about the apparitions in Lourdes, just as we know the confidences he shared about his feelings during the proclamation of the dogma. It seems that we don’t have anything comparable but the archives have preserved for us something very precious: a letter from St. Bernadette to Pius IX about the apparitions of 1858. It is dated 1876, three years before the saint’s death. Bishop de Ladone, who was bishop of Nevers at the time, went to Rome for his *ad limina* visit and he suggested to Bernadette that she should use the occasion to write to Pius IX and ask for his blessing. He himself would put the letter into the Pope’s hands. Although she was very nervous about doing this, Bernadette agreed to

the suggestion and she wrote the letter. Here is the main part of it: *'It seems to me that every time I pray for your intentions, the Most Holy Virgin must be looking down from heaven on you. Most Holy Father, when you proclaimed the Immaculate Conception, and when four years later, this good Mother came on earth to say 'I am the Immaculate Conception', I did not know what these words meant. I had never heard of them. Now, as I think of them, I often say to myself, 'How good the Blessed Virgin is! It could be said that she came to confirm the words of the Holy Father.' This makes me believe that you must have her special protection'*.

Pius IX followed with very great interest the effect that the apparitions at Lourdes had. He sent the Golden Rose to the sanctuary that was being built there as Our Lady had instructed. In Rome he had the pillar of Our Lady Immaculate, designed by the sculptor, Poletti, erected in Spanish Square. And in the Vatican he confided to the artist Podesti, the task of decorating the Immaculate Conception Room. Over his tomb in St. Laurence-outside-the-Walls, a mosaic, made according to the designs of Seiz, depicts the Blessed Virgin, crowned with stars, watching over her faithful servant, the great Pope who rightly deserves the title by which he will continue to be known by posterity, 'The Pope of the Immaculate Conception'.

His Eminence, Cardinal Jacques Martin

A Woman at the Centre of God's Plan

The whole of the Old Testament is oriented towards 'plenitude'. God takes the initiative. He sends His Son into the world to bring about a more intimate and lasting covenant. He willed that His Son should be born of a woman, as all human children are, so that He would be truly one of them and that they might all enjoy His fullness of being. The New Testament does not cancel out the Old, it brings it to fulfilment. The plenitude that comes with the Incarnation is the plenitude of maturity, not something passing. It signifies a completely new life which flows from the heart of God into our world, the life of God Himself. The promises made to David are fulfilled in a wonderful way. With God nothing is finished, everything is beginning.

So God's covenant with his people comes to perfection when the Son of Man became united with our humanity. This covenant is so intimate that nothing could ever separate the human from the divine. It is a covenant not based on self-interest but a covenant of love that transcends time and space. **God resumes His creative work for a new Eve and a new Adam.** This new Adam will not simply be made in God's image but will be His living image, His perfect resemblance. The new Eve, while still being a daughter of the first Adam, will be endowed with all the splendour of the second Adam from the first moment of her existence. This first glance that the Trinity gave to Mary, makes her the noblest model for our human race.

God has the same designs, the same plan and the same love for His Son who becomes incarnate as He has for the woman who gives that Son his human nature. God's designs on Mary are creative and sanctifying. The Incarnation is the finest and most precious gift that the Lord has given to our world. Thanks to the Son of God we are sharers in the divine nature. Saint Peter tells us *'He has given us the guarantee of something very great and wonderful to come: through this you will be able to share the divine nature'*. (2P.1:4).

The first person to benefit from these 'precious and most exalted promises' is, without doubt, the Virgin Mary. God Himself chose her to be the living and cognizant instrument for the fulfilment of His promises. It is true that no child can choose his mother or make her into the person he wishes her to be, but for the Son of God it was quite a different matter. He did choose his Mother and he did make her the person he wished her to be. Saint Bernard explains, *'God loved her and delighted in her in a way that was unique and that is why He showered on her in wonderful abundance gifts from His divine treasures, bestowing on her more than anything He bestowed on angels or on saints. So in the person of Mary who was totally and at all times free from any stain of sin, and was the most beautiful and perfect creature, we see the plenitude of innocence and holiness that nobody could have imagined existed outside of God, and only God*

could have thought of it'.

This supernatural beauty should not deceive us and lead us astray to the point of seeing the Virgin Mary as someone outside our human nature. Some people confuse the terms 'Immaculate Conception' and 'virginal conception and this is wrong. Like all children, Mary was conceived through the union of her parents. In this she is completely at one with the human race; in fact she had to be conceived in this way in order to pass on to the Son of God true descendancy from Adam. **In the Immaculate Conception God began the work of purifying all Adam's race through the light that comes from the death and resurrection of His Son.**

We can understand that God, who willed that His Son should take flesh in the womb of a daughter of Israel, should wish to prepare this daughter to be worthy of Him and of His Son. That is why He bestowed on her all the gifts she needed for the mission she was to carry out. She had to be utterly pleasing in God's eyes and the perfect woman in the eyes of men. Just as her Son is perfectly God and perfectly man, Mary is perfectly woman and perfectly mother. God did not just pretend to become incarnate; He really did take flesh in a real womb. In order for the Son of Man to be born a perfect man it was necessary that the woman in whose womb he would be formed, should likewise be perfect.

Just as, for long ages God had prepared the people of Israel for the coming of the Messiah, He secretly prepared the woman who was to bring him into the world. This preparation was mysterious, invisible and no human being could perceive it. When Mary was a child and a young woman there was nothing to distinguish her from her companions except, perhaps, the ardour of her glance. Everything in her was simple but it was the simplicity of fulness, not a simplicity that lacked anything. The Immaculate Conception took nothing away from Mary's womanhood. Quite the contrary; God enriched her with all the qualities of nature and of grace that would fit her to fulfil perfectly her special vocation with regard to her family, her husband, her people and all humankind.

What has been said about God's special preparation of Mary so that she could fulfil the mission God had in mind for her, can just as truly be said about her husband, Joseph of Nazareth. Of course the gifts bestowed on these two people were different, God's gifts are never mass-produced. The graces given to Mary and to Joseph are personal to each but they do have the same vocation; they are called to collaborate with God in His wonderful loving plan to give His Son to the world.

Father Bernard Martelet SJ
Doctor in Theology
Mary of Nazareth, Editions Saint-Paul

MAURICE ZUNDEL

**The Immaculate One,
our most reassuring and transparent intermediary**

From the first moment of her conception, Mary's life was totally directed towards God and towards Jesus. By a unique privilege accorded to her through the anticipated merits of Jesus on the Cross, Mary was free from that deceptive autonomy which makes people focus primarily on themselves and which is the mark of original sin. From the first moment of her existence Mary's life is one of total giving and complete self-emptying. Her gaze is fixed on God alone. In this sense she is utterly poor, she is in the image of God.

So it is perfectly clear that the Immaculate Conception means that Mary was invested and covered by the merits of Jesus. There is nothing in her that does not come from Him. There is nothing in her that He has not ordained. She is in the fullest sense His Mother and from the first moment of her existence she lives out the mystery of poverty which is the key to the Gospel. We contemplate this poverty in the Blessed Trinity, the poverty which sets the seal on Our Lord's humanity and which we find again in Mary, rendering her wholly transparent and making her the inseparable sacrament of the divinity.

For Jesus to have been conceived in her virginal body Mary had to be utterly pure and totally oriented towards Him.

Mary's motherhood which permeated the deepest and most intimate parts of her personality, is a motherhood that lasts for ever and so the virginal conception of Jesus is rooted in Mary's Immaculate Conception; it is the indispensable and complementary aspect of His virginal conception. If we went no further than Matthew's account of this miraculous and wonderful happening we might think that Mary is a virgin simply because she has no carnal knowledge of man, but no! There is something much more profound here, something that goes back to Mary's very origin.... From the first moment of her existence she is oriented towards the Redeemer, she is totally consecrated to Him, she is already alive with His presence, she gives a radical consent to her mission.... Her personality is sealed in the person of Jesus, so that her motherhood can make her person share some equation of light with the person of Jesus who will be brought to birth precisely because of her contemplation and her total self-giving.

Without her we can do no good! With her we cannot do evil. So we must always keep close to her. And every time we feel weary, worn out, crushed by life's labours and trials, by all the dust that has accumulated in our lives, by all the infidelities that arise from our frail human nature, we have to expose ourselves to that virginal light, and simply by doing this, by following in her wake, we begin to breathe more easily, we see things more clearly and we are drawn gently and interiorly to the centre of this light,

Jesus.

Maurice Zundel

Theologian

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CARDINAL CARLO MARIA MARTINI

O Mary, you have been ardently loved for countless ages

By her Immaculate Conception, the most Blessed Virgin gives us the perfect example of the dignity of life from its earliest moments: it is a grace that she expresses in her life by obedience. This dignity is the fruit of grace, that is to say, the fruit of God's love.

The Gospel tells us that Mary was full of grace. In the original Greek text the verb here is in the passive (so it signifies something that has been received) but the passive has been changed to the past tense. We can interpret it like this, 'O Mary, you have been infinitely loved for countless ages'. **This is the reason for Mary's dignity: 'O Mary, you have been infinitely loved for countless ages, from the beginning of time'.**

So when we contemplate Mary, and refer to the Letter to the Ephesians, which speaks of God's eternal designs, we are also meditating on the dignity of all people, the dignity of each one of us, of every child that is born, of every life that is conceived. The words, '*O Mary, creature who has been infinitely loved for countless ages, who from the beginning was present in the love and the designs of God*' have meaning for us, too. He '*chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world*', He has blessed us from all eternity with '*all kinds of spiritual blessings in Christ*'. (Eph 1:3-4).

Man's dignity comes from the grace of being loved. Being loved presupposes that we allow ourselves to be loved and that we will express this in obedient listening to God's word. This welcoming acceptance of the Word of God finds perfect expression in Mary's response to the angel, '*be it done unto me according to your word*'. (Lk 1:38). Human dignity is an honour that we have freely received and this dignity is manifested in obedience.

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, SJ
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Former Archbishop of Milan.*
In the pathways of the Lord, Ed. DDB

ANSLEM GRÜN

A feast that brings optimism

During the season of Advent, the Catholic Church celebrates, on 8th December, a feast that emphasises an important aspect of Christmastide. There are many people who know little about this feast or do not know what to think or do about it: it is the feast of Mary, the Mother of God, who was conceived without original sin. This dogma teaches that Mary was conceived in this way in order to give life to Christ and if we bring this

into our situation today, it means that through Christ, we, too, are exempt from sin. To the degree that Christ is living within us, sin has no power over us. In that inner space where Christ lives in us, faults and sin have no access; sin loses its power.

When we meditate on Mary, we are meditating on our own human nature, on the mystery of our redemption by Jesus Christ. When we celebrate Mary, that pure being who was innocent of all double-dealing, free from all self-seeking and who abandoned herself to God without any reservation, we can think that within us, too, there is something pure, transparent, something of integrity, something immaculate. We shouldn't be constantly thinking of ourselves as sinners but as **human beings that God has transformed in Jesus Christ.**

So the Church celebrates a feast that inspires us with optimism. It reflects the brilliant light shed by the Nativity and projects this light on to our wounded, broken nature. Very often we feel that we are not pure and sinless. Even when we perform a good action we have other things in mind as well as that action, we would like to be well thought of by others, we would like them to know what we do. We know that we have a tendency to appear better than we really are. Selfish motives can even creep into our love of our neighbour. In Mary we see the mystery of our own redemption. We are not just disturbed and errant beings, there is within us, also, a nucleus of limpid purity that is not tainted by fault or sin. The Epistle to the Ephesians teaches us this: *'He (the Father) chose us in him (Christ) before the foundation of the world, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence'*. (Eph 1:4); where Christ is living in us we are without stain. Even if we are very much aware of our mendacity and our unfaithfulness, we can still believe in that small pocket of purity we carry within us. Something inside us is undamaged and perfectly receptive to God's love. The feelings of guilt that we often torment ourselves with, cannot penetrate here: self-reproach and the devaluing of self that accompanies it are excluded; in this place we are in harmony with ourselves.

In some Catholic regions of Germany they keep up the custom of carrying Mary's statue to different places, and in recent times this custom has been revived in many parishes. The members of one family carry the statue of Our Lady to the home of another family and then both families celebrate a little ritual. For example, they read the Scripture account of Mary's meeting with Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56), they pray together and sing a hymn. The statue is given a place of honour and stays with the host family for a day. This family is invited to remember that each one of us is Mary, that in these days of Advent each one of us is made fruitful by the Word of God. And Mary teaches us, too, that in all the noise and flurry of the weeks leading up to Christmas, we carry within us a silent space where God is present. Mary's statue reminds the family to which it is taken that in spite of all conflicts, each one of us carries within us a core of immaculate purity that no tensions and no misunderstandings can change. The members of families that have the statue in their house begin to see each other in a different light; they no longer focus their attention on one another's faults but look on them with the eyes of faith and recognise their goodness, realising that behind their façade which is often objectionable, they still aspire to holiness, wholesomeness, integrity and peace. So this custom of carrying Mary's statue to different places can serve to dissipate the shadows that can

overcast life in common and reinforce our hope is seeing Christ born in each one of us. Where Christ is there can be no access for sin, we are pure and sanctified.

Anselm Grün OSB

Doctor in theology

Short meditation on the feasts of Christmastime, Ed. Albin Michel

ANSELM GRÜN

A future marked by hope!

Many Christians feel a certain unease with regard to the feast of the Immaculate Conception. It reminds them of the Church's rather negative attitude to the body and the doctrine of original sin, which is not easy to grasp. Mary seems here to be way above our human condition and the only creature to enjoy the privilege of being free from sin. But that is not the real significance of the feast.

The Fathers of the Church see in Mary Immaculate an image of the spotless Church and of our own sanctification through Christ. The image of the Immaculate Conception is only meant to express in a concrete way the words we read in the Letter to the Colossians: *'Now He has reconciled you by his death, and in that mortal body. Now you are able to appear before him, holy, pure and blameless'*. (Col 1:22) We do not venerate Mary in order to place her outside our common state but to celebrate in her the mystery of our own redemption.

The Fathers of the Church see Mary as first of all prefiguring the mystery of the Church, which has been purified from all sin through the death of Christ. This image of Mary illustrates Saint Paul's words in the Letter to the Ephesians, *'He wanted to present the Church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – so that she may be holy and without blemish'*. (Eph 5:27). This image presents the Redemption as liberation from the guilt that enslaves us. In the Church, God gave Himself, through his Son, a saintly people in whom grace is more powerful than sin.

With regard to the Immaculate Conception, the Fathers are not concerned about the circumstances of Mary's birth. They do not dissect the image in the way that theology has done in recent centuries; for them, the mystery expresses our sanctification through Christ. This sanctification is first of all for the Church as the People of God, but it also operates in the spiritual life of individuals. What grace began to effect in Mary has to be accomplished in us, too. That is why on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, we are celebrating our own mystery. We, who used to be enslaved by sin, have been freed from it by Christ with Mary. We are no longer completely tainted by the corruption of the world, we are not fundamentally evil or bad, in us grace is more powerful than sin.

The feast of the Immaculate Conception expresses our desire for purity. Could there not be somebody untainted by sin and pure from the first moment of their existence? This would have to be a person not focused on self and always seeking what is to their advantage. Yes, says the feast of the Immaculate Conception, such a creature does exist. There is indeed someone whose inner life has not been corrupted by sin. This person is Mary, one of us and like us. She is not as she is through any merit of her own, God has been at work in her. He has filled her with grace to such a degree that there is now no room in her for evil.

But in Mary we are celebrating our own human condition, what can be achieved in us, our own redemption. We, too, have been purified by Christ. In us there is an inner space where only God dwells. Some people continually see themselves as blameworthy and they allow others to censure them. They cause their own distress. The feast of the Immaculate Conception wishes to tell us that there is a part of our inner self that escapes our feelings of guilt, is immune to our failings, and gives no entrance either to the wickedness of the world or to our own guilt. It is that part of us where only God and Christ can find a home. This is what we are celebrating and in doing this we can breathe freely because we sense that Christ has freed us from the feelings of guilt that torment us, from the ever-present fear that we fall short of what we ought to be, of failing and being displeasing to God. The image of Mary Immaculate restores our confidence in God's boundless love. It takes away the anguish of existential guilt, the anguish which is such a characteristic feature of people suffering from depression.

It is an optimistic view of humankind that this feast presents; it offers a different image from the one given by contemporary literature. Modern writers portray people living in a world of commerce and fratricidal conflict, condemned to pursuing achievement and success at any price; without their realising it they become guilty. Society's structures are unjust and these render people guilty in spite of themselves. And there is no way of escape. Although contemporary authors give an accurate description of the human condition, they do not know the whole truth; there are people who, like Mary, are not imprisoned by guilt. Moreover we do, indeed, have the means of escaping from the frantic whirlwind of this guilt.

The mystery of the Immaculate Conception is not in opposition to the Lutheran teaching about corrupt human nature. However, we, like Mary, have been remade by Christ; *'And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation'*. (2Cor 5:17). Through Christ we are pure and spotless. On this feast we praise God for the working of His grace in us. It is the feast of God's grace and, as such, it addresses the concerns of the Reformers: moreover, it does this much more powerfully than do the incessant calls made by preachers enjoining us to do this or that and putting the emphasis on our responsibility. There is a style of preaching which only gives listeners a bad conscience. These people leave the service feeling that they are bad and incapable of changing in any way for the better. Excessive demands made by moralisers have the opposite effect to that intended, they leave people feeling sad and resigned to their condition.

The feast of God's grace which we celebrate in the person of the most pure Virgin, is meant to give us hope and confidence. We celebrate the power of divine grace which allows us sinners to come before God as pure and spotless. With Mary before our eyes throughout the day, the image of the Immaculate One renders us a little more pure and innocent. We discover within ourselves a place that evil cannot reach, an inner centre uncontaminated by sin and totally bathed in God's grace. We celebrate the fact that God's grace in us is stronger than sin. Mary awakens in us a desire for spiritual purity. Her image evokes the premonition of a purity that is already ours, something we are able to have through the merits of Christ. After this feast we will no longer feel weighed down by demands that are too heavy for us to bear; we will feel saved and loved by God. We will know that God's unbounded generosity which we see in Christ,

envelops us, also; a generosity that bestowed all sweetness and purity on Mary.

Anselm Grün, OSB

Doctor in theology

Landmarks for living. Ed. Mediaspaul

Mary's beauty, a pledge for humankind

In order to understand the founding message communicated to Catherine Labouré we have to think back to the series of apparitions as a whole: the apparition revealing Saint Vincent's heart, the times that Our Lord appeared in the Blessed Sacrament, the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin....

...The apparition of the Blessed Virgin on 27th November 1830 is of crucial importance. This was the one that would give concrete form to the mission entrusted to Sister Catherine: the medal which was so novel and so rich in symbolism that it wasn't long before the people called it the Miraculous Medal.

It was a **woman of indescribable beauty** who appeared to St. Catherine; a resplendent woman reflecting the beauty of God, the beauty of the glory that radiates from Christ at the Transfiguration as it will one day radiate from those who have risen and the glory which, by grace, can be reflected 'as in a mirror' on human countenances even here on earth.. (cf. 1Cor 15:43).

Meditating on God's beauty and on the grace of the beauty he bestows on the saints, is one of the important traditions in theology and eastern spirituality. The beauty that transfigures the face of Mary and the clusters of '*rays of wondrous beauty*' that flow from Mary's hands in the vision of the Medal, are one of the most striking expressions of this beauty to be found in Western Christian tradition. The rays are even more significant since they are there as '*the symbol of the graces that Mary obtains for humankind*'. [The colour of her robe (the whiteness of early dawn) serves to emphasise in its own way, the beauty of Mary Immaculate who, from the first moment of her existence, lived in God's light.].

This wonderful vision of beauty unfolded against the background of a picture around which Sister Catherine read the invocation, written in letters of gold, '*O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you*'. As was to happen later on at Lourdes, Mary was seen as the **Immaculate Conception**, a very powerful aspect of Marian devotion in western Catholicism in the nineteenth century.

Let us recall the very precious evocation of this in some words from the Second Vatican Council: '*It was customary for the Fathers to refer to the Mother of God as all holy and free from every stain of sin, fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature. Enriched from the first instant of her conception with the splendour of an entirely unique holiness...*' (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no.56).

In the course of the vision, the medal turns over and on the back of it Catherine makes out the letter M surmounted by a small cross and underneath, the sacred hearts of Jesus and Mary. This final stage of the vision is tremendously important. It reveals Mary

as being **totally oriented towards Christ the Redeemer**, as His Mother and as the Servant of the Lord (Lk 1:38), as the one who was always careful to live in accordance with the light of God's Word (Lk 2:23) and as the one who spoke to the servants at the marriage feast of Cana, and through them to the whole world, saying, '*Do whatever he tells you*'. (Jn 2:5). This vision is a strong vindication of Mary's powerful intercession.

But it is precisely the work of 'intercession': a motherly intercession as at Cana and the intercession of the handmaid she always desired to be. Her heavenly mission is 'the glory of God', as she said in her first apparition, defining the aim of the mission she was going to confide to Sister Catherine. If, in the founding message of the 1830 apparitions the glory of God is reflected in Mary, it is because through her intercession and intervention that humankind comes to discover and to love the God who is Love. In short, **Mary is an Evangeliser**.

The Medal is an icon for the poor. Most often it is made from metal that has no market value and costs almost nothing. Anybody at all can obtain it. Wearing the medal is a sign of confidence in and devotion to her who, in the order of grace is our Mother, just as a family heirloom – especially a wedding ring – can have great sentimental value.

We humans need signs and symbols. The overwhelming popularity of the Medal and its effectiveness show what a marvellous idea it was. Devotion to Our Lady is one of Christianity's most important traditions. According to the New Testament, Mary is closely associated with the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption. Mary is God's gift to humanity and is also the path that leads to Him.

The Medal, as part of the whole founding Message of the 1830 apparitions to Catherine Labouré, is a means of evangelisation. We have to look beyond the symbolism and strive to discover the whole message and then put it into practice.

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Doctor in theology

**Mary's privilege of the Immaculate Conception
is a privilege for us, too!**

Dogma expresses the living faith of the People of God. In the Virgin Mary we recognise **the successful outcome of God's action in our world**. In becoming man, He did not come to stick a small patch on an organism that was not functioning well but to renew it interiorly and resurrect it.

The Immaculate Conception is the sign of God's successful work in the Incarnation. He found someone who allowed herself to be loved. Mary is the creature who welcomes grace and allows herself to be continually changed by the gift God has given her. She respects God's freedom, she allows love to do its work, her life is totally immersed in grace that was hers from the beginning.

When we speak of a privilege being granted to Mary, we forget that this privilege was meant to be shared and that **it involves all of us**. The dogma does not add a pearl to Mary's crown, it illuminates the very reality of our lives. The poor and the lowly are illuminated by God's glance in their direction.

When some theologians call this dogma into question I tell them there are two ways of understanding the living reality of faith. If we take the external view of it and think only of words and formulas, it is easy to see the literal differences between what we find in the 'dogma' and what we have in the Gospel. But faith is not a catalogue of abstract ideas, it is a heart that lives, grows and develops. Now, what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is telling us is **the essence of the mystery of God's gift**. It shows us that the Incarnation and Redemption have been achieved in this lowly person, Mary, who is at the heart of our human sinfulness.

Our Lady represents the Marian part of us that has always been there. Even the most brutal of executioners has within himself a tiny part of unsullied purity. The Gospel texts clearly show us Mary's faith, her openness to God's word which made her heart totally ready to do God's will. We can see that this attitude of availability is not peripheral to her faith, rather it is the keystone of it: in the person of Mary we have both the God who gives Himself and the creature who says 'yes'. She is a lowly disciple, wholly clothed in the beauty of her God, something that we, too, are called to become, thanks primarily to the sacrament of baptism and renewed by the sacrament of reconciliation.

God looks on us in the way that the father in the parable looked on his prodigal son. He did not see the 'prodigal', he saw his 'son'. **In every woman and man God**

sees the person who will be His well beloved child for all eternity. This is what the Immaculate Conception is saying to us. It is not a dogma that has been invented because this would make us despair of faith, of God and of man.....In his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells us that we are called to be *'holy and blameless in God's presence, in love'*. The privilege of the Immaculate Conception is for us, too!

I believe that Mary is the finest illustration of one of the truths of faith that transcends historic divisions among Christians: we are saved by God's free gift. **It is creation being restored to its original state,** it is the world being created anew, a world that is utterly transparent and receptive to grace, the gift of God. The "yes" uttered by God when He created the world, hears the echoed reply of Mary's 'yes'. That is why the world exists. And it is not just marginal to the life we have to live....

Father André Cebes
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**“Totus Tuus”
The Marian way of John Paul II**

When speaking of the Rosary at the end of the year that he wished to dedicate to this devotion, to mark his 25 years as Pope, John Paul II described this prayer as the privileged ‘Marian way’¹ of contemplating the face of Christ and becoming his disciple. This Marian way is something that we see very early on in the life of the young Karol Wojtyła: he himself recognised it at the outset of his vocation. ‘I was already convinced that Mary leads us to Christ but then I began to understand, too, that Christ leads us to his Mother’.²

Reading St Louis Marie de Montfort’s ‘Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin’ provided the answer to all his doubts, for he had feared that Marian devotion ‘being developed to an excessive degree might end up compromising the supremacy of devotion to Christ’. The saint showed him that belonging totally to Jesus is more surely effected by Mary than by any purely personal decision to make this commitment. ‘I am all thine and all that I have is thine, my dearest Jesus, through Mary your holy Mother’.³ The Marian direction taken by John Paul II is the way that leads straight to Christ, the Redeemer of mankind, Christ who alone is able to restore his creature to its original, sinless beauty.

‘No other person can introduce us in the way that Mary does to the divine and human aspect of the mystery of Redemption. Nobody was introduced to it in the way that Mary was by God himself’. By her yes Mary becomes present to each one of us, Mary reveals to us the inexhaustible love of the Father’s heart. ‘Consequently, Mary should be found in every aspect of the Church’s daily life’.⁴

So, on the feast of the Annunciation 2004, the Holy Father can say to us, ‘My thoughts turn to some important moments at the beginning of my pontificate; to 8th December 1978 when, at St. Mary Major, I entrusted the Church and the world to the Blessed Virgin; to 4th June of the following year when I renewed that dedication in the sanctuary of Jasna Gora. I think particularly of 25th March 1984, the Holy Year of the Redemption. Twenty years have gone by since the day when, in Saint Peter’s Square, and in spiritual union with all the bishops convoked beforehand, I desired to confide the whole of humankind to the Immaculate Heart of Mary’.⁵ So the Pope invites all Christians to follow this way. As we are celebrating in 2004 the 150th Anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, and the Holy Father is going back to Lourdes, we have to rediscover the grace that is being offered to us redeemed creatures and rediscover, too, the path to that grace, the way of salvation through the Cross (following the Marian way does not exempt us from suffering) and finally rediscover the vocation and mission of the Church which is completely encapsulated in Mary, the Immaculate Conception.

‘Full of Grace’

The words of the angel’s greeting are simple and beautiful: ‘Rejoice for you are full of grace!’ ‘The words of the angel are closely linked: Mary is invited to rejoice, above all, because God has filled her with grace in view of the divine motherhood! Grace is the source of joy and true joy comes from God...Full of grace is the name that Mary has in the eyes of God’.⁶ And this name is in accord with the mission confided to her: Mary must be able to let the Son of God work perfectly in her, He must be everything to her, she belongs entirely to him. Mary is the first to welcome this gift and this vocation of grace, she is above all Christians and the Church: we are all miracles of grace, we only exist because of the freely-given love of our God, and we have to share this with the world.

We should not be surprised, then, that Mary’s appearance at Lourdes on 11th February, should have been preceded by a noise that seemed like a powerful wind, and then by a dazzling light. Mary only exists in the light of the Holy Spirit. The Pope likes to call her ‘the Spouse of the Spirit’, as Francis of Assisi and Louis-Marie had done. ‘In her the relationship with the Holy Spirit is enriched by her being his spouse...The Holy Spirit has already come down on her who, at the Annunciation, will become his faithful spouse’.⁷ Mary allows the Holy Spirit to act. This reveals her role with regard to us: the Immaculate Virgin allows the Father to conceive in our world the Beloved Son he desires to give us, the well-beloved Son that he eternally fathers in the Spirit of love and life.

The dogma of Mary’s Immaculate Conception and her total transparency to the action of the Spirit, is not, therefore, an optional extra to our faith, it is at the heart of the Good News even though the teaching has only recently been formulated. We are creatures of grace and we are created in order to generate grace. But we need time to admit this total dependence on love, this unique fruitfulness of love. Mary, a lowly creature, comes to show us, through Bernadette, that God wishes to make use of the poor who will not be tempted to impose their own worth on him. Mary recognises in Bernadette the lowly creature that she herself is, but a lowly creature who unreservedly says yes to love.

‘At the Foot of the Cross’

Through the action of the Holy Spirit who overshadows her, Mary is configured into Christ and becomes the humble handmaid mirroring the Servant of God. Mary is led, step by step, to the uttermost limits of her gift, to the foot of the Cross. Mary’s yes makes her become ‘God’s privileged collaborator in the New Covenant’.⁸ In this we can see ‘a singular vindication of the feminine personality. Mary signifies the complete emancipation of women’. Her yes ‘represents not just her acceptance of the motherhood offered her: it signifies even more Mary’s commitment to the mystery of Redemption....This trend towards the redeeming sacrifice dominated all Mary’s life as mother’.

When he came to Lourdes as a pilgrim during the Jubilee Year of Redemption, the Holy Father was able to sum up her way of acting: 'The sinless Virgin comes to the help of sinners... Let us frankly admit that our world is in need of conversion. Now the sinless Virgin reminds us here about this predominant need: she says to us, as she did to Bernadette, Pray for sinners, come and wash, come and purify yourselves, come and drink from new life... For if Mary is powerfully represented as the enemy of Satan and as the opposite of sinfulness, she shows herself here as 'the friend of sinners'.⁹ And Mary is close to sinners because she is all holy and closest to Christ the Saviour. 'Why exactly do sick people come on pilgrimage to Lourdes? Why has this place become for them almost a 'Cana of Galilee' where they feel called in a special way to come...? Because they know that here, as at Cana, the mother of Jesus is present. And wherever she is, Jesus, too, cannot fail to be present...

Through Mary the saving power of Christ will be manifested in them.¹⁰ But this will be primarily on the spiritual level.... 'At Lourdes the sick discover the inestimable value of their own suffering. In the light of faith they come to grasp the fundamental significance that pain can have not only in their lives which are interiorly renewed by this flame that consumes and transforms, but also in the life of the Church, Christ's Mystical Body. The Most Holy Virgin who courageously remained standing there on Calvary beside her Son's Cross, to personally take part in his Passion, is able to convince other souls to unite their own sufferings to Christ's sacrifice, in a choral 'offertory' that can transcend time and space to embrace and to save the whole of humankind'.

If 'the Immaculate One is the first wonder of Redemption...we must first of all say that Mary was created immaculate so that she could act more efficaciously on our behalf. Fullness of grace...gave the maximum value to her cooperation in the sacrifice. The unique privilege of her Immaculate Conception is put at the service of all and is a joy for all who look on her as their mother'.¹¹ On Calvary Mary sees beyond those who look on Jesus as someone accused by God: 'No. it is not 'devouring rage' that threatened to annihilate her Son; it was the furnace of God's Love consuming the sacrificial lamb and thus confirming the divine acceptance of the sacrifice of his life...Mary recognises in her own heart that is pierced by a lance, the dying heart of her Son and the furnace of divine love'.¹²

Mary participates interiorly in the sacrifice and she, too, makes her offering. That is surely the main reason why we can call her 'woman of the Eucharist'¹³, she is humankind-Church which associates itself with the gift that God makes of himself in offering up his Well Beloved Son. Here on the Cross, too, her true and immaculate being is engendered, she is conceived immaculate in love and in her loving faith, and it is given to her to conceive the people of believers, the people who offer.

At the Heart of the Church

On 8th December 1985 the Pope presided at the closing of the Extraordinary Synod convoked for the twentieth anniversary of the end of the Second Vatican Council. 'At the end of the second millennium after Christ, the Church ardently desires one thing:

to be the same Church that was born of the Holy Spirit when, in the Cenacle at Jerusalem, the apostles persevered in prayer with Mary. Because from the beginning the Church had at the heart of its community the one who is 'the Immaculate Conception'. And they look on her as their model'¹⁴. Later on, John Paul II would clarify this: 'The Virgin Mary is a figure of the Church, not as prefiguring something imperfect, but as spiritual plenitude'; she is the model of motherhood, of virginity, of the Church's sanctity, she is the model of its faith and its charity: 'the earthly life of the Mother of God is characterised by her perfect harmony with the person of her Divine Son and by her total consecration to the work of redemption he accomplished'¹⁵.

The utterly transparent reflection of God, Mary, the Immaculate One, gives birth by the power of the Holy Spirit. By her faith, she is behind all the sacramental actions of the Church, behind all the deeds of love and service, she is the human being who corresponds perfectly with God's gift in Jesus. The Holy Father recognises her place at the heart of the Church's Eucharist; from the Incarnation to Calvary, she 'lives a sort of anticipated Eucharist, that is to say, a communion of desire and of offering' which allows the prayer and the actions of the disciples to join in the gift made to them. She is the 'woman of the Eucharist'; and this is the same as saying that she is the Immaculate Conception.

We know that Pope John Paul has, on several occasions, and with increasing solemnity, entrusted to her care today's Church, the Church of a new Advent and a new Pentecost. 'You are the radiance which in no way detracts from the light of Christ because you exist in Him and through Him. In you everything is fiat, utter transparency and fullness of grace.... To you, salvation's dawn, we confide our journey during the new millennium, so that guided by you, people will discover Christ, the light of the world and our only Saviour'¹⁶.

We can see why John Paul, after discovering more and more that Christ is in Mary, through the infinite fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit, should have wished to rededicate himself to her as he saw his physical powers deteriorating: it is no longer just a personal matter but something relating to Christ in his Church,: 'Most holy Mother, obtain for me strength of body and spirit, so that I may fulfil to the end the mission that our Risen Saviour has confided to me. Into your hands I place all the fruits of my life and my ministry; to you I confide the future of the Church...in you I trust and once again I say, "*Totus Tuus, Maria! Totus Tuus. Amen*"¹⁷,

Father André Cabas

Doctor in theology

Extract from Lourdes Magazine, July-August 2004

Notes:

- ¹ Discourse given on 7th October 2003 at Pompei and general audience of 29th October. Documentation Catholique (DC), no. 2303, 7th December 2003
- ² My vocation, gift and mystery, French Ed. 1996, p.42
- ³ Letter to the Montfort family, Dc 2310, 21st March 2004
- ⁴ Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, § 22
- ⁵ DC 2312, 18th April 2004
- ⁶ General Audience, 8th May 1996, DC 2139, 2nd June 1996
- ⁷ General Audience, 10th January 1996, DC2131, 4th February 1996
- ⁸ General Audience, 4th May 1983, DC 1853, 5th June 1983
- ⁹ Homily at his arrival at the Grotto, 14th August 1983, DC1858, 4th September 1983
- ¹⁰ Homily of 12th February 1980, DC 1782, 16th March 1980
- ¹¹ General Audience, 7th December 1983, DC1865, 1st January 1984
- ¹² Homily at Innsbruck, 27th June 1988, DC 1967, 7th August 1988
- ¹³ Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* § 53-58
- ¹⁴ Homily, 8th December 1985, DC 1909, 5th January 1986
- ¹⁵ General Audiences, 6th August and 3rd September 1997, Dc 2168, 19th October 1997
- ¹⁶ Act of trust in Mary, on the occasion of the Bishops' Jubilee, 8th October 2000, DC 2235, 5th November 2000.
- ¹⁷ Homily at the sanctuary of Kalwaria Zebrzydowska (19th August 2002) DC 2277, 6th October 2002

**Following in the footsteps of the Founders,
the Company lives in accordance with the Gospel,
as Mary did**

'The celebration of our family feasts on 27th, 28th, and 29th November, takes on a special character this year...I invite you to draw some conclusions about the connection there is between the dates, 25th March, 27th, 28th, 29th November, and 8th December...Since the Company has been traditionally linked to Mary from its earliest days, I think we should entrust to her this new stage which is going to begin on 29th November 2004, the anniversary day of our foundation.' Mother Évelyne Franc.

**'27th - 28th - 29th NOVEMBER'!
THREE CONSECUTIVE DAYS OF CELEBRATING SPECIAL EVENTS!
A COINCIDENCE? A MESSAGE?**

Two preliminary observations about the 1830 apparitions

If we are to understand the core meaning of the founding Message of the 1830 apparitions, we would have to keep in mind all the specific circumstances relevant to it: not just the 'visions' and the 'words' that Catherine Labouré heard, but also her personality, her family background and the social and ecclesial milieu of the times. Two observations about the social and ecclesial background.

The epoch

The timing of the apparitions has its special significance, too: *'The period between 1815 and 1871 was the golden age of unbridled capitalism in France, as well as being a period of great poverty: life was extremely hard for the workers, money was king, and a policy of social aid was practically non-existent. The industrial boom was beginning to shake the foundations of life in France as it had done in Great Britain and as it would continue to do throughout the world until the 20th century. This would bring some material relief for many of the population in this industrial society but at the cost of how much suffering and personal and family tragedies! By sending Mary as an ambassador to Catherine Labouré, a Daughter of Charity belonging to one of the religious communities that give important witness of active evangelical charity by their service of the poor, God was taking sides against dire poverty and tremendous injustice. Let us not forget, either, the wave of dechristianisation that started at the beginning of the 18th century and which would progressively invade the whole of western Europe. The 1830 apparitions called people to pray, to have deep faith and active charity, so the message was of great significance within this particular historical context.'* (Father René Coste).

The dates

The two apparitions of 1830 took place on precise dates. We cannot fail to see that the first apparition was on *the feast of Saint Vincent*, the apostle of charity after the heart of God (until the Second Vatican Council, the Church commemorated Saint

Vincent on 19th July). The second apparition occurred on 27th November, *at the beginning of Advent*. More than being simply a coincidence, can we not see in this a key to reading the message of Mary Immaculate?

27th November

On 27th November 1830, Mary appears to Catherine completely enveloped in radiant light and resplendent with indescribable beauty. Mary reveals to her the intimate depths of her identity, she is 'conceived without sin'. She is the **Immaculate One**, full of grace. This second apparition coincides with the beginning of the period of preparation for **Christmas**, the feast of the One who '*came into the world to enlighten all men*' (Jn 1:9) and '*to kindle the fire*' of charity in people's hearts. (Lk 12:44).

The date of this apparition to St. Catherine which took place at the beginning of Advent, highlights **the role of Mary Immaculate in the mystery of the Incarnate Word** and it echoes the events commemorated on 25th March: '*The Father of mercies willed that the Incarnation should be preceded by assent on the part of the predestined mother....No wonder, then, that it was customary for the Fathers to refer to the Mother of God as all holy and free from every stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature. Enriched from the first instant of her conception with the splendour of an entirely unique holiness, the Virgin of Nazareth is hailed by the heralding angel, by divine command, as 'full of grace'. (Lk 1:28). Mary, consenting to the word of God, became the mother of Jesus. Committing herself wholeheartedly and impeded by no sin in following God's saving will, she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son, under and with him, serving the mystery of Redemption, by the grace of Almighty God*'. (LG 56).

By means of **the Medal**, Mary Immaculate is telling us once again that she is '**present in the midst of the Church**' as it makes its pilgrimage of faith (RM42,1) bestowing an abundance of graces on all. The 'motherly mediation' of Mary Immaculate, handmaid of the Lord, is based on the unique mediation of Christ on whom she is wholly dependent. 'This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterrupted....Taken up to heaven, she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for her Son's brethren whose pilgrimage on earth is not over..' (LG 62).

There can be no doubt that Catherine Labouré lived very intensely the time of Advent 1830. All her life would be illuminated by the 'rays of light' symbolising the 'charity' that Divine Fire comes to kindle in people's hearts.

28th November

The Church chose the day following the second apparition in 1830 as the day for commemorating **Saint Catherine**, the messenger of Mary Immaculate. Father Laurentin says of her, '*Catherine's supernatural insight, apart from the exceptional visions that were limited to just a few months of her Seminary, was to 'see' Christ in the events of*

daily life and particularly in the poor and sinners.....Her secret lies not so much in the fact that she was able to hide her identity as the seer, but rather that she was able to combine the wonders of the apparitions with the humble service she offered: the old men in the hospice, the poor of that locality for whom she had a special affection, and all the afflicted, sorrowing and marginalised. They found in her a haven. In her eyes they were special'.

Sister Catherine's spent **her entire life of service in the light of God that urged her to love.** Completely given to God and to the poor, she combined this twofold love, the visions and service, in one single love. A true Daughter of Charity, '*clothed in the spirit of Jesus Christ*', Catherine is a humble and simple Sister who can **see everything in God.** She comes like the first witness of a new type of sanctity devoid of glory or human triumph, that the Holy Spirit was beginning to raise up for modern times...Like thousands of other Daughters of Charity, Sister Catherine lived out **the charism of daily events as did the Immaculate Virgin Mary,** who is the model of this type of holiness.

29th November

The Company **celebrates its foundation** in 1633. Like the twelve apostles, gathered with Mary in the Cenacle to continue Christ's mission, twelve good village girls gather around Saint Louise, with Saint Vincent's blessing, to kindle, in their turn, the fire of charity among the poor, '*taking Mary there*' as their '*only Mother*'.

Three consecutive days

The events commemorated on these three dates that follow on from one another seem to be out of chronological order. But this coincidence allows us to see intuitively that Mary Immaculate is inviting us to intensify *ever more deeply* our love for her, so as to be *to a greater extent* 'rays of light' among the poor, by living the Gospel as she did, and in imitation of our Founders.

MARY IMMACULATE, 'ONLY MOTHER OF THE COMPANY'

'The Constitutions hold up before us Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as the model of the spiritual way. She, more than any other, created space for God in her life.' (Constitutions p.9). Mary is a permanent model for the Company.

The Company follows Mary on the mountain and then, descends with her to face the demands of everyday life. It visits women and men, and in spite of apparent sterility, it is there watching for signs of life, for possibilities, for life that is emerging in them. When it leafs through its family album it sees a picture of Stephanie in her wheelchair, Clarence who works twelve hours a day to feed his children, Fred in the street with his gang, Mamadou with the lepers, Eugenio with the illegal immigrants, Savang in the refugee camp, Antonio in his prison cell, Margaret in her hospital room, Luis and the other old people in the Retirement Home.....When the Company finds these along the wayside, wounded by life, it is filled with compassion. With infinite gentleness it soothes their wounds. Wherever people are suffering it strives to be the ever-open

door, the refuge of sinners, the mother of mercy.

Like Mary, the Company lives in the midst of people, in silence and simplicity. Her house is like all the others. She leaves her house to talk to the other people in the village. She weeps and she rejoices with them but she never preaches to them. More than anything else, she listens. She buys her provisions, she goes to the well for water, whenever there is a wedding, she is invited. In this way she meets people. Many folk like to sit down in her house for a few minutes: there is a happy atmosphere there.

Like Mary, the Company rejoices and sings. It knows that it has received God's freely-given love and that God has the heart of a mother. It recognises the Father who stands at the doorway, watching out for the unlikely return of his son. Instead of complaining about its lot and bemoaning the misfortunes of the world, it is lost in wonder at all that is beautiful on earth and in people's hearts. And it sees in all this the hand of God.

Like Mary, the Company does not know the answers before the questions are asked. Its path is not traced out beforehand. It experiences doubt and uncertainty for this is the price demanded by trust. It joins in dialogue and does not claim to know everything. Together with other people, it seeks ways of building a more just world where the lowly will be exalted.

Like Mary, the Company remains standing at the foot of the cross. With humble courage it stands firmly alongside the most deprived. It is vulnerable in its words and actions and when people are crushed it does not hesitate to *'leave God for God'*.

Like Mary, the Company allows the wind of Pentecost to come in, that wind that moves people to go out and serve new forms of poverty. Yes, in taking Mary to itself, the Company tries to be, in this world, hands radiant with light and a heart burning with love.

With Saint Catherine, the Company contemplates the immaculate heart of Mary so that this can be reflected in the very ordinary actions of every Daughter of Charity and thus the poor will be able to discover the motherly face of God who wipes away every tear and soothes every sorrow.

With Saint Catherine, the Company contemplates Mary Immaculate's way of seeing things in order to be able to *'turn the medal over'* and, with her, to recognise and admire in the faces of the poor, reflections of the heart of God.

Sister Anne Prevost
Daughter of Charity

News from the Provinces

NOMINATIONS

NOMINATIONS

PROVINCE OF PORTUGAL: Sister Domicilia Maria Guiomar was reappointed Visitatrice for three years, 6th July 2004

PROVINCE OF CRACOW: Sister Krystyna Jarosz was reappointed Visitatrice for three years, 8th July 2004.

PROVINCE OF HUNGARY: Sister Rufina Leitenbauer was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Magdolna Nagy, 13th July 2004.

PROVINCE OF AMAZONIA: Sister Josefa Eleni Bezerra was reappointed Visitatrice for three years, 1st September 2004.

PROVINCE OF ARGENTINA: Father Saturnino Redondo was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 5th April 2004

PROVINCE OF NORTH AFRICA: Father Felix Alvarez Sagredo was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 24th April 2004.

PROVINCE OF PAMPLONA: Father Jose Fernandez Riol was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 17th June, 2004.

PROVINCE OF BARCELONA: Father Jose Mulet was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 17th November 2004

PROVINCE OF CHILE: Father Arturo Galvis Nieto was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 17th June 2004

PROVINCE OF MOZAMBIQUE; Father Amindo Alredo Baloi was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 22nd October 2004.

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of the Philippines

4th Encounter of the Asian Visitatrices Bangalore, India

Namaste! (a form of greeting in India)! The 4th Encounter of Asian Visitatrices (AVE 4) was held from **21st August-1st September 2004, in Bangalore, India.** at the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC). 32 sisters, Visitatrices and their Provincial Councillors attended. The reunions were very warm and affectionate because bonds had already been made in preceding years.

With the help of different Commissions, Sister Maria Teresa Mueda, Visitatrice of the Province of the Philippines and coordinator for Asian meetings, was the main facilitator. The presence of Sister Évelyne Franc, Superioress General, was a special grace. On the second day she had a whole morning session with the participants on 'Vincentian leadership'. She highlighted the qualities of a good leader today: courage, compassion and creativity. These are the qualities that the whole Company also needs today. She presented the Action Lines dealing with authority, mission, relationships, formation, internationality of the Company, and vocations ministry. In the afternoon, Sister Évelyne had a meeting with the Visitatrices who shared with her their concerns and reflections and then she was able to meet each one of them individually. One of the most important points of her message was respect and love for each sister and respect for cultures. It is obvious that she feels strongly about these matters.

The participants said that Sister Évelyne's very human and approachable manner helped them to feel closer to the Mother House. Dhanyavad, thank you, Sister Évelyne.

21st August marked the opening of AVE 4 and the high point of this was an inculturated liturgical service. As the participants entered the hall they were given a *botu* (a red mark on their forehead) and a garland. The entrance procession was led by young women from the NBCLC who fascinated everyone with their liturgical dance. The entire liturgy was full of symbols unique to Indian culture and it was very beautiful.

At this time we were waiting for the new Constitutions and the theme of AVE 4 was '**Revised Constitutions and revitalised leadership**'. In her first talk, Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor, stressed the importance of 'contextualising the revised Constitutions'. We need to see the Constitutions:

- as a way of expressing the Company's tradition (not traditions)
- as expressing continuity with the past
- in their totality

The number of changes introduced in certain chapters is not to be taken as indicating that these are the most important. *'The Constitutions have been revised in the*

light of inculturating the charism. So the essential values of our charism need to be reworded in accordance with today's cultures. We need to identify the new cultural values that can enrich the way we live our charism today. Through inculturation, our charism is re-interpreted, re-expressed, and re-vitalised and this will bring a new dynamism and a new freshness to our lives'.

In her second intervention Sister Julma led the participants to a new understanding of the Company's internationality. The new Constitutions make the explicit link between inculturation of the charism and internationality. It is not enough to have internationality on the geographical level, we need to become more and more international, that is to say, a communion of Provinces that are truly inculturated...united in their multiculturality. She also reflected with the participants on some other revised points concerning formation.

Two other speakers discussed new values in the wider context of religious life, particularly in Asia. Sister Nonie Gutzier, an American Maryknoll Missionary in Taiwan spoke on the following topics:

- Fostering participation, co-responsibility and subsidiarity in religious communities for women.
- Decision making and creativity and the implications of these for leadership in the 3rd Millennium.
- Solidarity, justice and mission; challenges to be taken up by religious in Asia today.

Sister Sheena Kochettonil, SSPS (Handmaid of the Holy Spirit) from India, spoke on these topics:

- Exercising a value-oriented leadership.
- God- experience, leadership and discernment.

Recreational evenings with songs and dances gave everyone the opportunity to appreciate the richness of other cultures. A day of reflection and prayer helped the Sisters to interiorise all the reflections offered them in the light of Vincentian spirituality. The days that followed were devoted to personal reflection followed by sharing in groups. All the Sisters saw this experience as an Emmaus walk, with Sister Julma journeying with them patiently and lovingly, encouraging them and indicating the directions to be followed. She was a gift for AVE 4...and continues to be a gift for the Asian Provinces.

AVE 4 has begun to revitalise the Asian Daughters of Charity who are in positions of leadership. It has given our Provincial leaders a deep appreciation of the past, a dynamic hope for the future and the gift of celebrating the present through a firm commitment to live in fidelity to the revised Constitutions. Truly God is leading the Company to a new freshness of spirit, a new dynamism, a new time of grace. After AVE 4 ended, the participants returned to their own countries to start a new chapter in the life of their Provinces, with renewed fervour, deep trust in God's Providence, and the desire to live according to the revised Constitutions. AVE 4 has left in all those who came to it, the strong desire to leave to those who come after them the heritage of their faithfulness:

*'May all who come after us find us faithful,
may the flame of our devotion light up their way,
may the footprints that we leave lead them to believe,
may the way we live encourage them to live in obedience,
may all who come after us find us faithful'.*

Sister Roselyn Doromal
Daughter of Charity

TESTAMONIES OF THE SISTERS

Province of Nigeria

My experience with the young girls of “Bassin”

From the very beginning, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise responded to the needs of their times and sent the Daughters of Charity to bring relief to the destitute poor. In this way they were able to maintain the mobility needed for this as well as keeping to a life style close to the poor they served....having for cloister the streets of the city. (C 1.9).

I found it very difficult to fulfil my mission of carrying out a feasibility study for working with street children. I felt like a fish out of water, asking myself where would I start off and how would I begin. The warm welcome given to my companion and myself reassured me. Our arrival was good news for many people in the archdiocese of Kumasi. Many of these people had told us about their concern for the street children but what needed to be done for them was way beyond our imagination as their numbers were increasing every day.

After being in close contact for six months with the street children, especially the young girls of *Bassin*, as we call them, I cannot tell you that I know all the answers to their problems or even foresee how things will develop. The *journey* I made with them was for me both challenging and enriching. I was in close contact with them, hoping to learn something of their life stories and their history.

Many of us have had a stable background, have been in relatively comfortable circumstances and have been content to spend our lives in the place where we were born and grew up. Our family gave us a strong sense of belonging. It was in the family that we had our most significant human experiences and we developed within a more or less healthy emotional environment. So we cannot imagine what it must mean to leave the family home at the tender age of six or seven, in search of basic necessities or the minimum required for survival.

My first day in the street

Finding myself in the market in the centre of Kumasi one hot afternoon, I was moved to tears at the sight of waves of children carrying for people, loads that most of the time were three times too heavy for their age and doing this to earn a little money to meet their needs. Many of them were prostrate with fatigue on street corners, like sheep without a shepherd. The life of these children is a desperate struggle for survival. ‘What is going wrong?’, I asked myself. Are the adults not facing up to their responsibilities? Why are these children suddenly becoming adults and losing the innocence of childhood? Who is responsible for this deviation? Who are the losers and who are the winners in this sad situation?

It is sad to note that in spite of great progress in science and technology, people do not know happiness or plenty. The world is torn apart, levels of crime are increasing all the time and there continue to be wars between members of one religion and another, one tribe and another, one country and another. Family life is deteriorating. Children from broken homes, displaced and abandoned children, some of them very young, roam the streets trying to survive. 86% of these children who are constantly on the streets, are victims of family break up and most of them are aged between 7 and 15. What is God saying about this situation? We cannot rest easy without making a tremendous effort to create a world in which every individual, no matter how humble, is respected and cared for.

An unforgettable encounter

In order to come close to these street children, I had to try to understand their culture. Many of them had just arrived on the street and they couldn't speak *twi*. Instead, they tried to teach me *dacomba*, their mother tongue. I was only able to catch a few words because I had learnt *twi*. Some of them began to learn a few words; they found this very amusing and there was a lot of laughter. I benefited from their attempts to learn the language because it brought us closer together.

Although I thought I was being gentle, compassionate and reassuring in my approach, I was still unhappy because I felt a stranger in their midst. Being in unfamiliar surroundings and among people I did not know and trying to build up a relationship with them, I was daily confronted with the paradox and the difficulty of bringing together the different cultures. I tried to find the best way of being in contact with them but I felt like a little child. I tried to be vulnerable and trusting while at the same time being true to myself. The children themselves were not sure of me. Would I disappoint them, as so many other people had done? They were afraid to enter into a relationship and felt threatened. Sometimes I had the feeling that I was completely alienated, ill at ease, vulnerable and out of my element. I felt I was being subjected to what I might call a "ritual examination" in the street because they were weighing me up and comparing me with some reference points they were familiar with. Some of these occasions were embarrassing and unpleasant. This is an example of one such experience.

A young man came along as I was talking to the children. I will call him Mr X.

Mr X: Who are you, and what can you offer these children?

Sr P: I am a Sister of the Roman Catholic Church and I'm trying to find out from them the best way of helping them.

Mr X: But what can you offer them? Money, work, or what?

Sr P: At the moment I have nothing to offer, except just to be with them and find out how we can do something together.

Mr X: If you have nothing to give then you shouldn't be talking to them. A lot of people promise them things but never keep their promises. We have been marginalised and badly treated for so long we can't stand it any longer. If you have anything to offer, go to radio FM and announce it in public. If not, stop worrying these poor children.

I accepted what he said but the conversation had unsettled the children who began to doubt my good intentions. I tried to explain what I hoped to do but I wasn't successful. Mr X and the children became more and more angry. In fact, some of the children followed me as far as the cathedral and the administrator there had to intervene and try to calm them down and persuade them to be patient. I have to admit that I was terrified and I haven't been able to go back to that place for fear of being attacked.

My personal response

In spite of all this, I remained available, trusting, and faithful to the project. I became aware of my poverty and helplessness. Then I began to think that I was now close to them in their anger and frustration. Yes, society does not rate these children highly; they are insulted, badly treated, abused and misunderstood. They feel that they are at the bottom of the social ladder and have no hope of rising any higher. They are right to be suspicious of any individual or group that comes to listen to their story and then do nothing about it.

Whether we like it or not, the street has become a home and a means of livelihood for these children. It is here that they eat, work, sleep, socialise and are sexually active. In order to walk among them like the Christ of Emmaus rather than the Christ of the Transfiguration, I must put aside any trace of self-importance and learn the limitations imposed by their circumstances. In spite of its tension, its disorder and confusion, the change from serving physically handicapped people to working with handicapped lives, has given my life new dynamism, a new significance and a renewed sense of commitment.

Conclusion

In the streets of Kumasi there are thousands of children looking for physical and material well-being, as well as comfort and a sense of belonging: children who want to be accepted and treated as persons who are part of God's Kingdom. Working for these children is a new need and we have to respond to it. In making this response we should not give them things in the way that a patron or a benefactor would give, for this would create an unhealthy state of dependence. That would lower their self-esteem even more and make them even more unhappy. We are called to walk alongside them in humility, as friends, and at the same time we are to feel strangers among them. Let us try to build up a climate of equality, deliberately abandoning our privileged situation, just as Christ did. It is only then that they will forgive us for our love, or the bread we give them.

This may seem to us to be a daunting, ambivalent or agonising task, but with God on our side we will bravely carry it out. I would like to end this reflection with a poem

entitled 'People'; the author is anonymous:

There are people who do not know how important their lives are for others,
There are people who do not know how good it is just to see them,
There are people who do not know what consolation their kind smile can bring,
There are people who do not know what a comfort their presence is,
There are people who do not know how much they enrich our lives,
There are people who do not know they are a gift from heaven,
They will only know this if we tell them.

The street children need to hear the good news that God loves them and that there is more meaning to life than simply existing.

Sister Perpetua Essien
Daughter of Charity

NEWSBRIEFS

International Congress for the New Evangelisation (ICNE)

As part of the celebrations for the great Jubilee Year 2000, the Cardinals of Vienna, Paris, Lisbon, Brussels and Budapest decided to hold international Congresses for the New Evangelisation, organising large scale “urban missions” since modern urbanisation is one of the most significant features of this last century. After the **Vienna Congress in 2003**, there will be another Congress this year in **Paris**, from 23rd October to 1st November.

More than 500 initiatives, having as their aim: ‘To proclaim Jesus Christ, Source of Happiness’, were scheduled to take place in the city, on the squares in front of churches, in parishes.... A series of talks on the theme, ‘We are all called to proclaim the Good News’ was organised each morning in the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, to help people reflect on this mission for all Christians. (simultaneous translation in French, English, German, Portuguese, Dutch and Hungarian). Hundreds of workshops, prayer sessions and services of sorrow, public debates, testimonies, concerts, special performances etc, were open to everyone and these dealt with Christian commitment at all stages and in every aspect of life: cultural, family, social and political. ‘There have to be big events like these so that we can do things that are not ordinary in order to promote the ordinary’.

Life goes on in Slovenia

The Province of Yugoslavia, founded in **1919**, was flourishing until the Second World War. In **1945** the communist revolution expelled the Sisters, the Seminary was forced to close, and the works were all confiscated. Ten years later when communism was less rampant in Serbia, the Seminary boldly reopened, in **1954**, in Belgrade. More than 200 young Sisters of all the nationalities of the former Yugoslavia (Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian [Kosovan], Macedonian and Bosnian) were to make their Seminary there. In **1991**, political events led to the Province of Yugoslavia changing its name to “the Province of Slovenia”: the Provincial House and the Seminary will henceforth be at Sentjakob- Ljubljana. In **1999** the Region of Albania was created and in 2003 it opened a new Seminary at Durres, where nine young Sisters are currently in formation. (Province of Slovenia).

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