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TUESDAY 19<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2005

***“I am a simple, humble worker in the Lord’s vineyard”***

Photo of Benedict XVI

*“Dear Brothers and Sisters,  
in succession to the great Pope John Paul II,  
the Cardinals have elected me,  
a simple, humble worker  
in the Lord’s vineyard.*

*I find comfort in the thought  
that the Lord is able  
to use and to act through  
inadequate instruments.*

*And I particularly  
rely on your prayers.*

*Let us go forward  
in the joy of the Risen Lord,  
trusting in his unfailing help.*

*The Lord will help us, and  
Mary his Most Holy Mother  
will be at our side Thank you!*

First words spoken by Pope Benedict XVI  
before giving the blessing, “Urbi et Orbi”,  
on the day of his election, Tuesday, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2005

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Spiritual Life

**3<sup>rd</sup> Study document on the revised Constitutions**

**LIFE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY  
(CC 13, 16-26: SS 1-14)**

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In this third document we will be studying the first three paragraphs of chapter three. We will be presenting a good number of Constitutions and Statutes so our reflections will centre on some of the most important aspects of the Constitutions as well as the changes that have been introduced into them. So that this document will not be too long, we will leave aside other aspects which, though interesting, are of secondary importance. As in previous documents, we will follow the order of paragraphs and numbering as these appear in the Constitutions. We feel that this will make for clarity even if there could be some repetition, given the cyclical style in which the Constitutions are set out.

It is not enough simply to read the document. These documents are just instrumental perhaps in helping Sisters to assimilate the Constitutions. It is essential, therefore, that you study the text of the Constitutions both before and after you read the document. Beforehand, to orientate yourself, and afterwards to discover a deeper meaning to the Constitutions, and to review your life in the light of them. Of course, in addition to this study, it is advisable that you make the most important points part of your prayer. It is another way of assimilating the demands of your vocation and making them part of your life.

## II. MAIN CONTENTS OF THE DOCUMENT

### 1. “Given to God for the service of Christ in persons who are poor” (cf C.16-18, C.2.1-2.3 (1983))

Much of the subject matter of C.16 has already been covered in Chapter II but what is special about this article is that the points are now presented under the heading of “unity of life.” What do we mean by this expression? It highlights the fact that the Daughters of Charity have to combine in their vocation three inseparable dimensions of their life: giving themselves to God, the service of the poor, and community life. The three elements are interdependent and mutually enriching because they are all part of the “dynamic unity” that St. Vincent wanted for the Company, and which is now presented in the Constitutions (Cf. C.7b). This unity of life can be expressed as human equilibrium and the psychological capacity to face some difficult situations in the service of the poor and in the events of daily life.

In part “b” of this article there is an explanation of what we are to understand by the phrase “unity of life” from the perspective of service of the poor: this service is “*the expression of their total gift of self to God.*” This phrase invites us to avoid any possible dichotomy between our self-giving to God, and our service of the poor. This service should not be seen as the logical outcome of our dedication to God but as our way of expressing it, because the two fixed points of reference in Vincentian spirituality are inseparable. Just as God is found in the service of the poor, so the Constitutions clearly

state that service nourishes contemplation and at the same time gives meaning to community life.

The final part of C.16 describes the mystique that sustains the Daughters of Charity in their service of the poor. This means they have to look at the poor with the eyes of faith in order to see them as brothers and sisters, lords and masters, and Christ's representatives. We learn from masters, we serve lords and we love brothers and sisters. This Vincentian mystique can be perfectly summed up in terms of contemporary spirituality as "*being contemplatives in action.*"

Constitution 17 presents the mystery of the Trinity as the source from which the Founders nourished their spirituality, a source that the Daughters of Charity today must go to as the basis of their spiritual life. The phrase "*The Daughters of Charity go to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit*" is a classic expression of the traditional teaching of the Church: the Father is the Foundation and the Creator of everything; the Son is the Mediator and the Holy Spirit enables us to relate to the Father and the Son. The Constitution makes explicit reference to this Trinitarian spirituality in the following ways:

- With regard to God the Father, the Daughters of Charity maintain an attitude of filial confidence in His Providence as they remain in His hands and they aspire to live in constant dialogue with Him. Dialogue, God's hands, and Providence are three striking images that capture their relationship with Him and these sum up the truth that the best thing a person can do is to accomplish His will.
- Speaking of Christ, the Constitution highlights his Incarnation and Redemption, as well as his love for the poor. The spirituality of the Daughters of Charity has to be that of "following" this Second Person of the Trinity: "*Our vocation is in conformity with the life that the Son of God lived on earth... You have been chosen to imitate his holy life on earth. By our service of the poor we honour what the Son of God did while he was on earth, and his holy humanity.*"<sup>1</sup>
- With regard to the Holy Spirit, the Constitutions emphasise the need for the Daughters of Charity to be docile to his inspirations and dependent on him. The image that our founders used to illustrate our relationship with the Third Person of the Trinity is that of the principal source of action who uses us as instruments for accomplishing his mission.<sup>2</sup>

We will spend more time reflecting on C.18 because of its importance for the overall spirituality of the Daughters of Charity. It explicitly states the spirit of the Company as expressed by the particular virtues of humility, simplicity and charity. It begins with a statement about the Holy Spirit that follows through from the teaching set out in the previous Constitution. What does it mean in practice to live in dependence on the Holy Spirit? It means that the Holy Spirit will lead the Daughter of Charity to conform herself to the humble, simple and charitable Christ. This idea has already been

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<sup>1</sup> IX, 411, 55, 74

<sup>2</sup> Cf. IX, 374-378; XI, 411; SLM, 257-263

fully expressed in C.13, which gives the assurance that *“the evangelical virtues of humility, simplicity and charity are the path along which the Daughters of Charity allow themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit.”* In order to understand the importance of these statements and the emphasis placed on them, we might consider them from the opposite perspective: if a Daughter of Charity does not live in conformity with these specific virtues and if she is not essentially conformed to Jesus Christ who is *“meek and humble of heart,”* her life will not be subject to the Holy Spirit and she is not being led by Him. Such a Sister would be motivated by quite a different spirit.

It is so essential that each Sister let herself be led by the Spirit because it is precisely this that gives rise to three virtues that sum up “the spirit of the Company.” The following passage from Saint Vincent clearly illustrates this, *“You should know, then, my dear Sisters, that the spirit of the Company consists of three things: to love Our Lord and serve Him in a spirit of humility and simplicity. As long as charity, humility and simplicity exist among you, one may say, “The Company of Charity is still alive” but when these virtues are no longer to be seen, then one may say, “The poor Company of Charity is dead.” A Daughter of Charity who does not possess humility and charity is dead because she does not have the spirit of her state.”*<sup>3</sup> In today’s language we might say that the particular spirit connected with these three specific virtues, is not something that is of secondary importance in the Vincentian vocation, but it is an essential part of it, just as the objective of the Company is. Objective and spirit embrace and sum up every aspect of vocation. This shows us how important the subject is.

The second part of this Constitution considers each of the three virtues. If we compare the new texts with the corresponding ones in the 1983 Constitutions (Cf. CC 2,3), we will notice the considerable differences between them. The present text is very well constructed; it has kept faithful to the teachings of the Founders and, in addition, it has been enriched by overtones of present-day spirituality. We can almost feel the Assembly’s concern to present the particular virtues in a way that is relevant for our times. This concern is very natural but it is not something new. As far back as 1984 the then Mother General, Sister Lucy Roge, spoke about this to the Sister Servants making their retreat on 8<sup>th</sup> June that year and she asked, *“How are we to interpret the spirituality of the virtues and put it into practice in our day?”*<sup>4</sup>

**\*Humility.** The first statement introduces a new element: *“Humility prompts the Daughters of Charity to be aware of the gifts received from God, to be grateful for them and to place them at the service of others.”* The opening words of the 1983 Constitutions signified a very different approach: *“Humility makes them aware of their own utter poverty before the Lord, draws them close to the poor, and maintains them in an attitude of servant.”* The positive approach adopted in the opening lines of the revised Constitution may be asking us to discard, once and for all, the negative concept we might have regarding this particular virtue. The humble person, like Mary in her Magnificat (Cf Lk 1, 46-55), is able to recognise the gifts God has given her, and to do this simply and without affectation. This is why Mary’s canticle is so pleasing to God. The awareness of

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<sup>3</sup> IX, 536

<sup>4</sup> L. Roge, *The identity of the Daughter of Charity, today as in the past...* Echoes no.6 (1984)

life's deepest meaning that comes with humility, necessarily gives rise to thanksgiving because the person recognises that everything that he or she is and has, comes from God.<sup>5</sup> As regards our failings, we can say that humility makes us recognise these, forgive one another (as God so wonderfully forgives all humankind), and at the same time try to overcome our faults.

These statements about the virtue of humility conclude by asking the Sisters to preserve "an attitude of servants." This disposition is central to the teaching of the New Testament and is especially important for those in authority (and nearly all Daughters of Charity exercise some authority) "*If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all*" (Mk 9,35). In John's gospel Jesus teaches his disciples this way of understanding authority by washing their feet, a parable in action. (Cf Jn 13, 1-17). C.24 admirably reflects this aspect of humility when it says, "*Whatever their particular type of work and level of professional competence, the Sisters maintain towards persons who are poor, an attitude of servant, which implies the practice of the virtues of their state.*" So humility has nothing to do with passivity but signifies the joyful acceptance of being a servant who does things and handles matters for the benefit of the needy and the excluded.<sup>6</sup>

**\*Simplicity.** The revised Constitutions include the following quotation from Saint Vincent: "*As for myself,*" he said, "*I don't know, but it seems to me that God has given me such a great appreciation of simplicity that I call it my gospel. I have a special devotion to saying things as they are and this gives me consolation.*"<sup>7</sup> In the light of this explanation from Saint Vincent, we may regard this virtue of simplicity as a way of being and of manifesting to the world what we are; a way of relating to oneself, to God, to people and to events: a way of behaving and conducting ourselves.<sup>8</sup> This aspect of our lives and the way we reveal it to others is characterised by openness, transparency, clarity, intelligibility, authenticity, truth and integrity.

The Constitutions of 2004 make an absolute connection between simplicity and truth. This is an entirely new perspective on simplicity. In the first point of Constitution 18 b, we note the progression from "*seeking the truth*" to "*loving the truth*" and finally to "*defending the truth in situations of injustice.*" Saint Vincent particularly urged the first Sisters to be simple in their speech, "*Good souls*" said Saint Vincent, "*express their thoughts simply, they do not say the opposite of what they feel. But the maxim of the world is to practise equivocation, trickery and dissimulation; to conceal one's real thoughts in order to deceive people. Honourable people, on the other hand, are straightforward and never crooked. That is how you should act, Sisters.*"<sup>9</sup> Seeking after truth reminds us that we are pilgrims in every sense. We are eager to find the truth. This is something we discover only by degrees. All our attempts at expressing the truth are limited and we can always strive harder. Since we are all seeking the truth and nobody

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. Maloney, *The Way of St. Vincent de Paul. A spirituality for these times in the service of the poor.*

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 72-76

<sup>7</sup> St. Vincent, 24<sup>th</sup> February 1653, On the spirit of the Company, IX, p.606

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Coste I, p.144 and 224

<sup>9</sup> Coste X, p.146

possesses it fully, we must help one another. This is where simplicity comes fully into its own: it can be seen as sharing one's thoughts, respecting the opinions of others and seeking the truth together with all the Sisters of the community by sincere and sisterly dialogue. Finally, simplicity brings trust to community relationships.

Saint Vincent also spoke about being simple in the way we conduct ourselves. This is expressed in the Constitution as follows, “(they are) *to be transparent, authentic, and consistent in their words and the way they live.*” It follows that the virtue of simplicity is an important aspect of the inner coherence of a person's life: “*by this you will know that you are really so (Daughters of Charity), if your hearts are not thinking one thing while our lips say another.*”<sup>10</sup> Coherence of life and witness to the truth, are one of the key elements in evangelisation today: “*Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers...and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.*”<sup>11</sup> So here we have a wonderful way of evangelising: it is done silently and the transparency of one's convictions is reflected in concrete situations of everyday life.<sup>12</sup>

- **Charity.** For Saint Vincent, charity is so essential and so all-embracing that it encapsulates the whole spirit of the Company, Saint Vincent explained this to the first Sisters as “*the spirit of charity (which) obliges you to wear yourselves out in the service of your neighbour.*”<sup>13</sup> This particular virtue is so essential that it is even part of the Sisters' name. There is a close connection between the nature of something and the way in which we describe it. The name should correspond with the essential nature of the thing if we are to avoid strange dichotomies: a book's title should be related to its contents.

The foundation and source of this virtue are first presented: “*the charity to which they are called is the very charity of Christ Jesus.*” We are reminded that the theological and specific virtue of charity comes from God but is also meant to benefit the person who is filled with this love of God. Daughters of Charity have to realise that it is only by relating to a God of Love that they will be able to allow their hearts to be touched by Him and moulded and transformed into the image of His heart. Only then will they be able to reflect what God is. The special time for realising God's love is during prayer. This is where the Daughter of Charity experiences God as Love and as Father. When she does this she is connecting not only with the teaching and the basic experience of Jesus, but also with the deepest core of her identity as a Daughter of Charity since her name signifies Daughter of God, and this God is charity.<sup>14</sup>

Once it has been made clear that our charity is the charity of Christ, (C.18c) the implications of this virtue are treated in a much broader way than previously. The Constitution deals with the three areas in which the Sisters have to live out the charity of Christ: in their spiritual life, in community life and in the service of the poor

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<sup>10</sup> Coste IX, p.81

<sup>11</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 19-21

<sup>13</sup> Coste X p.356

<sup>14</sup> Coste IX, p. 52-53



**Relationship with God** (Cf C. 19-23; St. 1-7, C.2.12-2.16 and St 8-11 of 1983)

In the introduction to this chapter we have a new passage from Saint Louise's writings. It is an extract from a letter Saint Louise wrote to Sister Anne Hardemont in Montreuil. In it she stresses the importance of keeping before our eyes in prayer, the example of Jesus, in order to serve him in the person of the poor.<sup>15</sup>

The vocation of a Daughter of Charity makes consecration to God and service of the poor inseparable and these two dimensions of vocation are closely linked to community life. However, each of these elements has its own particular character so they are studied independently of one another. Under the heading "Relationship with God" the Constitutions present all the forms of prayer that help us to give ourselves to God. We will discuss each of these in the order that they are presented in the Constitutions, concentrating on the essential aspects of this prayer and also on any changes that have been introduced. First of all, though, we would like to say a word about the paragraph relating to article 19. Inculturation, which was the reason for revising the Constitutions, also has connections with these "*ways of expressing the faith.*" These may take on different forms according to respective cultures. The Church, of course, has recognised this legitimate and enriching pluralism, and in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* it states that the liturgy must correspond with the mind and the culture of all the different peoples.<sup>16</sup> The pluralism mentioned in the Constitutions does not refer only to the way that the Eucharist is celebrated but also to the different ways of praying and to different devotional practices.

\* **The Eucharist** (Cf. C.19 b, c). When referring to the Eucharist the Constitutions use lofty phrases such as "*vital importance*", "*centre of their life and mission*", "*centre of their spiritual life.*" This manner of speaking reflects the language used in Church documents, for example, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nos. 5-6; *Christus Dominus* no. 30; *Lumen Gentium*, no.11; *Vita Consecrata*, no. 95.... The phrases used are very similar.

The Constitutions speak of the Eucharist as "*an indispensable meeting each day with Christ and their brothers and sisters.*" I would like to emphasise the final words because this idea is developed further in the next paragraph. Indeed, when the Daughters of Charity go to Mass they do not go alone but "*in the name of all humanity, whose joys, hopes, sadness, and anguish they bear.*" Note moreover, the close similarity between this last phrase and the language used in the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*,; "*The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.*"<sup>17</sup>

Statute 1, which is a new addition to the Constitutions of 2004, reflects two juxtaposed realities: the importance of the Eucharist, and the fact that in some places it is

<sup>15</sup> Saint Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, p.260

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 37-40

<sup>17</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, no. 1

impossible to celebrate the Eucharist every day. The only solution to this problem is the one given in the text.

**\*The Liturgy of the Hours** (Cf. C.19d). This is the public prayer of the Church<sup>18</sup> and a response to the recommendation to “pray without ceasing.”(Cf 1 Thes 5,17; Eph 6,18). Saint Vincent recognised the importance of prayer and he said, “*You should not spend any time without being in prayer...*”<sup>19</sup> But at the same time he was conscious of the pressing needs of the mission and of service: “*you should hasten to the poor just as you would rush to put out a fire.*” As the Daughters of Charity cannot recite all the Canonical Hours, they pray Lauds at the beginning of the day and Vespers as the day ends.

**\*The sacrament of reconciliation** (Cf C.20a). The name has been changed. In the 1983 Constitutions it was called the sacrament of penance, now it is called the sacrament of reconciliation. In favour of the term “sacrament of reconciliation” it can be said that these words emphasise very well the most important aspect of this sacrament: God’s merciful initiative is far more important than the personal and ecclesial steps towards conversion. The term “*communal penance*” has been retained to designate community privations undertaken in a spirit of solidarity with the poor, as stated in St. 2.

**\*Spiritual accompaniment, spiritual direction.** (CF. C.20b). The 1983 Constitutions only spoke of spiritual direction. The present Constitutions have added the concept of “accompaniment.” In the Constitution we are studying, both terms are used in the same sense. However, some articles of the Constitutions use the word in a broader sense than just “spiritual direction”; there is accompaniment of young people, of Sisters in formation, and of Sisters in general. (Cf. C.31b;51d;65b;75a;St. 42). From the spiritual and theological point of view, accompaniment and spiritual direction are linked because the method used in each is more or less a directive one; less in the case of accompaniment, more in the case of spiritual direction.

With regard to accompaniment and spiritual direction, we should point out an important innovation: Daughters of Charity as well as Priests of the Mission are recognised as being suitable persons for accompanying Sisters. We agree with the recognition given to this and we celebrate it. We know that in every Province there are Sisters who are capable of offering this service in the Company. We would therefore encourage the Sisters to put aside any prejudices they might have and to recognise and accept this work as completely normal practice.

**\*Asceticism** (Cf C.20c). The way that this practice fits into the general pattern of the spiritual life is very clearly expressed in a short paragraph: it is not a question here of stressing mortifying the body and the senses, but of helping to promote the gospel and Vincentian values that are under threat from a culture that advocates hedonism and the rule of minimal effort.

**\*Prayer** (Cf. C.21a and b; St. 3). Prayer or meditation, which is also called “contemplation” in the Constitutions, is linked to apostolic work. The Constitution uses

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 98

<sup>19</sup> Coste IX, p.422

some forceful phrases to describe this prayer: “*a highlight of their day,*” “*they (the Daughters of Charity) cannot persevere if they do not pray,*” “*they should know how to leave God contemplated in prayer, in order to find God in persons who are poor.*”

This last phrase reflects Saint Vincent’s well-known teaching on “*leaving God for God.*” Our founder knows and he teaches that there are two ways of encountering God: in prayer and in service; and these ways complement each other. This integration is based on the fact that there are not two experiences of God; the one we have in prayer and the one that comes with service, but one single experience on both occasions. They only seem to the person to be separate experiences, this is not so with God. The decree *Perfectae Caritatis* encourages the members of all Religious Institutes to integrate contemplation and apostolic love.<sup>20</sup> The two dimensions are complementary because authentic Vincentian prayer leads to apostolic action. For Saint Vincent, meeting God always results in commitment to the poor and he makes these the object of God’s love in ways that are human and specific. Apostolic action, for its part, gives rise to prayer because it is in serving that the Vincentian person recalls and fosters the deep religious significance of what he or she is doing.

**\*The annual retreat and the monthly retreat** (Cf. C21d; St.6). This practice is already established in the Church and in the Company, too. Saint Vincent spoke to the first Sisters about retreats and said, “*Your rule of life also prescribes a little retreat once a year, that is to say, the spiritual exercises, and you make them, my daughters, in order to see your falls during the past year and also that you may rise from them more courageously. These eight days of silence are a harvest-time. What a happiness if you spend this time which God gives you in conversing with Him heart to heart!*”<sup>21</sup> Article 21d indicates that the Retreat is communal and Vincentian in character and Statute 5 adds that the annual retreat should last for eight days. It goes on to say, “*The details are determined at Provincial level.*” This is an invitation to show creativity in responding to the different requests made by Sisters.

**\* Spiritual reading** (Cf. C.22; St.6). As the Constitutions point out, the aim of this exercise is to nourish one’s spiritual life. Statute 6 stresses that the local community should reflect on this practice in order to establish the details and frequency of it as part of the Common Plan. Another example of the community being asked to be creative and responsible.

**\*Review of life** (Cf. St.4). In the 1983 Constitutions this practice was known as the “*examen*”. The title and the practice have been updated. In this “*review of life*” we try to see whether we have been careful enough to really discover the Lord’s presence in the service we have given during the day. This is the only way of living the Vincentian mystique and serving in the way that Vincent de Paul proposed. The way we do this should be specifically stated in the Common Plan.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* no. 15

<sup>21</sup> Coste IX p.221

\* **Devotion to Mary** (Cf. C.23; St.7). This has already been studied in the second document.

**3. Service of Christ in persons who are poor** (Cf. C.24-26; St.8-14, C.2.9-2.11; St.1-7 of 1983)

Article 24 approaches the subject of serving Christ in the poor, from various angles. Consequently, the article is extraordinarily dense in content. It starts by giving a definition of the work of a Daughter of Charity: an act of love that is sustained all through life. In other words, this work expresses what is meant by “*the state of charity*” which should characterise every member of the Company. What is the significance behind the literal sense of that expression used by Saint Vincent and one which now appears for the first time in the Constitutions?<sup>22</sup>

Saint Vincent wanted to emphasise that the Company was something completely new and original. The Daughters of Charity do not belong to the religious state (they are not Religious) but theirs is the state of charity. What makes the Daughters of Charity distinctive is their profession of charity, not the profession of the three evangelical counsels. On the other hand, when the Constitutions state that “*service...is the expression par excellence of the ‘state of charity’*”, we are being asked to make the distinction between “being” and “doing”; what we do should express what we are, just as the service we offer must express the state of charity. In the Instruction on the Vows we read the following: “*Service proceeds first of all from ‘being’ a state of charity, that is expressed in a ‘doing’.* To live the service of the poor in imitation of Christ, the Servant of the Father’s Loving Plan, and of Mary, the humble Servant of the Lord, presupposes deepening our identity of Daughter of Charity”<sup>23</sup>

There is nothing at all contradictory between “the state of charity” and these words from the Constitutions: “*They commit themselves by a specific vow to serve, corporally and spiritually, those who are poor.*” We can only say that the aim of the first vow is the fulfilment of the Company’s objective; this first vow is described in the Constitutions as “the specific vow.” Note the changes that have been introduced into the revised Constitutions regarding this point: “special vow” has become “specific vow” and this specific vow has now been placed first instead of fourth, in the vow formula; and of course we now have two alternative formulas for the vows included (cf. C.28). The reason for all these changes is clear: the first vow is the one that is most characteristic of our particular Company and the one most directly related to its identity and its aim. The other three vows have to be understood and practised in relation to this vow.

The Company’s service of the poor is an integral one, that is to say, this service is both corporal and spiritual. Saint Vincent’s thinking about the spiritual aspect of service is absolutely clear: “*It is indeed something to assist the poor, as far as their body is concerned but, in truth, it was never Our Lord’s intention, in founding your Company, for you to take care only of the body..... but it is Our Lord’s intention that you should assist*

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Coste

<sup>23</sup> *Instruction on the vows*, p.122-123

*the souls of the sick poor.*"<sup>24</sup> We have many documents that make similar statements. In her notes, Saint Louise writes, "*In the places where they are located, how many people have been turned away from sin? How many general confessions have been made after years away from this sacrament? How many little girls have been instructed by the sisters in the school....and how many heretics have been converted since the Daughters of Charity have been working in the hospitals?*"<sup>25</sup>

The Constitutions, however, go a step further when they state that the Daughters of Charity "*are open to receiving from poor persons and to allowing themselves to be evangelised by them.*" This statement may have been inspired by some words of Saint Vincent: for example, "*It is among the poor, among these poor people, that true religion and a lively faith have been preserved.*"<sup>26</sup> We also have the more well-known saying, "*The poor are our Lords and Masters.*"<sup>27</sup> The Daughters of Charity can allow themselves to be evangelised by poor people because these are like an open book for them, even though they hardly know what to say and can scarcely express themselves. In listening to poor people, the Daughters of Charity learn what the world is like. In the faces of the poor they can read the unjust structures of this world and the results of perverse mechanisms that generate evil, injustice, marginalisation, social exclusion and destitution. The poor are teachers for the Daughters of Charity because they help them to judge the level of Christian and Vincentian sensitivity towards poor people and they are also the criterion to be used in discernment when it comes to making decisions. (Cf. C.11, 36, 62).

In the second part of this article of the Constitutions (letters c, d, e, f), we see some of the dispositions that Daughters of Charity must have in their service of poor people: attentiveness to the individual is the basis of everything else, and then they must have the attitude of servants and express this by practising the three particular virtues; they are to pray for the poor and be always concerned to promote every sphere of the person's life. With regard to this last directive, we might well ask ourselves how far the Daughters of Charity should go in promoting the personal dignity of people. The Constitutions themselves provide the answer: the Sisters collaborate, according to the directives of the Church, with those who are working to defend the rights of poor people. They are also committed to working to change unjust structures that are the cause of poverty. This form of service is a new feature in the 2004 Constitutions but it was not unknown in Vincent's teaching and in his actions. We might mention, just by way of example, his interview with the First Minister, Richelieu, when with great directness, he asked him to bring the war to an end; his public and radical opposition to Cardinal Mazarin's policy of exploiting the people in rural areas; his appeal to Pope Innocent X, asking him to intervene during the Fronde Wars of the Princes and to bring about peace and so "*alleviate the plight of towns devastated by such a long war, restore life to poor people who are crushed and almost dead from hunger, and bring relief to country areas*

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<sup>24</sup> Coste X p.333

<sup>25</sup> Spiritual Writings A.100

<sup>26</sup> Coste XI, p.201

<sup>27</sup> Coste IX, p.119

*that have been totally devastated.*"<sup>28</sup> *"There is no charity unless it goes hand in hand with justice."*<sup>29</sup>

Statutes 8-12 give details of how the Sisters are to act in some situations in which they are serving the poor. We will just concentrate on what is different in the new text.

Statute 8c: The Daughters of Charity affirm the right to peace for all peoples and nations. We have just mentioned Saint Vincent who was a builder of peace during the social upheavals he witnessed in his times. The absence of peace is a form of poverty and it is the most vulnerable people who suffer most. *"Integrity will bring peace."*(Is. 32, 17).

Statute 8d. The Constitutions reflect the new sensitivities that are emerging in the developed countries. One proof of this is that this paragraph speaks for the first time about ecology and draws our attention to this: (the Company) *"fosters the responsible use of natural resources."*

Statute 8f: We live in a pluralist world. This pluralism extends even to the domain of religious convictions. It frequently happens that members of the Company work in a milieu where people practise different religions. There are Sisters, too, who collaborate with people who are not Catholics, or even not Christians. For this reason it is very fitting, as it says in this Statute, that the Sisters should foster ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.

Statute 12: New technologies provide opportunities for service and for evangelisation. We need to know how to use and benefit from them although, as the Statute points out, we need to show *"discernment"* in using modern technologies when these are appropriate for the objectives of our vocation.

Article 25 of the Constitutions discusses the missionary dimension of the Company. It has been missionary since its earliest days. We need only listen to Saint Vincent's words, *"This is how you should act if you are to be good Daughters of Charity, going wherever God may wish to send you: to Africa, into Africa, to the army, to the Indies, to whichever places ask for you."*<sup>30</sup> We know that Saint Vincent was seriously considering sending the Daughters of Charity to Madagascar, and if he did not do so, it was probably because he was not completely certain about the project and because he knew the dangers involved in travelling there. But he did make the Sisters aware that the Company was missionary.<sup>31</sup> The missionary character of the Company necessarily entails mobility, availability and an understanding of inculturation. The revised Constitutions draw our attention to inculturation so that the Company may recognise in the different cultures *"seeds of the Word"* as described in the decree *Ad Gentes*, no.15

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<sup>28</sup> Coste IV, p.459

<sup>29</sup> Coste II, p.54-VII p.98

<sup>30</sup> Coste X p.128

<sup>31</sup> Coste IV p. 289-290; X p.117

Statute 13 lays down some guidelines for Sisters who feel called to work in the mission Ad Gentes and for those already engaged in this work.

### **III. SOME QUESTIONS TO HELP IN PERSONAL REFLECTION AND COMMUNITY SHARING (AT LOCAL OR PROVINCIAL LEVEL).**

**\* Compare the revised Constitutions with those of 1983 and find the changes that have been introduced into the articles mentioned in this study document.**

**\* In the new way that the Constitutions present the specific virtues (Constitutions 2004: C.13-18), what strikes you as being particularly important for your vocation and your way of life?**

**\*Read the last 3 lines of C.19b, putting them in the first person. Is this the way you try to experience the Eucharist?**

**\*From among the different forms of prayer listed in C.21b, which ones do you find easiest and most beneficial?**

**\* Do you think Statute 12 is important and well thought out?**

**\*With regard to the changes made and to what has remained unaltered, which of the topics dealt with in this document present a specific challenge for you? What do they commit you to do?**

### **IV. SUPPLEMENTARY READING TO DEEPEN YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECTS DEALT WITH IN THIS 3<sup>RD</sup> STUDY DOCUMENT**

- **F. Quintano**, *“The spirit of the Company”*, Echoes of the Company, May 2003.
- **F. Quintano**. *“The prayer and the prayers of the Daughters of Charity”*. Echoes of the Company, September-October 1998.

Father Javier Alvarez, *Director General*  
and Father Fernando Quintano, CM

FATHER J ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

## **The Renovation at Easter time**

Second conference for the Renovation 2005

News of the resurrection comes to us from the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. We can also grasp its importance by studying an event that happened in

history. We see this, for example, in the following incident, which is historically authenticated: in the year 490 BC, two powerful nations, the Persians and the Greeks were at war. A fierce battle was fought in a place near Athens, called Marathon, about 40km away from the Greek capital. It was, of course, a crucial battle for the Greeks: if they were beaten the Persians would certainly invade Athens, destroying everything as they went, and massacring all the inhabitants. If they won the battle their victory would bring security and prosperity to the city and its inhabitants.

While this decisive battle was being fought, the people of Athens lived in great fear; the streets were deserted, the doors of all the houses were securely locked and the windows tightly sealed. Inside the houses, fear, worry and sadness were etched on people's faces. The Persian troops might appear at any moment and with them would come certain death! But the Greeks won the battle of Marathon. History tells us that when the battle was won, a Greek soldier threw down his lance and his shield and ran all the way to Athens to give them news of the victory. When he reached the main square of that city, he had just enough strength left to cry out, ***"Rejoice, people of Athens, we have won the battle!"*** Immediately afterwards he fell down dead, exhausted by the tremendous effort he had just made. This incident gave its name to the great sports competition we have today (a 40 km race) which has the same name as the battle.

The people reacted in two different ways to the news brought by the messenger; some did not believe it. They thought that his message was a ruse that would help the enemy. They chose to remain shut up in their houses, living, as they had done before, in fear and sadness. But there were others who believed the messenger's words; they left their homes, celebrated the victory and told their families, friends and acquaintances the good news that the messenger had brought them. They put behind them completely their lives of sorrow, fear, and the threat of death. In other words, they began to live in a very different way. News of the victory had changed their lives.

The news of Christ's Resurrection is even more significant than that of the Greeks' victory over the Persians. How do we react to it? Does it mean anything in our lives? Does it change us inwardly so that we are totally filled with joy and delight? How does this news of the Resurrection express itself in our lives, in what we "are" and in what we "do" as Daughters of Charity? Do we really believe what the Church is proclaiming at this season about Christ's Resurrection or is it simply for us the commemoration of a historic event and a passing sentiment evoked by the liturgy? Am I firmly convinced about the commitments I am led to make by these words of the Eucharist, *"We proclaim your death and resurrection"*? What specific commitments does Christ's resurrection lead me to make?

We must not forget that the Paschal Mystery is the centre and the core of all Christian life. It is the "axis" around which our whole life revolves. If this central focus of energy were missing, *"your faith would be in vain"*, as St. Paul says. (1 Cor 15,17); our lives would be meaningless and the world would drift aimlessly with nothing to guide it and no fixed points of reference. In other words, everything is structured and unfolds from the Lord's "Passover", beginning with the sacrament of baptism and ending with



Christian commitment. The history of the liturgy is one of the proofs that the Resurrection is central to our faith. Another proof is that of the Christian life; we see this in the words of St. Paul quoted earlier.

### **EASTER, BAPTISM AND THE ANNUAL RENOVATION**

The season of Easter has close links with baptism. We can say that every Christian lives this mystery of death and resurrection when they receive this first sacrament. If the Paschal Mystery is an inexhaustible source of life and grace, the sacrament of baptism is like the vessel that each person uses to go and collect the fresh water of redemption at its source. This close connection is very evident on Holy Saturday night; one of the main parts of the vigil celebration is the baptismal liturgy which includes the administering of this sacrament to new Christians (in the early centuries of Christianity this was the day for people to be baptised), or at least the renewal of baptismal promises (this is always done now because people are baptised at the beginning of life).

Saint Paul gives us a very good explanation of the connection between Easter and the waters of baptism. To his way of thinking, being baptised means being plunged into the death of Christ, drowning out the sin of the old Adam (Cf. Rm 6, 3-4). Just as the people of Israel, led by Moses, passed, through the waters of the sea, from slavery to freedom, so the new people of God, led by the Risen Christ, pass, through the waters of baptism, from a state of sin to being children of God (Cf. 1 Cor, 5, 7-8). Entering the waters of baptism, therefore, signifies being buried with Jesus Christ: coming up from those waters means rising with him and being clothed in the Spirit as new creatures.

According to the Constitutions and to Vincentian spirituality, the annual Renovation and the sacrament of baptism make up a binomial expression where the two elements are inseparable. I would even add that this relationship between the vows and baptism is also part of consecrated life in general, as we read in the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*: “*In the Church’s tradition, religious profession is considered to be a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in Baptism, inasmuch as it is the means by which the close union with Christ already begun in Baptism develops in the gift of a fuller, more explicit and authentic configuration to him through the profession of the evangelical counsels.*”

This connection has always existed for the Daughters of Charity, from the earliest days of the Company. In fact, Saint Vincent often declared that the Daughters of Charity are, and ought to be, nothing more or less than good Christians: “*I would not be saying anything more if I were to say to you that you would be good religious. Why do people join Religious Orders if not to become good Christian men and women?*” (Coste IX p.127). The Founder is of the same mind as St. Paul: being good Christians means living out the demands of our baptism. The Constitutions are very clear about the connection between baptism and the Renovation: by this act, the Daughters of Charity make and renew their vows in order to live as good Christians and be faithful to their baptism.(Cf. C.7, 27, 28b). By coincidence, the renovation of the vows takes place at Easter time this year and this gives you the opportunity to understand more deeply the twofold dimension

**“death-life”** that you undertake to live by practising the evangelical counsels. In other words, if we wish to emphasise the paschal dimension of renewing our vows, we need to ask ourselves two serious questions: what is there in my conduct that is not in accordance with the Vincentian charism and which I must rectify and put to death, relying of course, on God’s help and his grace? What are the dispositions I need to strengthen and resurrect; that is to say, the dispositions I need to bring to life so that they will be more in accordance with my Vincentian vocation? These are the fundamental questions concerning the Paschal Mystery, specifically with regard to the evangelical counsels. Living the Resurrection from a Vincentian perspective means identifying more and more with one’s vocation and living in conformity with it. The mission of a Daughter of Charity is to give life.

## **BEING WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION**

After the Resurrection comes the Lord’s command, *“You are to be my witnesses to the ends of the earth...Know that I will be with you till the end of time.”* Being a witness to the Resurrection is not a matter of choice, an optional extra for those who are seeking or aspiring to holiness. It is quite simply a logical consequence of my faith in the living Jesus. The light that comes to us from the Paschal candle on Holy Saturday night signifies our commitment to dispelling the darkness shown up by our own inner enlightenment. People who lack this fire cannot communicate it to others. Our certainty about Christ’s resurrection makes us witnesses to it, or rather, it is Jesus who is asking us, at this special time, to be witnesses when he tells us that he is alive.

In being witnesses we can rely on the presence of the Holy Spirit, *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses.”* (Ac 1,8). You also need a bit of doctrinal baggage, *“Be ready....to give an account of the hope that is in you.”*, as is written in the first letter of St. Peter. The important thing is that our lives should be transparent, and our testimony should continue without interruption, because we belong to a company of witnesses who, rooted in the faith of the apostles, announce, foster, proclaim and encourage this “new life”. In the language of this Easter season, and keeping in mind the Renovation, I would like to suggest to you some requirements and attitudes we need to have if we are to live, in the fullest possible way, the Easter season, and be witnesses to the Resurrection in our times and in our world.

### **1. Return to Galilee**

*“Go and tell his disciples: he is risen from the dead; he is going before you into Galilee: you will see him there.”* Mt. 28, 7).

Some contemporary exegesists and theologians consider this first account of the resurrection to be of particular importance. This is the opinion of Gustavo Gutierrez, the liberation theologian. The significance he accords to this is very interesting and you may find it helpful as you renew your vows at Easter time. What significance can these words, “Go back to Galilee”, have for the Daughters of

Charity? We will try to answer this question little by little. First of all we have to recognise that the message in St. Matthew's account is very clear: if the disciples want to meet the Resurrected Christ they must go to Galilee. This place is not just a geographical location, it is a "theological place."

The region of Galilee is mentioned about 60 times in the New Testament. Very often it is referred to in derogatory terms. Galilee is a place that is ignored; it has a bad reputation and it is marginalised. The Jews regarded it as a pagan area and consequently a place of little importance and one to be despised. Jesus and his disciples were scornfully described as "Galileans." In Jesus' day the phrase "*Nothing good can come out of Galilee*", was in common use. Well, it was precisely in this place that Jesus began his mission; the proclamation of the Kingdom, the first "signs", his journey to Jerusalem...It is in Galilee that Jesus begins his redemptive mission. Later on, the Risen Lord arranges to meet his disciples again in Galilee. From there he sends them forth to continue his mission. Galilee is the point of departure, it is the constant reference point in Christ's life. Galilee is Jesus' scene. Galilee is Jesus.

What do the words, "Go back to Galilee" mean? They mean that if I want to find the Risen Jesus again I must do as he did; I must imitate the way he acted towards marginalised people; I must proclaim the Good News, giving priority to the poor and to those excluded from society (Cf. Lk 4, 16-21), I must treat sinners, the lepers, the sick, the vulnerable, the abandoned...in exactly the same way that Jesus did. As the disciples retrace the same path as their Master, they will discover his glory, they will witness to his life and his destiny, they will proclaim his resurrection. The only way to experience the Lord's resurrection and be able to proclaim the Good News, is to follow the path that he did and share his experience.

The Daughters of Charity have a clear indication of what constitutes their path to Galilee. They have only to follow the path of their vocation. This will unfailingly lead them to Jesus' favourite region, to poor people who are marginalised and excluded. Saint Vincent made this very clear, "*To be true Daughters of Charity you must do what the Son of God did when he was on earth.*" (Coste IX, p.15). So the path of resurrection for the Daughters of Charity is the pathway of their vocation. If the resurrection does not help us to live our vocation in a better way, it means we are not really on the right road to Galilee. ("*He goes before you into Galilee, you will see him there.*"). People live the resurrection and manifest it to others when they take up the struggle for peace, justice, love and fraternity. In places where the "crucified people" of our own day are not left alone with their cross and are not abandoned, because we serve them as Cyreneans and Good Samaritans, Easter is happening afresh. When a Daughter of Charity acts in accordance with her vocation, she is proclaiming the resurrection and proclaiming Jesus in his beloved region of Galilee.

In the Constitutions, "going to Galilee" or meeting the Risen Jesus can mean: "*assuming poverty in a spirit of abandonment to the Father and as a sign of His mission in the world.*" (C.30a): "*imitating the attitude of the Son of God who, to*

*carry out the Father's loving plan, became obedient unto death and the death of the Cross.*" (C. 31a); *"finding and contemplating Christ in the heart and life of those who are poor....Their primary concern is to make God known to them, to proclaim the Gospel and to make the Kingdom present."* (C.10a); *"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."* (C.11a).*"They are alert to ways of helping their brothers and sisters to become conscious of their own dignity and agents of their own promotion. They plead the cause of the underprivileged, who do not have the possibility of making their legitimate demands and aspirations heard."* (C.24c).

To sum up, "going to Galilee" means, for a Daughter of Charity, living and renewing her vows of chastity, poverty and obedience "in a state of charity" that is to say, in relation to the "specific", particular and principal vow of serving the poor." (Cf. C.24b).

## **2. Being able to read the meaning of an empty tomb**

*"I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen as he said. Come and see the place where they laid him....."* (Mt 28, 5-6).

In our situation, what is the precise and deep meaning of the phrase "being able to read the meaning of an empty tomb?" What must we do in order to see signs of life, the presence of the Living Christ, where other people see nothing but traces of death and the reality of Absence? We often complain that our world is lacking in values, that it is deaf to what the Gospel is asking us to be sensitive to, death in the transcendent sense of the word. In the world there is only room for the utilitarian, for what can be measured and quantified. It is the sordid side of reality that prevails. On the social level, what counts are prestige, power and money. All these are achieved by the dominant principle of individualism which marginalises – pushes to the fringes of society – all people who do not contribute to feeding the machine of economic progress. Those who cannot read the deep meaning of signs and cannot see beyond them, will end up "throwing in the towel" and, like the Emmaus travellers will say, we expected to find life ....but *"now three days have passed since all this happened."*(Lk 24,22).

Being able to read the message of the empty tomb is to understand that practising the evangelical counsels is the gospel alternative to challenges arising from ambition, possessions, power and domination. We can say that the empty tomb and the evangelical counsels are prophetic signs that lead us to think of other realities. The empty tomb turns our mind to the authenticity of the resurrection, and the evangelical counsels make us think of a new Utopian society. Can we keep alive that Utopian idealism which gives rise to hope or do we let the reality of the empty tomb and the counter values of society make us as disillusioned as the Emmaus pilgrims? Where exactly do we stand in this matter? . Do we see things simply as they are or as they might and should become, do we stop at the material facts of the empty tomb or do we reflect on what this has to say to us?

When we view society in a realistic way, the evangelical counsels impel us to embody the values they proclaim. So, for example, in response to the overpowering forces of a hedonistic culture that makes an idol of sexuality, rejecting all moral laws and regarding sex as just another form of consumerism, we have the vow of chastity by which the Daughters of Charity, in common with all consecrated persons, choose to love God with all their heart, and they express this love by being open to their brothers and sisters and serving them. In response to our materialistic society which is greedy for possessions and for ownership, which shows no concern for the sufferings of its most vulnerable members or for a just distribution of the world's resources, persons who undertake to practise the evangelical counsel of poverty, respond to our consumer society's worship of money by leading a simple and sober life style and by showing a preferential love for the poor and solidarity with them. In response to a culture that circulates ideas of liberty that are completely divorced from truth and morality, persons who commit themselves to practising the evangelical counsel of obedience bear witness by their unconditional self-giving and their readiness to correspond to God's plan, as they live harmoniously together in freedom and obedience. And in response to a world riddled by wars and divisions, by confrontations between people of different generations and those who differ in ideology and in race.....choosing to live a sisterly life in community is the sign of a love that is capable of surmounting everything opposed to the civilisation of love and which sows the seed of reconciled humanity. What is our position? Are we closed in on ourselves through a pessimistic view of how things are (this world is a disaster and there is no way of changing it) or do we judge things according to the standards of the evangelical counsels? Which do we opt for, scepticism or hope?

Love for all people that is free from self-interest (*"the vow of chastity...frees the heart of a Daughter of Charity and gives it the dimensions of the heart of Jesus Christ"* C.29a) living in community, serving those in need, being open to God's plans, proclaiming the primacy of God over everything that is relative, taking part in the struggle for a fair distribution of resource, sowing the seeds of peace and proclaiming brotherhood at all levels – these are values that speak to us of a new society, one that is resurrected and freed from the tomb. These values also speak to us of the resurrection because they arise from the tomb where Jesus was laid. Living according to these values is to believe and proclaim the Resurrection of Jesus.

### **Anointing the body of Jesus**

*"When the sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices with which to go and anoint the body of Jesus"* (Mk 16,1).

On the morning of the resurrection, these women were preparing to carry out the symbolic ritual of anointing the body of Jesus. Our world is immunised against discourses and averse to them but it is still sensitive to signs that accompany words. In Sacred Scripture there are other examples of occasions when spices are used: for example when Jesus is in the house of Simon the Pharisee there was the sinful woman who *"came in with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment. She broke the jar and poured the*

*ointment on his head*” (Mk 14,3). Or there is the incident when that other woman from Bethany, six days before Passover, “*brought in a pound of very costly ointment, pure nard, and with it anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair.*” (Jn 12,3). In all three cases the action was prompted more by the heart than by the head; it was not so much a calculated action as a spontaneous pouring out of gratitude. The calculating and condemnatory glances of onlookers regarded these actions as totally unreasonable: where are these crazy women going to? What are they doing at such an early hour? Why are they wasting so much money? For people who as a rule do not know what it means to love, these are very reasonable questions.

What does “pouring out perfume” mean for us in our circumstances and in our times? At certain times in history when there is a general feeling of lassitude, what attracts and amazes people is that there are persons able to do audacious things because they are motivated by a passionate love for God and for the poor. The evangelical counsels to which we commit ourselves by vow, have this same motivation. The perfume of poverty, chastity, obedience and the service of the poor exhales the good odour of a preferential option for the poor, of availability to others, of sharing possessions, and of gratuitous love for all people, especially the poor. St. Paul used this same comparison when advising the community at Corinth to strive to be “*the good odour of Jesus Christ.*” (II Cor,2, 14-17).

The Daughters of Charity can spread throughout the world the good odour of the evangelical counsels and the human values these incarnate. There is only one condition for doing this: they have to generously pour out their life of dedication. This is something we know very well. In our society there are many and varied “perfumes”, so many that our sense of smell has become dulled. To sense the odour of the Risen Christ we have only to break empty the flask and lavishly disperse the perfume, giving it away in generous measure. If there weren’t other odours around it would not be necessary to be so open-handed, a small amount would be sufficient. But in spite of our liberality there is no guarantee that society will accept the prophetic witness of the Daughters of Charity or approve their way of life. The logic is clear: for a message to reach people it is not enough for it to be preached well, it must also be accepted. We will often have to witness to the Risen Jesus, knowing that our testimony will neither be understood nor accepted, still less spread throughout the world. This is another consequence of our vow of poverty. By their annual renewal of the vows, the Daughters of Charity are asked to consider the acts of renunciation and mortification this entails. Although these are necessary and have to be kept in mind when the Sisters renew their vows, they are not the whole story. In order to have a wider concept of the evangelical counsels they must, above all else, be aware that these counsels give rise to new life and realise they bring a new dimension to human life through the inner working of powerful gospel forces that reveal the existence of “*the new man*” St. Paul speaks about (Cf. Eph 2,16).

#### **4. Shouting “Alleluia”**

*“Filled with awe and great joy, the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell the disciples. And there, coming to meet them was Jesus. ‘Greetings’ he said.”*(Mt 28, 8-9).

Alleluia is a cry of joy rather than of praise. In the New Testament joy is related to the fulfilment of God’s promises and the presence of Jesus the Saviour. The theme of joy keeps recurring in the Gospel: there is joy at the angel’s message to Mary; at the Visitation John leaps for joy in Elizabeth’s womb; the birth of Jesus brings joy to the angels and the shepherds; Mary rejoices as she sings the Magnificat. In the “Sermon on the Mount”, Luke contrasts joy and grief: *“Happy you who weep now, you shall laugh”* (Lk 6,21). Laughter is the happiness enjoyed by the blessed. When Jesus tells his disciples he must leave them they are sad but his return will bring them great joy. (Cf. Jn 16, 12-15) *“You will be sorrowful but your sorrow will turn to joy.”* (Jn 16,20). In the Bible, the crowning point of joy is seen in the passages relating to the resurrection of Jesus ( Cf. Jn 20, 22; Lk 24, 41-52; Ac 8, 5-8; 13, 52; 16, 2-5). This joyful atmosphere characterises all the accounts of the resurrection event. Living the “news of the resurrection” and communicating it to others, brings with it celebration, happiness and joy. We are told in the Acts of the Apostles that when Philip began to preach in Samaria, *“There was great rejoicing in that town.”* (Ac 8, 8). St.Paul sums up this attitude that all Christians should have, when he says, *“Rejoice always in the Lord, again I say rejoice!”* This joy is based on the fundamental gospel conviction , *“The Lord is near.”*(Ph 4, 4-5). There is no sentiment more alien to all Sacred Scripture as the emotion of sadness. Of course everyone knows that joy is often accompanied by suffering and difficulties but these problems will never destroy the fruit of our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we do not live in an atmosphere of happiness and joy we might, perhaps, conclude that we regard the resurrection simply on the theoretical level. Where the resurrection is appreciated for what it is, there is no place for sadness. This is proved by the battle of Marathon.

However, the reality is that most Christians seem to lack this happiness, the joy we have been discussing. Two celebrated writers reproached the Christians of their time for this lack of joy and I think their complaint could equally well be addressed to the people of our day. Nietzsche, for example, said, *“For me to believe in the salvation of Christians, these would need to look as though they were saved.”*.

Georges Bernanos wrote, *“Christians, where are you hiding your joy? People seeing you living in this way would never believe that the joy of the Lord has been promised to you and to us.”* The French novelist, Julien Green, said something similar when he began to think of becoming a Catholic. He used to often go to the door of churches to observe the faces of people who were coming out. He thought: if they are really meeting God in there and are really present at the death and resurrection of Someone they love, when they leave the church their faces should be radiant, animated, transformed. He always ended up saying sadly, *“They come out from Calvary and they yawn and talk about the weather.”*

What should resurrection joy be like? On the feast of Pentecost 1975, Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, recalled three types of joy: the joy of things that give us pleasure, or human joy; for example, the delight we have in seeing beautiful scenery or the pleasure of being at a banquet; the joy of interpersonal relationships as when we meet our friends; the joy of being open to the transcendental, the fruit of God's grace given and accepted. Paschal joy belongs to this last category. It is closely connected with the profound experience of knowing oneself to be rooted in Jesus Christ and saved by the Father. It is nourished by the gospel conviction that we are God's creatures, that we are in God's hands and that our future is safe with God because "*Even the very hairs of your head are numbered.*" (Mt 10,30). It is true that the joy of the resurrection does not shield us from the pain of the Cross. Bearing witness to the resurrection will continue to bring problems our way and we will find sorrow there, as well as evil and sin...the resurrection does not blot out the Cross but it sheds light on what it signifies. We know that neither evil, nor injustice nor hatred...will have the last word, the values of the Kingdom will prevail. For this reason we can, and we should rejoice even in times of tribulation, as St Paul did (Cf. Rm 8,35; II Thes 1,4...).

If a Vincentian person does not live in the joy of the resurrection, it is because he or she has not understood the central message of the gospel or the true meaning of vocation. No way can such people give witness to the Risen Lord. A community of Daughters of Charity that is not a happy community should make us stop and think; at the very least, they lack one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. How can they recover this basic experience? The only way to do this is to inject into our lives a sense of the paschal mystery, which means seeing, understanding and interpreting everything in the light of the resurrection. There are many things that can help us to live Easter in a joyful, celebratory way: meditating on the Acts of the Apostles and the gospel accounts of Christ's appearances, the liturgy of the whole season of Easter, our community feasts (starting with the next one, the Renovation), pardoning others, community life, and perhaps some excursions into the country or the town (either as a way of relaxing or visiting places of cultural interest), Spring is equated with Easter and with the annual renovation of the vows...all these things and others that our creativity might suggest. Without joy and happiness there can be no Easter: in such a case there is neither Resurrection nor faith...nor is there meaningful renovation even if you are punctilious in reciting the vow formula.

### **QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT USE FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND FOR COMMUNITY SHARING**

- Meditative reading of the gospel passage Lk 24, 13-35.
- What will I include in my renovation this year: on the negative side (what must die in me) and on the positive side (what must I bring to life, resurrect)?
- In order to give witness to Christ's resurrection, what prophetic gestures could I, personally, and my community make?

Father Javier Alvarez, CM



VISIT OF SUPERIORS

Mother Evelyne Franc  
and Sister Marie-Bernard Giffard, General Councillor

**Visit to the Holy Land**  
(Province of the Near-East)

It was with great joy that the Sisters of this country welcomed Mother Evelyne to spend some days in the Holy Land. This visit was also a pilgrimage since every step one takes in this land reminds one of the Lord and of biblical events.

Brief history of the Province of the Near-East

Today, the Province of the Near-East comprises five countries: Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iran and Egypt. The first missionary Sisters arrived in Alexandria (Egypt) in 1844; others came to Beirut (Lebanon) in 1847; Sisters came to Damascus (Syria) in 1854; others arrived in Khosrova (Iran) in 1856 and in Jerusalem (Holy Land) in 1886. Iran only became part of the Near-East Province in 1957. At present, the Province has 250 Sisters and 37 houses.

**From 16<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> February 2005**, Mother Evelyne Franc and Sister Marie-Bernard Giffard, General Councillor for the French-speaking countries, were able to visit the **6 houses in the Holy Land** where there are 37 Sisters living. Sister Vincent Allouan, Visitatrice of the Near-East Province, and Father Nikad, the Provincial Director, accompanied them. The communities of Daughters of Charity at Nazareth, Haifa, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Bethany, and Ain Karem live in Israeli or Palestinian territories. Generally speaking, the term “Holy Land” is used to designate all the geographical territory that is home to these two peoples.

After Mass at the Grotto of the Annunciation and after meeting the 8 Sisters of the community and the administrative council of the hospital at **Nazareth**, Sister Evelyne was able to visit the different services there and spend a little time with some of the patients; these were often people of different religions. Time passed quickly and the following day the visitors set out for **Haifa**. On the way they were able to stop at *Thabor*, taking care not to build three tents there because they knew that the 4 Sisters of the Haifa community were waiting for them. Sister Evelyne was able to bring a little joy to the severely handicapped children and adolescents by the individual attention she gave to each of them. The visitors also appreciated the structures put in place for a specialised school for all these youngsters.

February 17<sup>th</sup> marked the beginning of a long day. The children from the nursery presented flowers to Mother Evelyne and then came dancing and compliments, sensitively and ingeniously prepared by the teachers and the Sisters. Then it was time to leave for the *Lake of Tiberias* after visiting *Stella Maris* where there is the cave of the prophet Elias and a statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

At Genesareth by the lakeside, they went to see a boat dating back to the first century AD, a vessel that some people have christened the barque of Peter. Next we went to *Tabgha*, the place where one of the incidents of the multiplying of loaves took place, and Mass was said by the lakeside; several Sisters from the nearest houses, had the joy of being there, too. This pilgrimage ended on the Mount of the Beatitudes, another place of precious memories that stirred our faith; the words of the Sermon on the Mount motivate our actions every day.

On February 19<sup>th</sup> Sister Evelyne arrived in **Bethlehem** (Palestine) and the weather was splendid. The visitors were welcomed by the President of the Order of Malta (France), the 4 Sisters of the community, the Staff and the children. Then it was the turn of the nursery children and their carers to offer their greetings. This first contact was a joyful experience on everyone's part: there was dancing and a crown with the words "we love you", and "Frere Jacques" sung in French. The time we spent with the little ones was a good prelude to our meeting with the doctors and we were all able to share our concerns. After being presented with a booklet explaining the different works of the house, Sister Evelyne was able to say yet again that the poor are our priority. The war has led to a big expansion of our service of poor people; during this time of conflict we always welcomed, respected and supported the poor, and it is the same now! One consolation is that nobody in this house was injured during the raids. Blessed be Jesus, our Saviour. We thanked God for this when we visited the Basilica of the Nativity.

On the days that followed, Sister Evelyne and Sister Marie-Bernard set out to meet the 9 Sisters of the **Jerusalem** community, 10 km away from our house in Bethlehem. Although this was quite a short journey, it brought before our eyes the great wall that threatens to encircle Bethlehem and isolate it. When you arrive in Jerusalem, however, it is like coming into another world. Israel is impressively modern and progressive but there is no hiding the fear that people feel here, a fear shown by the huge number of tanks and the presence of armed soldiers everywhere. The Holy City also seems to be the crossroads of the world, with its church spires, minarets, the domes of mosques and, of course, the Jewish monuments.

In Jerusalem the Sisters work at St. Vincent de Paul Hospice, which comprises a home for children from families with problems, services for handicapped men and women, a nursery and infants school for children who have been abandoned, and a kindergarten. More than 300 residents of the house gave Mother Evelyne a joyful welcome. The little children gave her flowers, the girls waved flags and streamers, the handicapped people holding balloons formed a guard of honour. Some of the children were dressed in national costume; local dances and songs were the background to all this.

The Sisters also went to Mass in *Gethsemane*, in the Garden of Olives, and this moved us to pray more earnestly to the suffering Christ, in union with all suffering people throughout the world, but especially the suffering people of this land. Then they visited other important places of pilgrimage, *the ancient olive oil press*, *the tomb of the Blessed Virgin* (according to Orthodox tradition), *Mount Sion* with the Basilica of the Dormition and the *Cenacle*.

Mother Evelyne and Sister Marie-Bernard then left for **Bethany**. The 4 Sisters of this community work in a home for 50 children whose families live in the occupied territories and cannot provide for their needs.

Mother Evelyne shared with us the thoughts she had at meditation: she invited us to follow in the footsteps of Abraham, to listen to the Lord's call, to reach out to those who suffer, and to have the courage to share in Christ's passion in order to proclaim the Gospel ((2 Tim 8). The Thabor experience sheds some light on all this suffering and opens up an avenue of hope. Then she spoke about some important aspects of the revised Constitutions. She referred to Constitutions 35-36 and Statute 21, stressing the importance of communication, an important part of community life and the basis of its dynamism. Quoting Statute 63, she asked each local community to meet at regular intervals. She also repeated how important it is for us to practise corresponsibility and subsidiarity in community, in accordance with our particular spirit. Constitution 18 points out the way we have to let ourselves be guided by the spirit of the Servant Christ; we are to follow the path traced out by the evangelical virtues of humility, simplicity and charity. Our entire life should express the "state of charity" of which Christ is the source and the model. Our service is one of mutual exchange and sharing: we evangelise one another.

Next day Sister Evelyne and Sister Marie-Bernard went to meet the 4 Sisters of the **Ain Karem** community. The Sisters work in the home for children who are seriously handicapped, a privileged place where Jews, Muslims and Christians collaborate in the same task. Everyone there, Staff, voluntary workers and Sisters, work for the good of the children. Situations of poverty and suffering often engender solidarity and fraternity. Following Christ's example, the Church is committed to taking up the challenge, not just of inter-faith dialogue, but also the challenge of international brotherhood, and the Company is putting this into practice in concrete ways and to a significant degree.

The final day, spent in Jerusalem, gave Mother Evelyne and Sister Marie-Bernard the opportunity of going to the *Holy Sepulchre Basilica* with Father Alvarez, CM. He very enthusiastically explained the different Christian rites and the memories evoked by this city. He then took them to *the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu*, the scene of Jesus's trial and Peter's denial. Later Mother Evelyne had the pleasure of meeting the Consul General of France and the Apostolic Delegate, both of whom were supportive of the Sisters when times were difficult.

So came to an end a visit that seemed very short but we remember it as a time of grace and the assurance that the whole Company is with us in prayer.

A group of Sisters

## Meeting of the French-speaking Provincial Councils

Paris, 25<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> February 2005

**On 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> February 2005**, the French-speaking Provincial Councils of France, Belgium, Switzerland, North Africa and the Near-East came together at the Mother House for a reflection session on the Constitutions. With them were Mother Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, Fr. Javier Alvarez, Director General, and Sister Marie-Bernard Giffard, General Councillor. On the final day, Fr. Gregory, Superior General, came to celebrate the closing Mass.

**The aim** of this meeting was:

- to get to know one another better
- to learn about the situation in each Province
- to exchange ideas and experiences about the way the new Constitutions are being taken to heart.

Each Province was represented by its Visitatrice, Councillors, Provincial Secretary and Bursar, and its Fr. Director. This made a total of 66 participants.

During the first evening each Province gave an account of its own particular situation. We were particularly struck by the impact Islam has on several countries and by the variety of religions found in the Near-East: this variety leads us to pay more attention to the Church's mission to foster dialogue and peace.

From the outset, Mother Evelyne asked us to think of this time as one for deepening our understanding of the Constitutions, as a time of grace for the Company. She encouraged us to discover the essentials and to look for ways of living out more authentically the spirit of the Beatitudes.

As facilitator for the group, Sister Jeanne Marie Gremling, a Sister of Christian Instruction, gave us a lot of help in highlighting the salient points and the questions we should be asking ourselves in order to find a dynamic working method that we could set up in our Provinces.

We found that the style, presentation and contents of the new Constitutions were generally appreciated. What we have already been doing is presented in a new way, but in order to respond to today's challenges, we need to follow guidelines: there needs to be corresponsibility, subsidiarity, sharing at all levels between communities and Provinces, internationality, inculturation, relationships with other cultures and religions, modern methods of communication, availability and mobility for service. In the chapter on

Government, greater emphasis is placed on the role of women: responsibilities which were formerly entrusted to the Superior General or to Provincial Directors, are now within the remit of the Superioress General or the Visitatrices. The role of our brother Vincentians is now seen to be largely one of accompaniment, counselling and spiritual leadership.

The new Constitutions have everywhere aroused new hope, enthusiasm and a desire for personal renewal. Yet there is always the fear that this initial impetus could slacken. So we have to support this wave of enthusiasm by putting forward specific ways of courageously tackling our study of the Constitutions.

The talk given by Father Javier, Director General, was much appreciated and in it he reminded us that the Constitutions are first and foremost a book of life and that they contain the Company's spiritual heritage. The Constitutions represent the thinking and the projects of the Founders in a way that is adapted to our own times. The period spent reflecting on and writing the new Constitutions was a most important stage; every one of the articles was studied even though not all of them were amended. All this work will be fruitless if the revitalisation of the charism does not have an impact on each Province, each community and each Sister.

Father Javier advised us :

- first of all, to personally read the texts, study them, reflect on them, and go back over them several times, to really assimilate them. It is good to compare the previous Constitutions with the ones we have now, so that we can see the current changes in the way we express our charism.
- to have Community sharing to look together at the way we understand these articles. In this way our personal reflection will be enriched by what we learn from our Sisters.
- to revise our way of living. For example, such a matter or such an encounter, links me to such a Constitution.

Each of these steps should be taken in a spirit of prayer.

Finally, we can use certain key points or topics as the starting point for our reflection:

- the key topic of **inculturation** (C.25a, 53, 31, 64: St. 14a, 61a, 62, 27, 54, 57)
- the key topic of **decentralisation** (C. 31b, 63b, 87d, 91b, 64e, 64d, 66b, 66e, 29, 82; St. 61a, 60, 66)
- the key topic of **the role of women** ( C.31a, 64, 73: St. 44, 45, 64...)
- the key topic of **unity in diversity** ( C.28b; St. 54a, 57a, 5, 6a, 20....)
- the key topic of **the Company's identity in the Church** ( Introduction p.15-20, C. 1-6, 7a, 16b, 24a, 28a, 29a, 31a, 18; St.16
- the key topic of **the major challenges facing us today** (C.12b, 24c, 52b; St. 8c, d, f, 16a, 12....)

In the light of what we have learned from this session, we now wish to share our reflections, in order to stimulate each community and each Sister to continue to study the revised Constitutions. We would also like to meet at regular intervals, in order to create stronger bonds between the Provinces, and to evaluate together the way we are living these new Constitutions, with a view to giving even better service to the poor.

Summary of the reports sent by the 5 Provincial Councils

Session for recently appointed Visitatrices  
Paris, 1<sup>st</sup> –15<sup>th</sup> May, 2005

### **The Visitatrice Leader and animator of the Province**

*From 1<sup>st</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> May 2005, 34 Visitatrices appointed after the 2003 General Assembly, met together in Paris for a reflection session on the theme: **The Visitatrice, Leader and Animator of the Province.***

We came from five continents to meet at the heart of the Company, round Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, like the apostles gathered round Mary in the “Upper Room” of the Mother House, to reflect on the mission entrusted to us and to ask Mary to help us to carry it out in faith and in love.

Meeting Sisters from every country adds much to the gift of sisterly union and it makes us grow in hope. Group work and the feedback at plenary sessions were very enriching. Even though cultures and languages are different we noted once again that we are united in the same spirit and that the Company is very much alive. Even if the number of vocations is diminishing in some countries, God continues to raise up genuine servants who will work for him in serving the poor.

Mother Evelyn, Father Javier Alvarez, Director General, the General Councillors and the other speakers were always available and they helped us to study in depth the theme of the session, in the light of the new Constitutions. During this encounter, the different speakers shed some light on the readings of the Mass, the Acts of the Apostles, the Psalm or the Gospel of the day. We will share with you some of their thoughts.

The session opened with a day’s retreat led by Father Javier who spoke to us about **the Holy Spirit and joy.**

*“Lydia, a devout woman, listened to the Word and God opened her heart to accept it.” (Ac. 18, 9).*

God has opened our hearts, just as he did for Lydia, so that we can listen to his Spirit, as St. Louise did, and allow ourselves to be guided by Him in the way we live out our mission to the Sisters. We need to pray earnestly for joy, this fruit of the Spirit. Joy will come like a blessing and it will allow us to show, by our devoted service, that we are joyful in the Lord.. (Phil.4, 4-7).

*“It is for your own good that I am going because unless I go, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I do go, I will send him to you.”* (Jn 16, 7).

On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2005 Mother Evelyne spoke to us about **Authority, service and corresponsibility**. In the Company, as in the Church, authority comes from God. The Company is a charismatic body that exists in the Church and for the Church. Today’s gospel urges us to view things with the eyes of faith. Authority, properly understood, creates a collective awareness and acceptance of God’s will. Authority is to be exercised as service, after the example of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Authority should be based on trust.

*“When the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will receive power to be my witnesses.”* (Ac. 1,8).

On 4<sup>th</sup> May Father Alvarez spoke to us about the relationship between Visitatrice and Provincial Director. He stressed the fact that when the Founders insisted on collaboration with a Priest of the Mission, they did not have expertise in mind, but rather brotherly help to serve the poor better. The Provincial Director really plays an important part in the accompaniment and spiritual leadership of the Company.

Then Father Javier spoke about the **secular character of the Company**, basing his remarks on the role of two lay women, Priscilla and Aquila, two lay women, in the evangelisation of the first Christian communities. (Ac. 18, 18). The service of the poor is the central point from which we live out the other dimensions of our life as servant. In our days, too, our mission to the poor needs to be sustained by prayer and by authentic community living. The Foundress saw secularity as the means of safeguarding the service of poor people in their own homes.

*“The Lord said to Paul: ‘Do not be afraid to speak out, nor allow yourselves to be silenced: I am with you.’* (Ac 18, 9).

On Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> May, Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor for the continent of Asia, gave a “power-point” presentation on the subject, **“Understanding the context in which the Constitutions were revised in 2004”**.

In the first part of her talk, Sister Julma shared her thoughts on the Constitutions in general. *“The Constitutions describe the way that the Company sees itself at a given time... They are a ‘self-portrait’ of the Company, a part of our history that is following ...a path of creative fidelity...For the charism to be relevant and dynamic in every era, it needs to be reinterpreted and re-expressed. Revision of the Constitutions has always*

*been a response to changes within the Church. The Constitutions are a path to holiness...provided we place the emphasis on the spirit and not the letter.”*

In a second session, Sister Julma highlighted the reasons for modifying certain articles. It is a matter of

- understanding changes in outlook and in culture.
- If we take the image of an iceberg, the revision of the Constitutions represents only the part of the iceberg that can be seen (i.e. 1/10 of the ice mass). To really understand why changes have been made to some Constitutions, we need to have a good knowledge of world situations today. We have to see the Constitutions as a unified whole. In order to remain faithful to what we are, we have to deepen our knowledge and understanding of all the Constitutions, those that have been amended and those that remain unchanged. We have to view any revisions made, from the perspective of inculturating the charism. The revision of the Constitutions should lead to conversion in our personal and community life, and to a revision of the works.

Finally, Sister Julma spoke on **Regular Visitations, a time of grace**. They are a blessing; they stimulate spiritual and apostolic vitality, move us to be more faithful to our vocation, and strengthen unity among the Sisters of the Province and the Company. They invite us to live our lives in a spirit of faith. They are a time when God’s grace is manifested in people and events.

*“An Alexandrian Jew named Apollos, preached with great spiritual earnestness and was accurate in all the details he taught about Jesus....When Priscilla and Aquila heard him speak, they took an interest in him and gave him further instruction about the Way.” (Ac. 18, 26).*

On Saturday, 7<sup>th</sup> May, Sister Rosa Maria Miro, General Councillor for Spanish-speaking countries, spoke on **Formation** and stressed the importance of this in the life of the Company. As we see from Apollos’ experience, enthusiasm on its own is not enough. Formation is the basis for giving quality service to the poor. It is a matter of personal responsibility, of seeing to our own formation and to strengthening our motivation, in order to respond in ever more appropriate ways to the calls that God continues to make.

*“God gives the lonely a permanent home, makes prisoners happy by setting them free.” (Ps 67).*

On Monday, 9<sup>th</sup> May, the psalm at Mass gave us inspiration for the day. Sister Rita Ferri, Treasurer General, gave us some points of reference with regard to **the administration of temporal goods**.

- Choosing a simple life style and reflecting on the concepts of “what is superfluous” and “what is necessary” in our life.
- Making the effort to share and to show solidarity with those who have much to suffer.



-Having a sense of corresponsibility, so that our Patrimony will be for the service of the poor.

- Revising our works so that we will be as faithful as possible to our charism. The administration of temporal goods calls for responsibility and efficiency.

*“Life to me is not a thing to waste words on, provided that when I finish my race I have carried out the mission the Lord Jesus gave me – and that was to bear witness to the Good News of God’s grace.”(Ac 20, 24).*

On 10<sup>th</sup> May, Fr. Hugh O’Donnell, CM, Director of CIF, shared his experience of being Visitor, as he talked to us on today’s theme.

- **Leadership and dynamic accompaniment**
- **The method of analysis used in CommunitySpiritual accompaniment**

The fundamental and dynamic basis of leadership consists in

- loving the Sisters
- freely accepting the responsibility conferred on us, relying on trust in God and our companionsbeing sincere with ourselves and putting our talents at the service of our Sistersbeing convinced that during this time of revising the Constitutions the Lord is calling us in a very special way to participate in this work which is so important for the Companywe have to view the Province as a whole and regard it as a “friend” or a “mystery to be uncovered”; we have to recognise God at work in the heart and life of the Sisters.

Using “power-point” each General Councillor gave an account of her Province, and the same was done for the Quasi-Province. This helped us to learn more about the Company. During the final week we were given more practical information about our mission as Visitatrice. We were helped by Sr. Ana Maria Olmeda, Secretary General, Sr. Claire Herrmann from the Mother House Archives department and Sr. Anne Prevost, editor of the Echoes of the Company. Finally, Sr Christa Bauer, General Councillor, helped us to visit the Company’s web site.

In the afternoon of Friday, 13<sup>th</sup> May, the day before the eve of Pentecost, we went on pilgrimage to the church of Saint-Nicolas des Champs, where Saint Louise had that important experience of Pentecost enlightenment. In the certain knowledge that the Company has always been in the mind of God. we prayed, and Mass was said for the soul of our Superior General’s mother who had just departed to the house of our heavenly Father.

PHOTO

We set off again, our hearts filled with joy and gratitude.

Some Sisters from the Session

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

Province of Fortaleza- Ceara

### **Jose Lourenco Camp**

The basic causes of the extreme poverty found in North-East Brazil are that land tenure is concentrated in the hands of a few people who own much of the territory, and there is an urgent need for land reform. In fact, among the countries that have recently won political independence, Brazil is the only one that has not yet introduced agricultural reforms. And it maintains this situation by not taking adequate measures to change things. Any attempts to improve matters have been half-hearted: for example, the solidarity agrarian reform in Ceara is illusory and it encourages corruption on a scandalous scale.

**In 1983** Archbishop Aloisio Lorscheider of Fortaleza had asked the Visitatrice, Sister Rita de Cassia Ramos de Vasconcelos, to send some Sisters to work with farm workers who were reduced to poverty by five consecutive years of drought. So even though we lived in Fortaleza we regularly left for the outlying districts of several towns in the Ceara region. One such town was Chorozinho and here we joined people who worked on the land.

**In 1990** Archbishop Aloisio made the same appeal to all the Religious Institutes in his diocese. This time three of us went to live on the outskirts of Chorozinho.

In the beginning we stayed with families and we found ways and means of coming closer to the poorest of these agricultural labourers. After some time we were able to move and find somewhere where we could live together. Someone from the farming community gave us an abandoned house. Inside it there was a small table, three stools and a water pitcher. As we had brought with us only what was strictly necessary, we found out what it was like to live with uncertainty and this helped us to understand the circumstances of these people in the North-East, who have to leave their land to look for work in some other region.

This new way of living among people also helped us to discover a new way of evangelising them. Previously we had been used to working with many projects in mind but now we began to “fast” from our old ways, choosing to conform our lives to that of the peasants. When we visited them we found people with very many problems but who had also been “touched” by the Gospel. The poor people and those who are trying to help them asked us to be a more effective presence here by providing human and spiritual formation, in particular teaching them about the Gospel. This situation lasted for nearly five years.

After spending 10 days or a fortnight with an agricultural community we move on to another place. It is important to point out that it is these farming communities themselves who determine the pattern of our moving on.

**In 1995** some government reforms allowed the poor people to occupy some plots of land that were not being cultivated.

On the advice of a priest from our parish of Chorozinho, a group of “landless” peasants appealed to us because we had experience of pastoral work in country areas.

In the beginning we were afraid that if we got involved in government affairs we might be manipulated by the authorities and so we showed some reluctance to act.

**On 27<sup>th</sup> November 1995**, feast of the Miraculous Medal, a group of 100 families who were without food and drinking water and who had barely enough to keep themselves alive (this was particularly the case with children); workers whose only roof was a piece of black cloth stretched over 4 poles, came to Camara farm at Chorozinho and occupied it. Very soon afterwards a man named Leao arrived, saying that he was the manager of the farm and that he had the backing of the police. He said this to intimidate the “occupiers.” Our young postulant, Lourdes Vicente, who was with this group, asked us to join them. Unfortunately, the occupation of Camara farm was short-lived. In spite of their resistance the families were transferred to another area on the outskirts of Aracati. For several months Camara farm remained empty.

**On 10<sup>th</sup> May 1996** another group of about 100 “landless” families occupied Camara farm. The leaders came and asked for our support. In spite of the risks involved, all the farm workers were committed to continuing this action and they held demonstrations on the national highway and in the streets of Fortaleza. The government responded to these demonstrations by threatening the peasants and then began a time of harassment.

When the landless people heard about this general mobilisation they made us a present of one of their tents. We were very moved by this gesture because it meant they believed that we were on their side. Living in this cloth tent meant we could be very close to the people. It was one of the best experiences we ever had in our lives as servants.

This second occupation of Camara lasted nearly 2 years and then the former owners were dispossessed. Then followed a period when houses were built thanks to the “Dwelling” project under the patronage of Incra (National Institute for Agrarian Reform). We were somewhat distanced from proceedings at this time, for personal and family reasons.

In this situation the landless families build their houses; they are called “settlers”. They then have to learn how to claim their rights. In this way 71 families have been able to settle there. They have worked together to build houses, a school, a telephone exchange, an electric power plant, a well, (though unfortunately the water is not fit to drink), and they have started up some small enterprises for marketing cashew nuts. Working in partnership with other organisations, the families have also built a small

community clinic and a craft centre. They continue to work together on other construction projects and are planning to organise courses for young people and adults.

When they took over the ownership of this land (formerly called Camara) they renamed it “Ze Lourenco” in honour of that beatified Christian man from the North-East who worked so hard in Ceara to have people’s dignity and rights as citizens respected.

We were also motivated by the words of Superiors and by the conclusions reached at Provincial and General Assemblies, telling us we should

- try to find a life style closer to that of the poor
- join forces with others who defend life and human rights
- collaborate more with lay people
- serve the poor in a way that answers their real needs. We asked the Provincial Council for permission to live in this “Ze Lourenco Camp” among the people and in solidarity with them. Our project was approved.

**This year 2005** means that we have been living in this camp for 5 years. The Council sent us another Sister, so now there are four of us. In living with the families here we see them very much as brothers and sisters. We are putting all our efforts into the direct and indirect formation of people at relational, political and religious level, to make them increasingly become agents of their own development. Thanks to them, our life as servants is affirmed and so is our ability to live with others.

Since 1999 the four Sisters of “Catherine Laboure” community have also had this kind of experience with “landless” people. We are extremely happy to have this experience, in fidelity to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, even if as yet we cannot do more for these people.

The four Sisters of the “Exodus” community

Province of Rome

**The Daughters of Charity,  
“external” collaborators at the Conclave  
An extraordinary experience!**

Everyone had known for months that the health of our Holy Father, John Paul II, was at a very low ebb but everybody cherished the secret hope that he might once again triumph over his illness. His absence from the Easter services, however, put everyone on the alert. Thousands of people kept vigil in St. Peter’s Square, saying the rosary and keeping their eyes on the window of that room where John Paul II was preparing to meet his Lord. When Archbishop Sandri broke the news that the Pope had left us for heaven, an impressive silence descended on the square: the long pontificate of John Paul II had

come to an end. Throughout the whole length of the Via della Conciliazione and in the adjoining side streets, millions of people from all over the world came patiently in a slow and orderly procession with the one desire of saying a final farewell to the Pope lying at rest in St. Peter's Basilica.

### **The Conclave**

On the days that followed, preparations for the Conclave in Vatican City were in full swing. St. Martha's house, which was destined to welcome the Cardinals who would elect the new Pope, was transformed into a building site. To ensure the isolation that the Cardinals needed, all access roads to St. Martha's were subject to control and security systems were put in place. Preparing for the election of a Pope is an important task involving a great many people. The new Director of the house asked the Sister Servant and the Sisters to make themselves available and to collaborate in the work. He asked them to get other Daughters of Charity to help. The Visitatrice of Rome gave permission for this and sent 12 Sisters to work full-time at this task, for as long as necessary. This made us even more aware of God's marvellous gift for us and for the whole Company. Even though we felt small and helpless we were very happy at the confidence people had in the Company. The refurbished chapel became, for the 180 members of the Conclave, a place of prayer and of listening to the Holy Spirit.

At 5 p.m. on *Friday, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2005*, together with fifty or so bishops and everyone taking part in this event, we were summoned to the Hall of Blessings, to take the oath by which we swore to maintain secrecy concerning anything we might learn about the Conclave in the coming days. It was a simple and solemn ceremony. This action set us firmly within the context of the Conclave. St. Martha's house gradually became a citadel with well-defined boundaries; we were all kept out of sight 24 hours a day, and at this time we welcomed about 180 people. A security gate was left at our disposal if we needed to have contact with the outside world. In this way we began to prepare for the great event which captured the attention of the whole Church. Our task was "*intensive and efficient work, serene collaboration, openness and availability*": our strength was "*prayer and love of the Church*", our concern was to *respect the silence we had sworn to observe.*"

At 9 a.m. on *Tuesday, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2005*, the Cardinals enter the Sistine Chapel but the morning goes by without any results being declared. In the afternoon, during Vespers, we hear the bells ringing out joyfully. We rush to the stairs leading to the front entrance of St. Martha's and soon reach the "Archway of the Bells." St. Peter's Square is already filled with an expectant crowd. All eyes turn to the balcony of the Hall of Blessings. Suddenly the window is thrown wide open and Cardinal Medina Estevez appears...A loud cry comes from the people in the square and then there is a heavy, expectant silence...and we hear the words, "*Habemus Papam! Josephum, Cardinale Ratzinger, qui sibi nomen imposuit Benedictum XVI.*" We are very happy to sense an immediate surge of goodwill and esteem between the newly elected Pope and the countless faithful gathered there. The Church has a new Pope, a follower of the pastoral

policies of John Paul II, and defender of the Catholic faith. We at St. Martha's know him very well because, as Cardinal Ratzinger, he comes here on various occasions.

*On Wednesday, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2005* the Holy Father and the Cardinals arrived at "our house" at 8 a.m. for breakfast before Solemn Mass in the Sistine Chapel. Benedict XVI came back to St. Martha's for lunch and two Daughters of Charity had the privilege of serving him. He found everything very good and well prepared, and he thanked us very warmly.

### **An "exceptional Chaplain"**

Next day the Holy Father said Mass for us in the chapel of St. Martha's. All 20 of us were there and we were deeply moved as we received Holy Communion from the hands of the Pope. At the end of Mass Benedict XVI greeted us and thanked us for the work we had done these last few days. For a further week we had the joy of having Mass said here by the Pope himself. One day he sent us a present, a very beautiful wicker basket full of good things and covered with a beautifully embroidered cloth. The following Sunday, the inauguration of his Petrine ministry when Benedict XVI became bishop of Rome, was a day of great rejoicing for the 400,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square. On the last day of the Pope's visit to us, the staff of St. Martha's were invited to his Mass. Afterwards we were all able to meet him individually and to ask for his blessing. He had found out our names and greeted each one of us by name, thanking us once more. His last present was a beautiful souvenir photo. In all simplicity, Benedict XVI stood in the centre of our little group and the photographer's snap caught us smiling and full of gratitude for the truly exceptional experience we had just had over the last fortnight.

The Sisters of St. Martha's

Quasi-Province

### **Sister Marie-Madeleine, a humble Daughter of Charity**

Sister Marie-Madeleine was born on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1922 near Lille in northern France. The second of seven children, she was christened Anne-Marie and she grew up in a united and Christian family. She was a very good student and she went to the University of Dijon. During the Second World War, the city's military hospitals became increasingly full of patients and in 1944 she helped the American army as an interpreter: *"Anne-Marie brought to all her gentle charm, her patience and understanding. Her gentleness calmed my outbursts of moodiness. I have never met anyone as near to perfection as she was."* She remained close to her family all her life, sharing the joys and the sorrows of each relative: from time to time and always with the utmost discretion, she would share with us the trials suffered by her brothers and sisters and her many nephews and nieces.

## **A Sister who had great respect for others**

The thing that everyone of us remembers most about her was her compassion: her ability to listen, the way she recognised the value of each person and saw that it was respected, the way she would come and pray, and sometimes cry with you, when everything was turning out badly. She had great respect for everyone, their situation and their suffering.

*“How approachable she was! Everyone who came into contact with her – no matter what their condition – felt at ease, and she herself felt at ease with the great ones and the lowly folk of this world: without boasting of her background or of her extensive culture, she put her talents at the service of all, and she did this so tactfully that people never felt worried about asking her help.”*

*“Always good-humoured, she was a very positive and constructive member of our community. A very good listener, she knew how to find a way for people to dialogue. She was always ready to do a favour, to give advice, to forgive people or to be forgiven...she was always available to help.”* Sister Marie-Madeleine felt very keenly the sufferings of the poor but in spite of this, she retained her good humour and in this way followed in the footsteps of Saint Louise who urged her daughters to be gay even when they had good reason to be sad. Sister Marie-Madeleine was able to chat easily and pleasantly to everyone and she had good stories that she liked to tell to make people laugh.

## **In the direct service of the Company**

After working with children in the Madeleine parish of Paris, Sister Marie-Madeleine was soon given responsibility for different activities that were in the direct service of the Company. She had a great love for the Company: she had a realistic view of it but she saw it at such close quarters from the inside, that she never ceased to do everything in her power to make it as good as possible, through the different offices she was asked to undertake.

At the Centrale des Oeuvres (67 rue de Sevres), she was part of the common mission of formation. She also did secretarial and translation work.

## ***Formator***

Many Sisters benefited from her presence at many formation meetings and sessions, and from the guidance she gave.

*“Sister Marie-Madeleine was kind, attentive and a good listener. She brought her experience and her expertise but did this discreetly. We found great joy in sharing with her. She had that quality of heart that made her remember everyone by name.”*

*“When she gave us lectures in the Seminary, she showed a great love for the Church and she was able to share with us her passion, not just for what the Church is, but also, through her deep knowledge of the subject, for its history and also, its relevance for our times.”*

### ***Secretary and translator***

Sister Marie-Madeleine was called to take an active part in the meetings of Sisters who served the working class. She coordinated the different groups and was responsible for taking the minutes of the meetings and for compiling the archives, a duty she carried out very conscientiously. *“She did not live the same kind of life as the workers but for her, working with the lowliest people is indeed serving Christ. During our sharing sessions she told us about their working conditions. She emphasised the importance of our work and always encouraged us.”* For many years she was secretary to the Visitatrices of France: *“She was always ready to do what was asked of her: her deep charity, her greatness of soul, shone out of her.”*

Sister Marie-Madeleine also participated in the General Assemblies of the Company, working at translation and the liturgy. Finally, she contributed effectively to the editing and reinterpretation of numerous texts, notably the 1983 Constitutions and those of 2004.

As a translator, she was particularly careful to make sure she understood what Father McCullen was saying so that she would not alter its meaning. The homily that Fr McCullen gave at her funeral bears witness to this. *“Sister Marie-Madeleine was an able and very experienced translator. Faithful to the Word Incarnate, as our Founders urged us to be, Sister Marie-Madeleine must have seen her vocation as translator in the Company, as a work of incarnation. For a translator has to face the challenge of incarnating the thoughts of another person into words which, it is hoped, will bring life to the spirit of those who listen to or read them. On many occasions, sending me the typed copy of a conference or a homily, Sister Marie-Madeleine would add a very kind message saying she had benefited spiritually from this translation challenge. Sometimes she said she always tried not just to give the meaning behind the words, but also to keep to the English style in which they were written. Such was the measure of her professionalism....However, Sister Marie-Madeleine, was more than a professional translator. She was first of all a true Daughter of Charity who had drunk deeply from the wellsprings of our Founders. “The spirit of the Company consists in giving oneself to God to love Our Lord and to serve Him in the person of the poor, both corporally and spiritually.” .That sentence from St Vincent is a rather pithy summary of Sister Marie-Madeleine’s life as a Daughter of Charity. Her conscientiousness in translating as faithfully as possible the words of any author or speaker are just the reflection of a whole lifetime’s fidelity to the charism of St Vincent and St Louise....*

### **Working with people from Sri Lanka**



In 1994 Sister Marie-Madeleine was asked to use her knowledge of English in welcoming from conflict torn Sri Lanka, families and young people who found themselves a long way from home and in very difficult circumstances. As she discovered their wretched living conditions, she was moved by these Sri Lankan people to do all she could to help them integrate into French society. None of their circumstances left her unmoved, she felt solidarity with all of them. Like St Vincent, she knew how to forge links with people of all ages and all conditions, to seek with them the solutions to their problems. She set up for the Sri Lankans a network of mutual aid and sharing, helping them to benefit from her own personal contacts. *“She not only knew our language, but she understood our despair, the rejection or mockery that we sometimes had to suffer from other people.” “She always restored our confidence and we knew that she was praying for us.”* Doctor Pierre Dutertre, a doctor from the “Exile Journey Association”, wrote to us: *“I was deeply saddened by the news of Sister Marie-Madeleine’s death. We were in regular contact about the work for refugees and were good friends. I was particularly proud of being able to award her a prize in recognition of her devoted work for these exiled people.”*

Sister Marie-Madeleine had close and lasting relationships with many Sri Lankan people. One of them, Lenine, said,

*“I have known Sister Marie-Madeleine since 1984, since the day I arrived in France. I was the first Sri Lankan person she ever knew. She welcomed me most warmly. Very soon afterwards, I introduced her to Father Audiau, the Indian chaplain. Through him she got to know many other Sri Lankans and she did a lot for them. Thanks to her, many of us have obtained a residence permit for France and solved our problems. She would often go to OFPRA (Office for the Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons) to help our Tamil community. We will never forget what she has given us. Thanks to her I can manage to get by quite well in French. Her death comes as a great sadness to all of us. I think she will continue her mission in heaven.”*

In his homily, Father McCullen, too, stressed her love for the poor. *“When in recent years I occasionally visited Paris, I would go to 67 rue de Sevres to see Sister Marie-Madeleine. Invariably I would find her in a room near the chapel, counselling or helping some poor person. When we began to talk she would speak with great compassion about the sad situation of the last person she had been helping. Then she would talk to me about the great social problems in France, particularly the many immigrants who had come to the country.”*

Sister Marie-Madeleine was fond of repeating St Vincent’s words: *“The poor are our masters.”* In community she told us about her work and the little details she shared with us helped us to understand what these families or these young people were going through.

### **During her illness**

*“I feel very privileged to have known Sister Marie-Madeleine and to have been close to her in the closing stages of her life. She lived through this time of illness with*

*calm serenity, deep humility, and with the strong faith of someone who has trustingly abandoned herself to the Father's will. Her whole person radiated goodness, wisdom and humility. I liked to talk to her about the Company which she knew so much about. Her way of approaching people and dealing with events moved me very deeply; one could read in her eyes discernment, humble respect, kindly understanding and great sensitivity."*

### **Friend of Our Lady**

Sister Marie-Madeleine went to heaven on 9th February 2005. *"I suspect that she asked Our Lady of Lourdes to come for her so that she could celebrate February 11<sup>th</sup> in heaven with all the saints and the angels. She had such a deep love of Our Lady, particularly Our Lady of Lourdes. I cannot forget her smile and her spirit of faith when, a few days before she died, I brought her a little bottle of Lourdes water!"*

Like St Catherine Laboure whom she also loved very much, Sister Marie-Madeleine was, for those who knew her, one of the greatest Daughters of Charity.

Thank you for being so very kind, humble and discreet, for being so close to the poorest of the poor. Thank you for giving such authentic witness by **living in accordance with your vocation**, by your **spirit of union**, and by **being close to the lives and the hearts of the poor**. All this is a wonderful illustration of what Mother Evelyne put before us in her letter of 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2005.

Thank you for being **our mediatrix**, as Fr McCullen described you in this prayer: *"Sister Marie-Madeleine, you can now lay aside your talents as a translator because in heaven they speak only one language, the language of charity. Yes, when you were on earth your ministry was to mediate between peoples of different languages. In heaven – and this is our prayer – may the Lord welcome you as specially qualified for the work of "mediation" in His presence. So we ask you, who used to be a translator and are now a mediator, to remember us here on earth as we still speak so imperfectly the language of charity, the language of our God who is pure Agape."*

Your grateful Sisters

Province of Japan

### **Golden Jubilee commemoration**

(1954-2004)

### **A little history**

The Province of Japan was erected on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1954, with Sister Laporte as Visitatrice. The Province has 38 Sisters – 12 are Japanese, and there are 26 missionary Sisters, most of whom are French. The first Sisters arrived in Japan in 1933, at the request of Mother Meyer, a Sacred Heart nun in Obayashi. In 1949 missionary Sisters were obliged to leave their mission to escape imprisonment during the cultural revolution

so they came to the community at Osaka. Under the direction of Sister Genevieve Termier, two houses were opened at Osaka and at Fukuoka. Mother Meyer found ways of giving financial support to the Sisters caring for people in the shantytown of Osaka, better known as Kamagasaki. At Fukuoka, the Sisters, at the Bishop's request, look after children in the day nursery.

After the Second World War, Father Friel, an Irish missionary Columban Father, asked the Mother House to send Sisters to work in Japan. The Superioress General asked the Province of Saint Louis to respond to this need. In 1954 the Province sent 4 Sisters to work in the area of Wakayama and these continued to depend on their Province of origin. Gradually they took charge of Postulants, set up hospital visiting and had a hospital built for handicapped children. In 1963, after a visit from the Mother General, the mission at Wakayama was once more attached to the Province of Japan and Sister Mary Moran was appointed Visitatrice.

### **Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary**

*On 13<sup>th</sup> June 2004*, the 50th anniversary celebrations were held at the Provincial House in Kobe. Among those present were Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor, Father Torres, Provincial Director, Fathers Constantio and Caballero, members of the Vincentian Family and some youth groups. The day began with a special Eucharist concelebrated by Bishop Leo Ikenaga and the three priests: this was followed by a celebration meal and a time for recreational and artistic activities. Finally, Sister Julma used power-point to project a montage on "The service of the Poor in our times; Saint Vincent and beyond." On the days that followed she spoke very enthusiastically to the Sisters of the Provincial House and those from the Seibo house in Osaka, about the new values contained in the revised Constitutions, and she made us all keen to deepen our knowledge and appreciation of these new Constitutions. Later, she addressed the Sister Servants, clarifying some points on Apostolic Reflection, and she did this through role-playing in which the Sisters took part. Unfortunately, Sister Julma's meeting with the Sisters under ten years vocation at Wakayama was cancelled because a typhoon was heading that way.

*On 11<sup>th</sup> October 2004*, it was the turn of the Sisters in the house at Wakayama to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of their house, and the arrival of the American Sisters. Since that time the Daughters of Charity have continued to collaborate with the Columban Fathers in the parishes of the Wakayama region (this area is under the jurisdiction of the regional authority). At the church of Yakata-machi, Bishop Leo Ikenaga concelebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving with the Columban Fathers and the three Vincentians. We all joined the parishioners and people who work with us, for a festive meal. Of course, the presence of Sisters Mary Moran and Mary Patrick, two Sisters who were at the foundation from its earliest days, was an added reason for rejoicing.

These two jubilee celebrations provided an opportunity for many parishioners, volunteers, associates and other members of the Vincentian Family, to remember our past history and to share the grace of the present moment: they encouraged us to continue to

collaborate with them and to witness to the charism of Vincent and Louise in the years to come.

Sister Sharon Tenbarge  
*Echoes Correspondent*

Quasi-Province  
**Andrew, the courage to love !**

I met Andrew just over six months ago. He has an injured foot, the result of an accident at work seven years ago, and he now works as a cashier in one of the big stores. He lives with his three children, aged 17, 15 and 13. He has brought them up very lovingly. When he can, he helps his neighbours. He adored his wife, who died two years ago after a serious illness. Even though I never met her, I feel that I know her very well. When he speaks about her, he gives a little smile, and tears well up in his eyes. When the children are there he looks at them and finds his wife in them.

I have never known him to speak a bitter word. He talks calmly about his past. He is courageously preparing for his children's future. This man, whose eyes reflect only peace, is a man who reacts strongly against injustice, and he is not afraid to stand up and defend the rights of the most vulnerable.

Thank you, Andrew. Your courage and your self-forgetfulness teach me how to live, in a better way, my vocation as servant.

Sister Louise  
*Daughter of Charity*

DAY OF PRAYER

Vincentian Family Day of Prayer

During the second meeting of the leaders of the different branches of the international Vincentian Family, which took place from 25<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> January 2005 in Paris, we looked back over our principal activities in 2004 and considered what we have planned to do for 2005.

We noted that all the main branches will be holding an Assembly or international meeting this year: the AIC in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic, from 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> February; the SVP Society in Salamanca, Spain, from 19<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> June; the JMV in Paris, France, from 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> August; the AMM in Rome from 24<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> October, and Misevi at the Berceau, France from 26<sup>th</sup> -30<sup>th</sup> December.

We also evaluated the campaigns held in recent years. Everyone agreed that the campaigns were an opportunity for us to become more united as a family in the different countries where we are established. We would like to share with you some reflections from our dialogue on these different activities (cf. appendix 1).

As is our custom every year, we are writing to encourage you to prepare for the “**Vincentian Family Day of Prayer**” which will be held on September 27<sup>th</sup>.

After reflecting deeply on recent world events and on different situations of poverty and marginalisation, we decided that the theme for next year will be Vincentian solidarity and that we will take as our motto:

“United as the Vincentian Family

*in solidarity with those who are most vulnerable.”*

We think this is a very evocative theme and we would like you, wherever you are, to identify situations in which our brothers and sisters are most vulnerable and then respond to these specific local circumstances in your own country. Who could these most vulnerable people be in our respective countries? You will know the answer to this question. They may be street children, old and abandoned people who live on their own, indigenous persons, women, victims of natural disasters, etc.

The celebrations for the feast of our Founder, Saint Vincent de Paul will be planned with this context in mind.

In appendix 2 we describe some situations of vulnerability in different world contexts. No doubt you will all know of other difficult situations nearer home.

We are sure that you do know other situations where people are poor and vulnerable in your respective countries. We would like the different branches or the National Councils of the Vincentian Family to identify these situations of poverty and according to the means at their disposal, draw up projects for action, keeping in mind the three levels or stages of intervention (sensitising, educating and taking specific action), and to do all this in response to situations of poverty.

We are asking you, yourselves, to make suggestions about this day of prayer for the feast of Saint Vincent and to become involved in this so that all the members of the family will take part.

We are living in privileged days when the Holy Spirit is working very specially in the Vincentian Family. We are also living, in a creative way, in fidelity to our Vincentian vocation. And we would like to end with these words of Saint Vincent: “*So let us go, my brothers, to serve the poor with new love, and let us even seek out the poorest and most abandoned people, recognising before God that these are our lords and masters....*” (SV XI, 393).

May God grant us the grace to live in unity as the Vincentian Family and to show solidarity with the most vulnerable. All our best wishes for the feast of Saint Vincent!

Gregory G.Gay (CM), Sister Evelyne Franc (DC),  
Marina Costa (AIC), Jose Ramon Diaz Torremocha (SSVP),  
Benjamin Romo (AAM), Gladys Abi-Said (JMV).  
Eva Villar (Misevi), Yvon Laroche (RSV).

## **EVALUATION OF THE CAMPAIGNS (Appendix 2)**

As we do every year at this time, we are writing to encourage you to begin preparations for the Vincentian Family Day of Prayer, which will be held some time round 27<sup>th</sup> September. We would also like to share with you our reflections on what we have been doing.

### **1. Vincentian Family Campaign in operation since 2001: “*The globalisation of charity: the fight against hunger.*”**

This campaign has produced good results. More than 160 projects have been organised worldwide. We know that other campaigns are being carried out but we haven't yet received information about these. The campaign itself is over but concrete activities resulting from it continue to take place in every country and among the different branches of the Vincentian Family.

### **2. Vincentian Family Campaign in operation since 2003: “*Political action to campaign against malaria.*”**

The person in charge of this campaign tells us that it comprises three stages: firstly, sensitising people; secondly, educating them; thirdly, setting up specific projects. The campaign is now in the first phase of sensitising people.

Opinions were divided on the matter: some said that the campaign had achieved its objective; others said it had failed. We recognise all the valuable work done by the person in charge of the campaign. As a family, we are gradually becoming aware that “political action” is a fundamental expression of charity.

We agreed to end this “political action” (first phase of the campaign) on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2005. Consequently, we are asking the promoter to continue work at the educational level (phase 2) and for this stage a booklet, “*Measures to fight malaria*” will be produced. Through the different branches of our family, the booklet will reach countries where this scourge exists. Finally, we have decided to help these countries to draw up concrete projects (phase 3). We have to bear in mind that at each stage we must, as far as we can, involve those who will benefit from the campaign.

**3. Vincentian Family campaign from 27<sup>th</sup> September 2004 to 27<sup>th</sup> September 2005:**  
*“Year for young people in the Vincentian Family: sharing the charism across all generations.” Prayer- Formation-Service.*

This year has been an opportunity for all of us in the Vincentian Family to come closer to young people, to recognise their most important place in our family, and to help them to discover the richness of our charism. It is urgently necessary for these young people to have had a living encounter with Jesus himself in the person of the poor. We continue to share our Vincentian charism with young people through the witness we give of a holy life and service of the poor.

On the occasion of the XXth World Youth Days at Cologne (Germany), the JMV will organise in Paris the 3<sup>rd</sup> encounter for Young Vincentians and its theme will be, *“With Mary, we have come to adore and serve you in the poor.”* This will be the crowning point of the international year for the young people of the Vincentian Family.

**4. Collaboration in drawing up Formation Plans and exchanging information**

- 4.1. Vincentian documents have been translated in Madagascar and Hungary. We have in mind further projects for the future translation and adaptation of documents for Vietnam, Mozambique, Nigeria, Congo, Ukraine, China, Ethiopia, Eritrea, etc.
- 4.2. Setting up a collaborative network to finance, translate and disseminate formation material. Fr. Manuel Ginete, the Superior General’s delegate for the Vincentian Family, will be the intermediary.
- 4.3. Drawing up a three page document on the main branches of the Vincentian Family for distribution during the World Youth Days.
- 4.4. Updating the presentation dossiers of the main branches of the Vincentian Family.

**5. Current situation: the tsunami**

- 5.1. After the tsunami we sent a message expressing solidarity with the members of the Vincentian Famil in South-East Asia. This message was sent by internet to all the branches of the family.
- 5.2. The SVP Society will organise a meeting to study the situation in South-East Asoa and draw up a plan for sending aid. This meeting will be held in Salamanca on 19<sup>th</sup> April. All branches are invited to send a representative.

**SOME WORLD SITUATIONS WHERE PEOPLE ARE VULNERABLE**  
 (Appendix 2)

**1. The situation of children throughout the world in 2005**

Being a child is a frightening experience for at least half the world’s child population. This is indicated by UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) in its report

on the situation of children in 2005. This year's report pinpoints poverty, conflicts and AIDS as the main threats to young children.

**1.1. Poverty.** In measuring the impact of poverty, researchers for “the situation of children throughout the world in 2005” document, based their figures on findings by Bristol University and the London School of Economics. According to these researchers, the main criteria for measuring levels of poverty and infringement of human rights are: housing, nutrition, sanitation, access to drinking water, health, education and information. It is estimated that nearly 110 million Latin-American boys and girls are living in poverty. Indigenous children and those of African descent are the most excluded. On a world scale, 180 million children are subjected to the worst forms of child labour. Every year 1.2 million children are victims of child-trafficking and at least 2 million are exploited in the sex industry.

**1.2. Armed conflicts.** “The state of children world wide, 2005” stresses the fact that children are increasingly being targeted in armed conflicts. About half of the 3.6 million people who died in these conflicts during the 90s decade were below the age of 18. The main consequences of these attacks is reflected in the millions of boys and girls who were injured or handicapped, victims of sexual violence, traumatised or suffering from hunger and disease.

**1.3. AIDS.** Death and disease suffered by millions of adult victims have devastated the lives of boys and girls, while the number of young people dying from this disease continues to increase. The wave of orphans caused by AIDS is one of the principal repercussions this epidemic has had on children. In sub-Sahara Africa, particularly, HIV/AIDS is wiping out communities because it is not just the parents and relations who are dying but also teachers, farmers, and others who provide basic human resources. Orphans are particularly vulnerable because they have nobody to defend them. For example, boys and girls whose parents died from AIDS are discriminated against, whether they themselves carry the virus or not, and they are maltreated by people who are terrified of the illness and ignorant of the way it is transmitted. Many orphans have to stop going to school and they earn some money to subsist and to look after their younger brothers and sisters.....And it is not just the orphans who suffer the consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. More than 3 million people, not all of them orphans, live with AIDS. Even more millions of children have also to look after their sick parents and brothers and sisters, or they have lost their dear ones.

**1.4. Street children.** Thousands of young people, most of them minors, live in the main towns of Romania. They number more than 5000 and half of these are concentrated in the streets of Bucharest. This situation has been revealed by the Romanian branch of *Save the Children*. The Director of this organisation explains that children or young people who live on the streets are classified as “homeless” and receive no support from their parents or any institution. Most of them survive by washing cars, selling good, collecting materials for recycling, or by begging. Many are forced into prostitution and the number of homeless young people on heavy drugs such as heroin, is continually on the increase.



**1.5. Children of the tsunami.** A third of the people who suffered in this South-East Asian disaster were children. We are told that in some of the countries affected by the tsunami, there were traffickers who exploited abandoned youngsters. The Mafia of sexual exploitation of children and illegal adoptions, saw this crisis as an opportunity to continue their criminal activities. The United Nations Fund for Children (UNICEF), confirmed cases of child-trafficking in Sumatra, where phone and text messages were used to proposition children between the ages of three and ten.

The humanitarian organisation *Childwatch* has confirmed the disappearance of 130 Thai orphans at Phuket, and on that same island, a women's refugee camp informed us that 24 hours after the tragedy, foreigners came along offering to adopt children in exchange for money. There had already been charges of sexual violence against the child population; countless orphans were among the millions of displaced persons so there is reason to mistrust the Mafia gangs in Indonesia who could hand youngsters over to trafficking networks and sell them into forced labour or sexual slavery in richer countries. Thousands of tourists who travel to Southern Asia do not go there just to admire the paradise locations of these places, but can also be motivated by prostitution, the child pornography industries and sexual tourism involving minors.

The tsunami of 26<sup>th</sup> December last year led to the disappearance of many institutions and this has left the door open for criminal and unscrupulous exploitation of those who are most vulnerable. Illegal people-trafficking is more profitable than drugs or arms-trafficking so the international community has to take certain measures such as registering all displaced boys and girls; giving them immediate attention, locating their parents, issuing a temporary moratorium on youngsters under the age of 16 leaving the country, preventing illegal adoptions and reinforcing border controls.

## **2. Indigenous peoples**

Indigenous people are to be found in vast areas of our planet. They are scattered all over the world, from the Arctic to the South Pacific, and are estimated to number about 300 million people. Among the many groups of indigenous peoples are the Indians of the American continent (for example, the Mayas of Guatemala or the Aymaras of Bolivia) the Inuits and the Aleutians from the polar regions, the Samians of northern Europe, the Aborigines and the indigenous people of Torres Strait, Australia, and the Maoris of New Zealand. All these, as is the case with most other indigenous peoples, have preserved their social, cultural, economic and political characteristics which are patently different from those of other sections of the population in other nations.

Throughout the entire history of humankind, each time dominant forces from neighbouring countries have extended their territories, or when colonisers from far-off lands have taken over by force new lands, cultures, means of livelihood and even life itself; the indigenous people have been in danger. Threats to the culture and the lands of indigenous peoples and to their juridical status and other rights established by law, do not always take the same form that they did in the past. Although some groups have

managed, relatively speaking, to maintain their way of life, indigenous people throughout the world have to struggle to have their identity and way of life recognised .

### **3. Migrants**

Migrants are people who leave their country in search of a better life, forming a huge and ever-increasing wave of human beings that are spreading all over the world. Today they number 175 million and by 2050 this figure will rise to 230 million according to a demographic prediction that the world population will reach 9 billion. This data is given in the annual report on migration issued by the International Organisation for Immigrants (OMI) which collaborates with 101 countries and monitors the political, economic and social aspects of this flow of migrants. Migration has always been part of human history and this is due to a variety of factors: poverty in the country of origin; natural, political and social disasters, and demand for labour. In view of these different factors it is not possible to classify migrations, but these have to be regarded as a human phenomenon which might eventually benefit the emigrants and their country of origin as well as the host countries.

In 2002, 2.9% of the world's population was classified as migrants, that is to say, 1 person in every 35 left their native country; men and women went in search of a better future, usually leaving the southern hemisphere for the richer countries of the north. This wave of migration can alter the demographic patterns of countries. Clandestine migration and people-trafficking are not controlled by OMI: these are illegal and criminal activities but they are extremely profitable. There are no reliable statistics but according to police estimates in different countries, there could be 2 million people (illegal immigrants, women and children for prostitution) whose exploitation generates about 10 billion dollars for criminal organisations.

### **4. Women**

The feminine face of poverty is "another form of violence against women." Most of the 1,500 million people who subsist on 1 dollar a day or less, are women. The gap between men and women trapped in the cycle of poverty has widened over the last decade, women earning on average a little over 50% of what men earn. Women living in poverty often are denied access to important means of help such as loans, property and inheritance. Their work is neither recognised nor rewarded. Their needs, health care and nutrition, are not seen as priorities; they do not have adequate access to education or support services and their participation in decision making, whether in the home or in the community at large, is minimal.

Trapped in the cycle of poverty, women do not have access to services that could change their situation. The following data give this information about the marginalisation of women: 3/5 of the 115 million children who do not go to school are girls, and 2/3 of the of the 879 million illiterate people are women: in many countries women have the highest mortality rate, especially in southern and eastern Asia: more than 500, 000 women die during pregnancy or in childbirth every year and these deaths have been happening much more frequently in sub-Saharan Africa. Half the cases of

HIV/AIDS are women. The number of women who are victims of sexual trafficking or who are forced into slavery varies: according to the data we have, these number between 700,000 and 4,000,000. Only 139 UNO countries have ratified the Convention abolishing all forms of discrimination against women.

## **4.2 Migrant women**

According to estimated figures issued by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), there are currently nearly 90 million people in the world who are emigrants, not counting refugees and people seeking political asylum. Women make up about half of this total. In many countries the number of women who leave their country in search of work far outstrips the number of male immigrants even though the images of the “typical migrant” persist; the emigrant worker is usually thought of as a man, usually a young man, and one who is trying to make money.

At present there are two worrying trends in the migration of women. First of all, in many parts of the world it is obvious that there is a concentration of women in vulnerable occupations such as domestic service, offering “distractions”(including forced participation in the sex industry) and caring for children and sick people. These women workers are vulnerable because they are very much subordinate to their employers. This vulnerability is heightened by that fact that these sectors of the labour market tend not to be part of the national social legislation structure and are not bound by directives that regulate international migration. Women’s participation in the international labour market, which often, though not always, adopts different forms of forced labour, is another worrying feature that demands international attention.

## SPECIAL 175<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1830 APPARITIONS

Apparition of 18<sup>th</sup> July 1830

### **Mary, pathway of light**

#### **Some pastoral outlines**

The apparitions of 1830 are, first of all, the story of that humble Daughter of Charity, Sister Catherine Laboure. The 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 18<sup>th</sup> July 1830 is an opportunity for us to follow in the footsteps of St. Catherine so that we may have an inner appreciation of this wonderful event and allow our minds to be enlightened so that we can learn to see events and people in the light of the unseen.

An apparition is not, in itself, an article of faith. However, when it is recognised as authentic, it helps to deepen people’s faith. The word “apparition” might lead us to think of supra-natural phenomena. Well, “supernatural” means Love, the Life of God which does not add anything to our human life but transforms it and allows every aspect of that life to develop. An apparition is not just a scientific statement of some

extraordinary happening. It is something connected with our faith: it is an invitation to believe and to love. An apparition is meant to remind us about things we cannot see but which really do exist. It makes visible the essence of something, not just its external appearance. The apparition from the invisible world of love is a glimpse of something that should make us attentive to the daily “apparitions” in our lives.

- In the first section of this article we will be following the spiritual journey traced by Catherine during the night of 18<sup>th</sup> July 1830.

- In the second part, we will be contemplating the face of **Mary**. What she is like and how she acts reveal what God is like and how He acts.

## **I. CATHERINE’S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY** **“Moving from darkness into light”**

On July 18<sup>th</sup> Catherine is called upon to start off on a spiritual journey. In the middle of the night she discovers the mystery of God’s gracious presence. God does not come to reveal himself but, in the person of Mary, he shows us the luminous “ground” of his presence.

The message of 18<sup>th</sup> July urges us to take the time to examine our lives in the light of the four main stages of the path followed by Catherine, gospel stages for passing from death to life, from darkness into light: moving towards the place of encounter, looking beyond appearances, discovering the mystery of encounter and communing with God and our brothers and sisters.

### **Moving towards the place of encounter**

Our Lady’s coming is announced by a child. When Catherine is asleep he comes and wakens her: *“Get up, the Blessed Virgin is waiting for you.”* It is this child who will prepare Catherine to move towards the place of encounter, the land of the Covenant.

Tenderly and untiringly, God goes in search of us: he asks us to enter into a Covenant with him. His presence alongside us is always discreet, as was the presence of this little child. When God calls he does not impose his presence; he speaks to our hearts to arouse what is best in us, a response that is freely given. His hand is outstretched only to urge us to give our gift freely. He tells us, as he told Abraham, *“Go ...to the land I will show you...”* The land that God has in mind for us is the land of encounter. *“The land that I WILL SHOW YOU”* is the land of the I-Thou relationship, the land of dialogue, the land of the Covenant, the land where we will find the promised happiness. God speaks to us from the depths of his heart, in the mystery of this inexplicable and unique Covenant he wishes to make with us.

Catherine’s response to this meeting with Mary is spontaneous. Beforehand, like Mary on the day of the Annunciation, Catherine puts forward an objection to her little messenger: *“But they will hear me..”* Reassured by his answer to this, Catherine follows

her guide and, with him, discovers a pathway of light. In fact the child is radiant with light: *“he brings rays of light wherever he goes,”* he makes everything he touches beautiful and look different. The chapel is bathed in light.

But Mary is not there. The chapel is “deserted.” Catherine waits. If Mary has not yet arrived is it not because she wants to give Catherine time to get ready to meet her? This time of waiting and powerlessness intensifies her desire and hollows out in her a wider space to welcome Mary. Indeed, communication between people demands a certain reticence and respect, loving patience and availability. Before Jesus began his mission, did he not spend 40 days in solitude, preparing to meet people with respect and mutual attentiveness?

The time of waiting that Catherine was subject to, is something imposed on each one of us so that we may truly respond to God’s calls. The light of Love can only be revealed if, like the shepherd Moses, we take off our sandals before drawing near to the Burning Bush. To *“tread on holy ground”* we have to rid ourselves of any spirit of possessiveness, domination and self-sufficiency. Infinite respect is needed if we are to welcome the presence of another person.

### **Looking beyond appearances**

At last a woman comes forward, *“in the choir, and sits down in the chair to the left of the choir.”* Catherine sees Mary but does not recognise her. *“I did not see the Blessed Virgin,”* she said.

The child then has to repeat three times, *“Here is the Blessed Virgin.”* Catherine needs some time to adjust her way of seeing things and to look at them on a different level, the level of faith. The child helps her to see things differently. Then, going beyond appearances, Catherine recognises Mary: looking with the heart she is able to see “the unseen.”

Does not this remind us of the experience that the two men had one day as they were walking to Emmaus? They, too, needed time to adjust and move forward, in order to recognise God at their side. And again, today, welcoming the light of love allows us to see persons and events with the eyes of faith, not reducing them to the image we have of them.

### **Discovering the mystery of encounter**

Mary is there, seated in the chair. She welcomes Catherine like a mother wanting to spend a little time with her child. She wants it to be a time of sharing. Her attentive listening inspires loving trust.: *“Then, looking at the Blessed Virgin, I was at her side in a single bound, on my knees on the altar steps, with my hands resting on the Blessed Virgin’s knees....Time passed, the sweetest time of my life. It would be impossible for me to describe what I experienced.”* Catherine feels so much at ease that she is able, in a familiar way, to place her two hands on Mary’s knees. They are both on the same

wavelength: the wavelength of true Love where each person truly exists for the other. Catherine experiences a new kind of life where all the significance of relationship is revealed in the light of God. Catherine's heart is filled with great waves of tenderness, joy and love, such as she could never have imagined. She feels good even physically. The astonishing privilege of this encounter means that Catherine is able to share, in all simplicity, the deepest experiences of her life; her difficulties and her disappointments. Mary listens to her with great attention, she understands her and is able to speak to her in a way that restores her confidence. This unique sharing opens up a new horizon for Catherine.

In this sincere sharing, Catherine's attentiveness prepares her to receive the message from God who is simply Love and Gift: *"The Lord wants to entrust you with a mission..."* Just as one day God needed Mary to make him known, He reveals to Catherine the love He freely pours out on the world. He asks her to freely commit herself to this mission. Just as the aged Simeon prophesied to Mary that a sword would pierce her heart, this apparition tells Catherine that she, too, will meet with contradiction; but nothing must stop her carrying out her mission because God will be with her. *"You will have much to suffer...you will be contradicted. But you will be given grace. Do not fear."* Catherine accepts this mission in the sure knowledge that God is not simply sending her to fulfil it but that He will be there at her side to support and encourage her: *"Lord, thy will be done!"* Catherine's trust is founded on the certainty that the Lord took the initiative in trusting her.

### **Living in union with God and with other people**

The apparition journey begins, for Catherine, with her encounter with her Eucharistic Lord. Mary gradually leads Catherine to discover that there is a double movement in this single encounter – movement towards God and movement towards our brothers and sisters.

Then Mary identifies the poor with the Suffering Servant: *"The Cross will be held in contempt...Our Saviour's side will be opened anew...The streets will run with blood – the whole world will be plunged in gloom."* Catherine shares Mary's faith and compassion. She feels called to see the fatal events that will unfold in the present and in the future, events that will degrade the world, and she is made aware of her responsibility to help build a world of justice and of peace. She also understands Mary's wish to establish an Association that will help young people in distress and provide them with human, Christian and apostolic training. Mary does not hold Catherine back but sends her forth towards her future. Her vocation is to bring God to her brothers and sisters and find, in return, the face of God in the faces of these people, especially the most disfigured ones among them.

### **Conclusion**

This apparition of 18<sup>th</sup> July is not simply an incidental experience in Catherine's life. It traces out a pathway of light for her whole life. Today, Our Lady of "rue du Bac",

is asking us, also, to take these steps and rediscover at a deeper level the twofold dimension of the encounter: meeting God and meeting our brothers and sisters.

### **MARY ON OUR JOURNEY, A REFLECTION OF THE HEART OF GOD**

The 18<sup>th</sup> July encounter has many lessons for us. In the person of Mary, radiant with the light of God, the spiritual path followed by Catherine is an invitation to us to be open to the Infinite. Through Mary, it is God who comes to meet us, who “visits us from on high”. (Lk 1, 68,78). If we look more deeply into the heart of Mary we discover her loving passion for God and her tireless patience with humanity.

#### **Love waits patiently**

Catherine’s experience of meeting Our Lady is first of all a story of love. By her discreet and unhurried manner of acting, Mary patiently follows the method of taming the fox described in Saint-Exupery’s story. The supernatural relationship she offers Catherine does not crush her with condescending goodness or with demands on her. She asks her to experience a genuine encounter in the light of God’s presence, where each person needs the other, each person needs to love. Is not the entire Bible the inexplicable story of God’s love for people and the tireless confidence he persists in having in them? Even in the opening pages of the Book of Genesis, we hear the footsteps of God as he walks among the trees in the garden, searching for man, and his voice, like that of a father looking for his son, saying, “*Adam, where are you?*”(Gen 3, 8-9). In other pages of Scripture, God ceaselessly presents himself as a lover who comes looking for us, who weeps when he cannot find us and who fears he might lose us when we have let ourselves be found, who takes us in his arms when we are exhausted or injured, who kneels down to wash our feet, who shares our misery even to the point of death and gives his life in order to save us. Again, it is he who is preparing the banquet table to which he is inviting us in the joyful hope of seeing us all united to him.

So, on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1830, with the simplicity of being one of the family, Mary sits down in a chair. She is there as presence, as utter welcome and pure gift. She is, at the same time, Sister, Mother, and the humble Handmaid of the Lord. Her attitude reflects and extends in a human way, the attitude of God revealed in Jesus when he says to Zaccheus, “*I must dine with you today.*” Jesus, begging for love, stands humbly at the door and knocks....

In most cases, God comes to visit us in a quiet way. He invites himself as a friend would. He knocks at the door and respectfully waits for us to answer because he cannot force us to love. Love is not possessive, love offers itself. God begs for our yes, our smile. When he finds our door open, God only asks to come in to make our hearts burn with his love. He has already taken the initiative in order to welcome us to himself. With Mary, we become more aware that God’s love goes ahead of us and that our own love is only a response to his.

### **Love causes people to live in truth**

Because Mary is waiting for her, Catherine is offered the grace of seeing herself as she really is. However, Mary first of all makes her wait for a while. Is not this a discreet way of inviting her to look deeply into her own circumstances, her personal fragility, so as to find there, “another person’s glance” that will give her confidence? Catherine learns from Mary to welcome God’s gift and to live in grace. So, as they look at one another, Catherine recognises Mary, because until now, nobody had ever looked at her like that. The love that comes to Catherine from Mary’s transparency, shows her what she is really like. With Mary, Catherine discovers God’s esteem for her and the infinite price of her personal dignity.

When God opens his heart to us, he leads us to understand the intimate depths of his Covenant: *“As the Father has loved me, so I also love you. Remain in my love...I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy complete.”* (Jn 15). We are all called to the Burning Bush to receive this inner enlightenment and to let God touch our hearts and add to our happiness.

### **Love listens and adapts itself to the other person**

In such an atmosphere of trust, Catherine can reveal herself as the person she really is, she can say what she truly thinks without fear of being judged. When Mary shows an interest in everything that is happening in Catherine’s life, she is able to show her how important her life is; she allows Catherine to reveal her most intimate thoughts and desires. Mary listens to her for a long time and is understanding; then she gives her advice about how to deal with her problems. *“She told me how I should act in my difficulties”*, said Catherine. This dialogue between Mary and Catherine gives us some understanding of the mystery of the Divine Trinity where sharing and dialogue between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are eternally ongoing, where they constantly show love for one another and where each Person gives to and receives from the others.

In the same way that Jesus acted towards Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind... God treats us with the greatest respect. His attentive listening and compassion help us to find meaning in everyday events, especially those that are humdrum, repetitive and often burdensome, and to discover the hidden joy at the heart of the most insignificant daily happenings. As we listen to the Word of God, our hearts are conformed to God’s way of thinking so that we can hear the appeals made by our world and respond to them as his heart would have us do.

### **Love arouses missionary zeal**

In this time of conversation Mary does not keep Catherine for herself. She brings her to God. Mary leads her along the path of mission: *“Do whatever he tells you.”* (Jn 2,5). Since this is what Mary herself has done, she is able to address these words to Catherine just as she said them to the servants at the marriage feast of Cana. Catherine has been given a mission. She has been asked to undertake a task that is beyond her.



Catherine's hidden resources will be united even more closely with the life of God himself. Catherine will be inwardly moulded and hollowed out. Mary awakes in her an extraordinary trust in God. Like a good teacher, she awakens in Catherine the dynamism of love and she promises to support her so that she will blossom in the gift she makes of herself, in spite of the sacrifices this entails.

Every mission is life-giving. Love gives itself, it shines out like the Spirit at Pentecost who inflames the earth and transforms it into a Burning Bush. God promises to be with us, to give us the Spirit who will support us in times of trial, give us peace and lead us to joy. Grafted onto him, our love will always be life-giving and dynamic.

### **Love gives itself to the very end**

The sad expression on the face of the Blessed Virgin when she speaks about human misery shows how deeply Mary shares her children's sufferings. *"The Cross will be held in contempt. It will be thrown to the ground. Blood will flow. Our Saviour's side will be opened anew. The streets will run with blood."* Humankind often experiences times of crisis caused by sin and selfishness. When the Israelites were captives in Egypt, *"God heard their groanings."* ( Ex 2, 23-25). In calling Moses to serve him, God takes up his people's cause.(Ex 6,6). At Christmas, God assumes our human condition so that we can share his divine life. And his love will continue right to the end of that human life he wanted to share. The crowning moment of the Covenant will be the Cross, where love is seen to be stronger than evil. For Mary, when any person is being abused, it is God who is being hurt. In every abused person she sees her persecuted, tortured and executed son, Jesus. She helps Catherine to become more aware of the sufferings of her people. Just as the disciples gathered in prayer with Mary in the Cenacle became "Apostles", so Catherine is moved to pray for the whole human race and to follow her God on the pathway of the Covenant.

God abhors evil, injustice and all forms of selfishness. He asks us to take an active part in the work of Salvation. *"Love no flood can quench, no torrents drown."* (Sg 8,7). The gift of his love calls us to be responsible and to give witness to him. Love only flourishes when it is shared with others. Mary makes us people whose hearts are moulded by Love, who learn to be compassionate and united with others in self-forgetfulness, who give themselves to the utmost.

### **Conclusion**

The account of what happened on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1830 speaks of an experience of Love that transforms. For Catherine, the message of this Apparition is first and foremost that we need to accept love and then in a responsible way reflect and spread it. The 45 years that Catherine lived in discreet self-effacement, lead us to think that the spiritual experience she had on the night of 18<sup>th</sup> July 1830 helped her to understand, in the very depths of her being, what is meant by mission. It is not a voluntary action on our part, it is "God's life" that fashions us, divests us of ourselves, penetrates us and becomes fruitful. The spring can only flow from the "open side."

Mary, who was present at the birth of the Church and who is at the heart of it, is the model of human nature transformed by love. Catherine contemplated Mary's beauty and reflected it in her ordinary actions as a Daughter of Charity. Every day Catherine would go "*to the foot of the altar*" to draw from there the confidence placed in her.

Sister Anne Prevost  
*Daughter of Charity*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

José Maria Roman, CM  
Saint Vincent de Paul, Biography  
Alzani Editore, March 2005

Why hasn't this life of St. Vincent de Paul, written by Fr. Jose Maria Roman, been translated into French before now? It was translated into other languages many years ago. Why did we have to wait so long for the French version? We have had to wait nearly a quarter of a century before discovering this life of St. Vincent. It is the French translation of Volume I of "St. Vincent de Paul, the biography written by Jose Maria Roman CM and published in September 1981 by the BAC ("*Biblioteca de autores cristianos*") Madrid. The second volume was devoted to the spirituality of St. Vincent and included various passages from the saint's writings. This translation has been authorised by the Vincentian Provincial of Madrid.

We are very familiar with Jose Maria Ramon, a leading authority on St. Vincent and his fervent admirer. In 1981 he was one of the most knowledgeable experts on the Founder of the Mission and his times. In this book he presents us with the fruits of his research on the life and times of St. Vincent. As the Spanish editor observed, "*The author has taken pains to let the saint speak for himself wherever possible. Most of the time it is Vincent himself who tells his story. It is he who passes on, particularly, his message; to make charity one's mission in life.*"

This life – the umpteenth of his biographies – is a historical and a critical study of the subject. It is the outcome of long study of the Founder of the Mission: every statement made and every quotation are based on documentary evidence and scientific research. This biography was written 23 years ago. Since then, researchers have continued their investigations and new documents have come to light, particularly those discovered by Fr. Bernard Koch, CM. Amendments or additions have had to be made here and there, for example, with reference to the captivity in Tunis, the state of the town and the parish of Chatillon, the Priory of Saint-Leonard-de Chaume. Fr. Roman would no doubt have approved these clarifications, given the historical rigour with which he strove to be at the forefront of research. However, from choice and out of respect for this his greatest work, we would like to preserve Fr. Roman's text in its entirety and thus enhance the memory of the author who departed this life in February 2002.

The reader will appreciate the quality and expertise of this translation which is the work of French confreres: Andre Sylvestre and our sadly missed Jules Vilbas: the whole work has been coordinated and edited by Jean-Marie Lesbats. We are indebted to them for their persevering work which has added to our enjoyment.

Jose Maria Roman – Saint Vincent de Paul

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- Procure de la Mission, 95 rue de Sevres, 75006 PARIS
- Economat, 140 rue du Bac, 75340 PARIS cedex 07

The door handle

An artist painted a picture

of a “house of peace.”

It was a large, strongly built house  
and as solid as Noah’s ark.

The colours used were pleasing  
and harmonious.

It was all very peaceful.

A little boy looked closely  
at the picture.

Suddenly he asked,

“Daddy, there’s something missing from this picture.

There’s no handle on the door  
so how can peace come into that house?”

Somewhat taken aback, the father replied,  
“The artist hasn’t forgotten the door handle,  
he just didn’t paint it in the picture.

Peace can only come into a house  
if we open the door from the inside  
and let it come in and dwell with us”.

Group of German Sisters  
International Vincentian Session  
(Paris, June 2005)