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MOTHER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL**Letter dated 15th August 2005**

My dear Sisters,

*“She is a sister and a mother,
She is love and she is light.
She is, quite simply, Mary,
whose love is boundless.”*

These words are taken from a hymn that we learned very quickly, and then sang again with our whole hearts, on 10th August last, in the MotherHouse chapel, during a wonderful prayer service conducted by those taking part in the Second International General Assembly of Vincentian Marian Youth Groups. I have chosen these words as an introduction to this traditional 15th August letter of thanks because they remind us about the place the Virgin Mary has in our lives as Daughters of Charity. Today we honour her as we celebrate her Assumption as Queen of Heaven, Queen of Angels and Queen of the Church, because she found favour with God and because, as she herself said, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, “*He has looked on his lowly handmaid and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed.*” Lk 1,48.

Together with Mary, whom Constitution 15, in fidelity to the teaching of St. Louise, presents to us as, “*Mother of mercy and hope of the lowly, closely united to her*

Son and leading to Him those who put their trust in her”, I wish to express my gratitude for all your affectionate feast-day messages. There were so many of them and even though I cannot reply to each one individually, I read them all with great pleasure, relishing their contents and recalling during prayer the news you sent about your communities, your service and your Provinces.

As I said at this time last year, it is now my turn to share some news with you. All these items of news invite us to offer prayers of intercession or thanksgiving, and they strengthen the bond of union among us.

The situation in Haiti is still very unstable. Our Sisters there are serving very courageously and joyfully in precarious situations, sharing the sufferings of the poor and their vulnerability in the face of violence. The Sisters in Southern India, Thailand and Indonesia are still coping with the consequences of the Tsunami. They are implementing projects that have been well prepared and which are financed thanks to contributions received through Interprovincial aid (aid that comes through the generosity of all the Provinces), in the midst of the inevitable difficulties that follow a catastrophe of such magnitude. Let us keep them in our prayers, as well as three Sisters (two from the British Province and one from the Province of the Near-East) who have just left to spend three months in Niger with an NGO that specialises in emergency humanitarian aid.

I am very happy, too, to tell you that the mission of Magadan (Eastern Russia) which, for several years, has been ably and resolutely prepared for by the Province of Los Altos Hills (USA), is about to see the light of day. The difficulty of finding Sisters able to speak Russian, led the Province of Los Altos Hills to ask the help of other Provinces, and, in the end, it is the Province of Cracow, Poland, that will take responsibility for this foundation in Magadan, a port on the Pacific Ocean, that unfortunately became notorious during the time of Stalin because of the prisoners who were deported there: it is still a place of great poverty. Two Sisters from the Province of Cracow will set off in October and will join a Sister from Los Altos Hills who is already there. Our prayer goes with these Sisters, and we wish to express our gratitude to the two Provinces concerned.

I also wish to let you know of a new project that will bring great hope to AIDS patients in Africa. The Company of the Daughters of Charity and the Community of San'Egidio have recently signed an agreement to collaborate in African countries and in Madagascar, in places where we have Sisters, to fight the scourge of AIDS. The Community of Sant'Egidio had its beginnings in Rome in 1968, and is now canonically recognised as a public Lay Association. At the present time it has more than 50,000 members who devote themselves to evangelisation and works of charity in Italy and in more than 70 countries. This community has initiated a strategy to fight against AIDS which is called DREAM (Drug Resources Enhancement against AIDS and Malnutrition). This DREAM project is concerned with the treatment of pregnant women who have the HIV/AIDS virus, in order to ensure that their babies are born without the virus. This project guarantees free access to treatment and uses a holistic approach which entails fighting against the effects of AIDS, as well as tuberculosis, malaria and malnutrition.

According to the terms of our agreement, the Sant'Egidio Community is in charge of the training of Sisters and lay personnel, and of the technical side of the initiative (establishing laboratories and follow-up work as well as evaluating the programme). The Company of the Daughters of Charity commits itself to implementing the DREAM project when the Visitatrice and the Provincial Council judge it possible. The Province of Mozambique was the first to make a commitment to this programme, and other Provinces are preparing to do so. Father Robert Maloney has agreed to be the Director of the Project. On behalf of the Company he will coordinate collaboration between the Sant'Egidio Community, the Daughters of Charity and the Seton Institute, an organisation associated with the Daughters of Charity in the USA, which has accepted responsibility for fund-raising. A team of two Sisters; Sister Catherine Mulligan of the Irish Province and Sister Jacqueline Gbanga of the Province of Congo, will be a link between the Provinces and Father Maloney.

Please excuse this long explanation, but it is good for you to be well informed about this difficult yet exciting project which is so important for these poor people. Let us pray together that the Lord may bless our efforts at serving those who are the poorest of the poor; may He bless our collaboration with lay people, and the devotedness of the Sisters and nursing personnel who are already implementing this DREAM project, and those who will gradually put it into action in Africa and Madagascar.

Since the beginning of this year, the General Councillors and I have noticed the enthusiasm and energy with which the study of the Constitutions is being undertaken in each Province. I, myself, had the joy of visiting the Holy Land (Province of the Near-East), Algeria (Province of North Africa), the house of Montolieu (France-South), the Province of Seville (Spain), and the three Provinces of Cracow, Warsaw and Chelmno (Poland). Then there were sessions based on the study of the Constitutions, with meetings in the Mother House for the French-speaking Councils and certain English-speaking Councils, as well as meetings for recently appointed Visitatrices: the Polish Provincial Council met in Warsaw and there was a meeting in Mexico of formators from South America, Central America and the Caribbean. We should add that there was also an interprovincial seminar organised by the Social Justice Commissions of the Provinces of Saint Louis and Evansville, and a Provincial Meeting in Emmitsburg. I also spent some time at Casa Maria Immacolata and availed of the hospitality of the Province of San Sebastian to continue my study of Spanish. The Councillors, too, have made many journeys to the various Provinces and you cannot imagine how enriching our sharings are when one or other of us returns from a journey.

As well as these visits, the General Council, particularly during special Council meetings, has already studied and approved numerous Provincial Plans and some Provincial Norms. It is continuing its reflection on the updating of several documents of the Company (Directives for Sister Servants, for the Visitatrices, the Instruction on the Vows); it is exploring the possibility of new foundations and is endeavouring to respond to requests for Vincentian Formation at international level.

As I wrote at the beginning of this letter, we have had the joy of welcoming to the Mother House the Second General Assembly of Vincentian Marian Youth Groups in this 175th anniversary year of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to Saint Catherine. The enthusiasm of the young people and the quality of the accompaniment wholeheartedly offered to them by the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, are also a source of hope.

We are living in a time of grace, as our Action Lines remind us. So let us ask the Lord, through the Blessed Virgin, to enable us to put it to good use, so that the Company may be faithful to the charism received from our Founders.

“It is for charity, for God, for the poor...and what greater act of love can one make than to give oneself, wholly and entirely, in one’s state of life and in one’s duty, for the salvation and relief of the afflicted” (Saint Vincent, VII, Letter 2734, p.397).

May Mary, the servant who was ever attentive to the Word and courageous in carrying it out, watch over each one of us, over each of our Provinces, and over the Company.

Yours affectionately and devotedly

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

FATHER.J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

4th study document on the revised Constitutions

LIFE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

Practice of the evangelical counsels
C.27-31; St. 15-18

INTRODUCTION

In this fourth document we will only be studying a few articles. These are very important, however, for understanding the identity of the Daughters of Charity. The Company, of course, has its own special way of practising the evangelical counsels; this is different from the way that other consecrated persons in the Church practise them. When we are faithful to this different way of acting, we are keeping faith with our Founders. We advise you to pay great attention to the explanations given in the first part of the second paragraph of this document..

As we said earlier, we think that after studying the document and reading the corresponding articles of the Constitutions, you should meditate on the evangelical counsels. This is, without any doubt, a wonderful opportunity to contemplate the beauty of a life given to following Christ, Servant of the Poor, who lived in poverty, chastity, and obedience to the designs of His Father. At the same time we can reflect on whether these criteria are really the guiding principles in our life or whether, on the contrary, they are just theoretical principles that have no great influence on our daily life.

We will see that in this chapter there are very few changes but each one is noted and explained in the document. While not ignoring the modifications introduced by the Assembly, we would do well to focus our attention on the contents of the evangelical counsels, as mentioned earlier.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCUMENT: MAIN IDEAS

The revised Constitutions, contrary to those of 1983, place the “specific vow” of service of the poor before the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience (**Cf. C.24**). In accordance with this change, article 28 has put the service of the poor as the first vow.

Another fundamental aspect of the practice of the evangelical counsels, is the relationship with baptism that is the basis and foundation for practising these counsels. Article 27, in accordance with articles 7a and 8b, expresses this relationship in the following terms: *“In order to serve Christ in persons who are poor, the Daughters of Charity commit themselves to live their baptismal consecration through the practice of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, which receive from this service their specific character.”*

Before commenting on each relevant article of the Constitutions we should explain and clarify the meaning of certain terms used in these articles on the evangelical counsels. This will surely help you to understand better the specific nature of the vows of the Daughters of Charity and their way of practising the evangelical counsels as described in articles 29, 30 and 31.

Baptismal consecration

Through baptism, God consecrates and sanctifies us. He makes us his children by sharing with us his divine life. The wonderful thing about faith and baptism is that these bring us into the very life of God, they make us the adopted children of the Father and brothers and sisters of Christ. Through baptism we are destined to become temples of the Holy Spirit and members of his Church. Every vocation and every state in life are different ways of living our common and basic vocation to be Christians and living our baptismal state of God’s children. Saint Vincent was certainly right when he said that the vocation of the Daughters of Charity was *“to be good Christians.”*¹ This is asking us to be faithful to our baptism and all the demands this makes.

¹ Coste IX, p. 127

Many Church documents speak of “consecration in the religious life.”² The Constitutions of the Company, however, use the phrase “*total gift of self to God*”(C.16b). Both phrases signify the development and deepening of one’s baptismal consecration; in other words, the growth and development of those seeds of divine life planted in us at our baptism. Baptismal consecration is the underlying element in the religious life, just as it is in the life of a Daughter of Charity, because it is the basis for all subsequent forms of consecration.

Evangelical counsels

The phrase “evangelical counsels” sums up the difference between what a person is obliged to do if he or she wishes to follow Christ, and on the other hand, propositions that are simply suggested. There are some passages in the gospel that show this distinction between what is obligatory and what is of counsel, though nowadays this is very much a subject for debate among theologians and exegesists. (Cf. Mt. 19, 11-12; 19, 16-30).

Of course all baptised Christians are called to live chastely in accordance with their state in life, to be obedient to God and the Church, and to use material goods in a responsible way. Clearly, baptism does not oblige all Christians to practise celibacy, to obey a Superior or to renounce their possessions. These obligations are for people who have received a special call from God to live out their baptismal consecration in a radical way by professing or practising what we call the evangelical counsels. Just as consecrated religious do, the Daughters of Charity commit themselves to live according to some aspects of the gospel that baptism does not make obligatory and which manifest their desire to live in a radical way their baptismal consecration. The Daughters of Charity practise the evangelical counsels in accordance with the specific way that these are interpreted by the Company.

By accepting to live the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, the Daughters of Charity are committed to identifying themselves in a radical way with Christ who was chaste, poor and obedient. They make commitments that are designed to help them face challenges and overcome obstacles that would prevent them living out their baptismal consecration, or make this more difficult. These challenges and obstacles spring from a natural tendency to own things, to seek pleasure and to dominate others.

Throughout the history of the Church, taking vows to observe the three evangelical counsels has always been regarded as a way of expressing a person’s total self-giving for the Kingdom of God; a sign that this person has chosen to follow Christ in a radical way and adopt a life style that expresses and deepens the demands made by baptismal consecration. If this is not the case we should think, as the Gospel expressed it, that the salt has lost its savour and should be thrown away, or that the leaven can no longer make the dough rise because it has lost its power to alter things. The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* says that practising the evangelical counsels is akin to offering a

² For example: Canon Law c 654; *Perfectae Caritatis* 5; *Vita Consecrata*, 30, 72.....

prophetic testimony and spiritual therapy for humankind, in a world where sex is glorified, where materialism gives rise to greed for possessions, and to the mistaken notions of freedom that are rampant in today's culture.³

The vows

There are many different ways of undertaking to practise the evangelical counsels: this can be done, for example, by making a promise, taking vows, etc. Vows may be public or private, perpetual or temporary. The Constitutions define the vows of the Daughters of Charity as "*non-religious, annual and always renewable*"(C.28a). So vows are a way of promising to observe the evangelical counsels. But it needs to be said that in theology and in Christian spirituality, vows are considered to be the most serious form of commitment before God, to carry out what one has promised to do. It is like a covenant between God and the person making the vow, a covenant which, by its very nature, calls for fidelity to one's pledged word.

The vows express commitment and at the same time they provide a spiritual impetus. Persons taking vows commit themselves to observing not just the specific requirements of the vows but also to practising the corresponding evangelical counsels and living according to their spirit. If a vow signifies something radical its demands can be no less exacting than the demands made by the virtue or the relevant evangelical counsel; otherwise it would be a contradiction in terms. To make this very clear let us take a practical example: by their vow of poverty the Daughters of Charity "*commit themselves to total dependence in the use and the disposal of the goods of the Company, as well as in the use of their personal goods.*"(C30a). This specific definition of what is understood by their vow of poverty does not dispense them from fulfilling the obligations of following Christ who was poor, or from the implications of what is meant by living as servants of the poor. If Daughters of Charity were to think that practising poverty simply meant living in accordance with what is laid down by vow, they would be debasing the evangelical virtue of poverty.

The two quotations that follow, clearly show that this was Saint Vincent's way of thinking, too. Saint Vincent was speaking here to the Sisters; those who had taken vows and those who hadn't: "*My daughters, you have chosen Him ever since you entered the Company....and as He led a life of poverty, you must imitate Him in that respect*"⁴ or "*all of you who are members of the Company and have not yet made vows are bound to observe poverty: as for those who have made vows, that goes without saying.*"⁵ The Constitutions, in line with Vincentian teaching, present the evangelical counsels and the vows and they don't simply define the contents of the vow but include the theological thinking and the spirituality behind the relevant virtue and evangelical counsel. This is only to be expected since the Daughters of Charity, in renewing their vows each year, are reaffirming their total self-giving to God to serve Christ in the person of the poor, and see this as a means of serving the poor better.

³ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 84-91

⁴ Coste X p. 209

⁵ Coste X, p. 210

Non-religious vows

The fact that the vows of the Daughters of Charity are “non-religious” means, first of all, that they are different from the vows taken by religious. The essential difference is that vows taken in a Religious Order are public vows and it is this profession of vows that makes a person a member of a Religious Order.⁶ What makes a Daughter of Charity is her unreserved self-giving to God to serve Him in the poor. That is why she is recognised as a Daughter of Charity right from the time she enters the Seminary. She makes vows five or seven years later, to confirm this total gift of self to God and as a means of serving God better.

Since the Daughters of Charity are not members of a Religious Order, they don’t “profess” the evangelical counsels either. The Constitutions use the verbs “choose”, “practise” “ratify” etc. (cf. c8b, 27, 28a) but they never use the word “profess.”. Saint Vincent’s teaching on this subject is very clear: *“They (the Daughters of Charity) shall bear in mind that they are not a Religious Order, as this state is incompatible with the duties of their vocation.....making use of no other form of profession to assure their vocation than the continual confidence they have in Divine Providence and the offering they make to God of all that they are and of their service in the person of the poor.”*⁷

The Founders weren’t sure whether the Daughters of Charity should make vows or not. In fact, it was only after nine years that the first Sisters began to make vows. Of course, those Sisters who did not wish to make vows were genuine Daughters of Charity nonetheless. When they entered the Company they all made a commitment to live in poverty, chastity and obedience, whether they made vows or not. Why did the Founders have reservations about Sisters in the Company taking vows? They were worried that if Sisters took vows people would think they were religious and that would lead to their being cloistered. If this were to happen, the Sisters would no longer have the mobility required for going to the poor who needed their services. After reflecting on the matter for some time, the Founders decided to introduce the practice of taking vows. At that time their main concern was to make Sisters realise that taking vows did not make them members of a Religious Order. *“If he (the Bishop) asks you who you are and if you are nuns, you will tell him that you are not.....If he asks you: ‘Do you make religious vows?’ tell him, ‘Oh no, Sir, we give ourselves to God to live in poverty, chastity and obedience, some of us for ever and others for a year.”*⁸

The Constitutions have been approved by the Church so what does this tell us about the vows? This way of practising the evangelical counsels is the Company’s guarantee that the Sisters are remaining faithful to what the Founders had in mind.

Annual vows that are always renewable

⁶ Canon Law, C.654

⁷ Coste X p.661

⁸ Coste X p.533-534

The Founders weren't sure whether the vows made in the Company should be temporary or perpetual. In the end they opted for temporary vows that would be renewable every year on the Feast of the Annunciation. This was another way of emphasising the difference between Daughters of Charity and religious, because normally religious take perpetual vows.

The fact that our vows are for one year and are always renewable does not make them any less important: temporary does not mean provisional; these annual vows are a sign of spiritual dynamism and a way of helping the Sister to understand and appreciate more and more what their vocation involves. From the outset, these vows are made for life. The yearly renewal of the vows is a way of saying "yes" to a permanent option for a particular way of life. Since the vows of the Daughters of Charity confirm the Sisters' unreserved gift of themselves to God, and since these vows are, from the outset, an option that is made for life, then they are "always renewable." Although vows are made for one year, this does not mean that opting for a particular way of life is also for one year. Saint Vincent said, *"You have given yourselves to Him in the Company with the intention of living and dying in it."*⁹ And Saint Louise wrote, *"We do not accept anyone who is not resolved to live and die in the Company."*¹⁰

Even though the vows are renewed every year, fidelity to one's vocation means persevering in the path one has chosen to take. People might think that because the vows are for one year they are not so important but Saint Vincent said, *"However, it would be better not to make them at all than to do so with the intention of securing a dispensation whenever you wished."*¹¹

They make greater demands

Even before vows were introduced into the Company Saint Vincent was convinced that the vocation to be a Daughter of Charity was a path to sanctity, a way of radically living out the gospel. He told the Sisters, *"To be true Daughters of Charity it is necessary to have given up everything: father, mother, possessions and the hope of establishing a household. This is what the Son of God teaches us in the gospel. It is also necessary to give up self.....to be Daughters of Charity is to be daughters of God, daughters who belong entirely to God."*¹² And speaking about the Company continuing Christ's mission, he said, *"What! To do what God did on earth? Should you not be most perfect? Ah! yes, Sisters, should you not be angels in the flesh?"*¹³ On another occasion he said, *"They (the Daughters of Charity) should be as virtuous as, and even more virtuous than religious."*¹⁴ *"Daughters of Charity who do not have vows to sustain them, do not cease to be in a state of perfection, if they are real Daughters of Charity."*¹⁵ He

⁹ Coste IX, 629

¹⁰ Spiritual Writings p.511

¹¹ Coste IX, 25

¹² Coste IX, 14

¹³ Coste IX, 583

¹⁴ Coste X, 661

¹⁵ Coste IX, 14

goes even further, “*Could such a holy state be found in any Religious Order?*”¹⁶ “*It is very important that you should be more virtuous than religious. And if there is one degree of perfection for persons living in a Religious Order, Daughters of Charity need two.*”¹⁷

When Saint Vincent and Saint Louise decided to introduce into the Company the practice of taking vows they did so in the knowledge of what this had always meant in the Church, a radical way of following Christ. There are many passages in their writings that indicate this. “*What does a Daughter of Charity say when she makes vows of poverty, chastity and obedience? She says that she renounces the world, that she despises all its beautiful promises and gives herself unreservedly to God....That is what one does by making vows, and that is how one should act to observe them faithfully.*”¹⁸ “*It would be well if those on whom God has bestowed the grace of giving themselves more perfectly to Him and who have promised to serve Him in the Company, were to renew their vows.*”¹⁹ “*You have, by entering the Company, chosen Our Lord as your Spouse, and He received you as His spouses, or to put it better, you have been betrothed to Him and, at the end of four or five years, more or less, you have given yourselves entirely to Him and this by vow.*”²⁰ “*My daughters, the name of each of you was written in the book of charity when you gave yourselves to God to serve the poor; and in particular, on the day when you made your vows you received this name which God Himself has given to you.*”²¹

So we can clearly see from these texts that although the vows of the Daughters of Charity are “*non-religious and annually renewable*” this does not mean that they are any less radical with regard to the demands made by the gospel. I would even go so far as to say that if the vows are not a sign of following Christ more radically then there is no point in making vows. Father Maloney rightly said, “*Vows are prophetic signs and symbols that attract others provided we live them sincerely and to the full. Otherwise they become a source of scandal, a lie, they speak of someone who has given their word and then taken it back.*”²²

After these lengthy but necessary explanations, we will now analyse the Constitutions and Statutes relating to the evangelical counsels and the vows.

C.27: The evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience that the Daughters of Charity undertake by vow to practise, are a way of living out their baptismal consecration and serving Christ better in the person of the poor. As a consequence, the three evangelical counsels are interpreted in a specific way.

¹⁶ Coste IX, 684-696

¹⁷ Coste X, 658

¹⁸ Coste X, 215

¹⁹ Coste IX, 352

²⁰ Coste X, 169

²¹ Coste X 472

²² R. Maloney. “*The vows as parable and prophecy*” Echoes of the Company, May 1996

C.28: The first paragraph of this article clarifies the significance of vows in the Company. By their vows the Daughters of Charity ratify the total gift of themselves to God which they made when they came to the Seminary.

If we compare the text of the present Constitutions with that of the preceding ones, we will see that the most important change is that 2 formulas are now given, both for first vows and for renewing them. Both formulas are equally valid and each Sister can choose which one to use.

In the first formula the phrase “*obedience to the Superior General of the Mission*” (C.2,5) has been changed to “*obedience to my legitimate Superiors*”. Article 31a gives the reason for this change and lists the Superiors that the Daughters of Charity commit themselves to obey, including the Superior General as mentioned in the earlier formula. The phrase “*in accordance with our Constitutions and Statutes*” has been moved in the text. In earlier Constitutions this phrase referred to the three traditional vows and not to the specific vow of corporal and spiritual service of the poor. In the current formula, this phrase covers all four vows and it comes towards the end of the formula for the vows. This change would seem logical since the Daughters of Charity understand and make these vows in accordance with the way these are interpreted in the Constitutions and Statutes.

In the alternative formula, the “specific vow” of service of the poor is placed first in the list given in article 28a. The other paragraphs of this article, together with Statute 15, offer some explanations about first vows and renewing the vows; first vows are made when the Sister is between 5 and 7 years vocation; the renovation is made in silence, each Sister signs a document to confirm she has renewed her vows.... On the whole, the revised text is clearer and simpler than that of the 1983 Constitutions.

Finally, before moving on from this article, we might stop and ask ourselves if vows made in the Company are private vows? The Constitutions do not use this word: maybe this is because it is not fully in accordance with the Company’s practice. A Sister needs the Superior General’s authorisation to make first vows, to renew them or to seek a dispensation. So, with regard to the question mentioned earlier, it would be better not to use the adjective “private” but to keep to the wording of article 28 of the Constitutions which describes vows made in the Company.

C.29: This article begins by defining the aim of the vow of chastity: “*The Daughters of Charity commit themselves by vow to a life of chastity in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom.*” The rest of the article deals with the vow in general; what corresponds to the vow itself and what corresponds to the evangelical counsel.

If we go back to paragraph a) we will see that the text is a big improvement on that of former Constitutions (C.2.6). Two new and important ideas are introduced. Firstly, the Daughters of Charity commit themselves to living in chastity, following the example of Jesus Christ. Christ is the inspiring force behind this vow. Secondly, they

make a vow of chastity in order to express their unconditional self-giving to God and their total availability for the service of the poor.

The word “perfect” has been omitted (perfect chastity) and this word is no longer used either in articles 30 and 31 (with reference to poverty and obedience). The three evangelical counsels are adopted as an ideal to which the person’s whole life tends. Paragraphs b, c and d, arrange and simplify the contents of article 2.6 of the 1983 Constitutions, with a few additions and some omissions. All this serves to make the text clearer.

C.30: In the first paragraph the aim of the vow of poverty is defined as “*total dependence in the use and disposal of the goods of the Company, as well as their personal goods.*” In this paragraph it is stated that poverty, too, is practised “*in imitation of Christ.*”

The whole of this article is devoted to the subject of evangelical poverty, which comprises, “*poverty of spirit*” (C.30a), “*a modest, simple life style*”, “*they submit to the universal law of work*” (C.30b), “*they share with one another*” (C.30c) and they are specifically told how to act with regard to “*the goods of the Company*” and “*their personal goods*”, avoiding any manifestation of inequality or ownership. (cf. C.30c). The text makes further reference to the simple and modest life style the Daughters of Charity should have in accordance with their vocation, and then adds the following observation which shows the Company’s thoughtful consideration for its members: “*The Company takes care to provide for the needs of each Sister.*” (C.30b).

Statute 16 urges the Sisters to examine their lives with regard to some ways in which they practise poverty individually and as a community. For example, their life style; how they use their personal money, and their obligations with regard to justice and charity. For the first time this Statute mentions discernment on “*their use of goods and of the earth’s resources.*” The Company wishes to be part of the current concern for ecology and how the world’s limited resources are to be used. It wants the Sisters to use these resources sparingly and in a responsible way. This ecological sensitivity is a way of understanding and practising solidarity. Statute 16b ends with a directive about how the Sisters should act and how they should use the donations given them for the poor.

C.31: The substance of the vow of obedience is clearly stated in the first paragraph of this article of the Constitutions: “*They commit themselves to obey their Superiors, in accordance with the Constitutions and Statutes.*”(C. 31a). The preceding statements point out that the obedience practised by the Daughters of Charity is patterned on the obedience practised by the Son of God.

The most significant change with regard to the 1983 Constitutions, is the omission of the Provincial Director from the list of persons the Daughters of Charity have to obey in compliance with their vow (cf. C31a). According to Universal Law, designated Superiors are those who play a governing role at General, Provincial or Local level. The Constitutions do not accord a governing role to the Provincial Director: his mission is clearly a pastoral one and is always carried out in collaboration with the Visitatrice and

her Council (cf. C.75 and St. 56). Although he is not designated as a Superior, the Director nevertheless exercises moral authority over the Province. His mission derives from the Proper Law of the Company as well as the explicit wish of the Founders.

Article 31a includes another though less important change. The words now used are more in line with today's understanding of obedience, and with new sensitivities in this matter. The phrase "*they submit*" (cf. C.2.8 of the 1983 Constitutions) has been replaced by "*commit themselves to obeying.*"

Article 31b tries to harmonise two aspects of obedience that are closely related: authority and obedience. It is based on two fundamental principles, co-responsibility and subsidiarity. Co-responsibility is understood as active obedience as presented in *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 14. This co-responsibility implies active participation in the common mission and it is manifested by a constructive outlook and manner of acting: in this way the person shares in the mission and supports it. It also renders the community more dynamic because all the Sisters are actively engaged in building up the community and making it more effective. Subsidiarity, the process by which Superiors at a higher level do not deal with matters that can be settled at a lower level, is something that promotes decentralisation, effective participation and collaboration. In short, these two principles are the basis for co-responsible authority and active obedience.

Article 31c points out that availability is a necessary consequence of obedience. Article 31d presents in a realistic and deeply spiritual way what is meant by the evangelical counsel of obedience.

SOME QUESTIONS TO HELP US IN OUR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND COMMUNITY OR PROVINCIAL SHARING

1. Compare the revised Constitutions with the 1983 text and look up the changes mentioned in this study document.
2. Discuss these words of Father Lloret: "*You don't make vows in order to become Daughters of Charity but because you are Daughters of Charity and wish to be more authentically so day by day.*"
3. Reluctance to make a permanent commitment (for life) or the idea that I can honour my commitments "as long as things are going well for me" are two features of our present day culture. Do you think that this mentality is having an influence on the Company? In what way?
4. What are the means proposed in article 29 for living out the evangelical counsel of chastity?
5. Discuss some of the sentences in article 30 about the vow of poverty.
6. According to article 30, how can we know God's will?

SUPPLEMENTARY READING FOR IN-DEPTH STUDY OF THIS 4TH DOCUMENT.

- Father Robert Maloney: *“The vows as parable and prophecy”*, Echoes of the Company, May 1996
- Father Fernando Quintano: *“The vows in the Company of the Daughters of Charity,”* Echoes of the Company, May 2001.
- Father Fernando Quintano: *“Being good Christians in the Company of the Daughters of Charity.”* Echoes of the Company, April 2001

Father Javier Alvarez, *Director General*

Father Fernando Quintano, CM

FATHER R. McCULLEN, CM

The vows of the Daughters of Charity

1. The day on which we are holding this reflection on the vows coincides with the 41st anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council on 11th October 1962. Some of you may have very hazy recollections of that day, some of you may not have been born – and some of you may be too young to be aware of what was happening on that momentous day. From the archives of my memory, I can call up an image from a black and white television screen, of the procession of bishops making their way into St. Peter’s Basilica.

The Roman sky was overcast that day. Two by two, in what seemed like an endless meandering river of bishops – in copes and mitres – kept mounting the steps of St. Peter’s and disappearing through the great bronze doors of the Basilica. At the end of the procession came Pope John XXIII on his elevated chair, being greeted enthusiastically by the banks of people that crowded up against the barriers to witness what was recognised throughout Christendom to be an historic event. What thoughts were in the minds of bishops on that morning? We do not know.

The aged Pope was cherishing, I believe, the hope that the work of the Council would be completed by Christmas of that year. He hardly envisaged that the Council would only bring its work to completion in December 1965... And that end was only the beginning! There would not be a nook or cranny in the great house of God, which is the Church, where the light of the Council would not shine; transforming, uprooting, removing, replacing, and refining what we had come to see as the familiar and almost

unchangeable landscape. It was as if the voice of the Spirit, - as recorded in the prophecy of Isaiah – was sounding again, *“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”* (Is 43, 17). The Holy Spirit has continued to do new things as the river of the Council continues to flow on its course. And, as that river broadens and widens, we are blessed indeed if we have eyes to see and ears to hear the new thing that the Spirit of God is still doing among us who have been called to the Company and the school of St. Vincent and St. Louise.

2.- As we cast a glance back on the 40 odd years since that river-like procession of bishops entered St. Peter’s Basilica on 11th October 1962, what would you consider to be two of the most fundamental calls that the Church launched to those of us who by Divine Providence have been invited by the Spirit of God to what is now called the Consecrated Life? I have selected two, and let me say at once that my selection is subjective, coloured necessarily by my own experience. Even if my selection of two fundamental calls or appeals made by the Spirit may not be your choices – I am certain they would figure among your top ten. So let us take the first.

3. Following immediately on the closing of the Council, you will recall that each Order, Congregation and Institute was invited to return to its sources of origin. We were invited and encouraged to study afresh the actions, writings, the vision, the charism of our Founders. We were invited to return to the sources and origins of our community. It was an invitation by the Church to make a prolonged and prayerful pilgrimage to the sanctuaries of mind, and heart and thought of our Founders who, when moved by the Holy Spirit, did a new thing in the Church. After prayerful reflection on our sources and origins, we were challenged to formulate anew and with fidelity, in our Constitutions and Statutes, the vision of our Founders so that the people of today’s world would experience something of the radiance, warmth and aura with which the Spirit of God had enfolded our Founders during their life spans on earth.

4. So firstly, to our sources, and particularly the sources of our vows. Some great rivers of the world can be traced back to a point where one can see a definite trickle of water bubble over the ground and begin its long journey to the great ocean. Other rivers seem to find their source in an indeterminate sort of swamp extending over a larger area, so that it is difficult to put one’s finger on a particular square foot of ground and say – this is the source. When our two communities set out to look to the sources of our vows, we found ourselves, with St. Vincent and St. Louise, in rather marshy ground.

5- St. Vincent had begun to reflect on the introduction of vows for his Congregation of Fathers before giving thought to making them also a defining feature of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. The Congregation of the Mission was not long in existence before its members were pronouncing vows – even before the Congregation was formally recognised. By contrast, the Company of the Daughters of Charity was some decades in existence before all the Sisters were pronouncing vows. Perhaps some trace of that evolution is to be found in the fact that even today a woman who is responding to a call from Christ, commits herself to serve him in the poor through the community, and is entitled from the day she is officially admitted into the Seminary, to

be called a Daughter of Charity. Two months ago, in the Province of California, two young women were admitted to the Seminary during the celebration of the Eucharist. One of them, I was told afterwards, was ecstatic at the end of the Mass and confided to a Sister how she glowed at the thought of being able to say, "*Now I am a Daughter of Charity.*"

6. Turning for a moment to the first group of six priests that St. Vincent had gathered around him, it is interesting to note that even in the very early years they seem to have agreed to take what St. Vincent called "vows of devotion." Furthermore, they seem to have adopted the practice of renewing them annually. Even when St. Vincent had, some years later, obtained local approval from the archbishop of Paris for his community, the vows of the Priests of the Mission would retain their character of "devotion" and were renewed each year. What is rather interesting is that within a month of St. Vincent's obtaining approval of the Missionaries' vows from the archbishop of Paris, on 24th February 1642, St. Louise, along with four of her Sisters, pronounced vows on 25th March of that year. Not all the Sisters, however, pronounced vows on that day. Only gradually did other Sisters follow their example and the Founders were not insistent on the taking of vows by all the Sisters. Vows were not obligatory. What the Founders were intent on was inculcating the spirit of Christ among the Sisters, and the qualities or virtues needed for their mission of serving Christ in the poor. Glance at the list of topics in the volume of conferences that were held by St. Vincent and St. Louise, and you will find that they concentrated on cultivating "**the spirit of the Company**" and of the means to serve effectively and lovingly Christ in the Poor.

7- In those early years, a certain pluralism obtained in the Community on the matter of the vows. There are references in St. Louise's letters in which she asks St. Vincent's permission to renew her vows. Unlike the lengthy negotiation which St. Vincent had conducted with the Holy See for over a decade and a half to secure approbation for the vows of his community of Fathers and Brothers, he made no such approach to Rome for the Company of the Daughters of Charity. While he approved and encouraged individual Sisters to take vows, it would seem that the practice among those who did, was the adoption of vows that were annual and renewable. Furthermore, the Founders, particularly St. Louise, saw with increasing clarity that there was much spiritual advantage to be gained by the growing practice of taking such vows in the community. Let me quote St. Louise in a letter to two Sisters who, in 1651, wished to make perpetual vows. She wrote, "*As for the desire you have expressed, I consider it praiseworthy. It is not enough to begin well, one must persevere as, I believe, you intend. Nevertheless, in such matters we must be submissive to the guidance of our Superiors who, for very important reasons, have determined that it is sufficient to make this offering for one year and to renew it annually. Do you not think, my dear Sisters, that it will be very pleasing to our Lord since, having your freedom again at the end of the year, you can sacrifice it to Him anew? That is why, my dear Sisters, I advise you, if you are still in these good dispositions, not to put it off any longer so as not to lose any merit.*"

8-The practice of making vows and renewing them annually was establishing itself increasingly in the Company but it was not universal in the Company before 1660.

However, St. Vincent's first successor as Superior General, Monsieur Almeras, in one of his circular letters, encourages the practice and alludes to it being done on 25th March each year.

9- So what I have called the course of the river of the vows had, through the 370 years of the Company's existence, broadly found its bed within or shortly after the lifetime of the Founders, even if it would not be until June 1954 that your four vows acquired a strictly ecclesial character with the formal approbation given to them by the Congregation of Religious in that year. Until that time the vows had been regulated by legislation internal to the Company.

10-To sum up: for his Congregation of Missionaries, St. Vincent wanted its members to be considered as part of the "body of the secular clergy" while at the same time he was eager to secure stability for those whom he considered called by God to the Community. Given the fact that the members of the Congregation of the Mission were largely priests, it was urgent that their status in the Church be clarified. Vows for the members of the Congregation of the Mission were to be perpetual and they could only be dispensed by the Pope or the Superior General. Because he was eager to secure a measure of stability for the members of his Congregation, he was also concerned that they should have an identity independent of the diocesan clergy, while remaining very close to them. It would appear, too, that while St. Vincent was intent on finalising the pattern of vows for his community of Fathers and Brothers, he was content to allow the pattern of vows in the Company of the Daughters of Charity to evolve. He had great respect for St. Louise's judgment and endorsed her practice of renewing her vows annually, and he adopted and approved the same practice for other Sisters who, with St. Louise's approval felt drawn to do so.

11- May I be allowed here to speak of a personal experience of mine which came as a rather startling revelation to me within two weeks of my election as Superior General. I had gone to Paris from Rome for the 18th July celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Our Lady's apparitions in the rue du Bac. It was a very brief visit and Mother Roge arranged to come to Rome a week or so later to discuss some questions while our Vincentian General Assembly was still in progress. We met in the Via Ezio and she had a little diary or notebook in her hand. She asked me if I would be in Rome on 2nd February. It was then July. I replied in a rather off-hand way that I supposed I could be. (At the time I was not thinking further than surviving that day in office!). She looked at me intently and then said respectfully but firmly, "*Father, it is important, because on that day the Sisters all over the world know that I come to you to ask permission to renew my own vows and permission for them to renew theirs on that day.*" I said that of course I would arrange my programme so as to be in Rome to receive her that day. When 2nd February came round I went into Via Ezio and after Mass and having breakfast with the Sisters, Mother Roge came to my office. She surprised and somewhat embarrassed me by going down on her knees. I immediately offered her a chair but she protested and said, "*No, Father, this is the way I want to do it.*" She then went on to speak about herself and her limitations and defects as Mother General (it was not a sacramental confession) and she invited me to make any observations I wished about what she had said. Finally, she asked me if she could, notwithstanding her unworthiness,

renew her vows. After that she did sit down and opened up a book she had brought with her. For a good part of the morning she presented, Province by Province, the requests sent by the different Visitatrices, noting particularly, the names of the Sisters who for one reason or another, would not be renewing their vows, or who had asked or had been asked to defer their renewal for three months or six months. From Mother Roge I learned that what she did that morning had a very long tradition in the Company. Later I was to learn from her how she saw the whole process of the individual Sister asking her Sister Servant for permission to renew her vows, then the Sister Servant presenting her own request along with those of her companions to the Visitatrice, *“It is like a great retreat for the whole Company, “* Mother Roge remarked, *“beginning, Father, in November or December in the local community and culminating on 25th March when the world-wide community makes this immense offering of itself to God in order to serve his Son in the person of the Poor, with renewed zeal and dedication.”*

12. The call that the Second Vatican Council made to those in Consecrated Life to return to their sources and to their origins, had a much wider scope and purpose than the study of the vows or other bonds that had been proposed or suggested to them by their Founders or Foundresses. This brings me to the second great call made by the Council to persons in the Consecrated Life. It is, I think, an even more fundamental and comprehensive call than an invitation to return to the sources and origin of the Community of which I have been speaking. It is the call to holiness, addressed to each member of the God’s people. Amid all the changes we have seen in the past 40 years, perhaps we tend to lose sight of this universal call to personal holiness that went out from the Council. Just glance at the order of the chapters in the fundamental Constitution of the Second Vatican Council – that on the Church. The first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* has the very significant title, *The Mystery of the Church*. It was only after a certain amount of floundering during the opening sessions of the Council, that the bishops came to realise that the only adequate description that one can give of the Church is to see it as one of God’s great mysteries. The second chapter in *Lumen Gentium* has as its title, *The People of God*. The third, *The Church is Hierarchical*. The fourth chapter, *The Laity*, and the fifth, *The universal call to holiness.*”

13- To each member of God’s people, the Council sent out a new call to holiness. It would not be a “one-size-fits-all” type of holiness. In the minds of many of the laity, as we are aware, holiness was looked upon for too long as the special prerogative of bishops, priests and religious. The particular placing of the chapter on the Universal Call to Holiness in the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* explodes that notion. Priests and religious have no monopoly on holiness. For each of God’s people Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. By diverse paths, however, he leads each of his people towards that Way which will be for him or her Truth and Life, nothing less than abiding in the Vine that is the Risen Christ.

14- Our path to holiness will be in and through our Community. Our lives and our vows can only be sourced in the living person of the crucified and risen Christ. Each river of the globe can be traced back to its source. The particular river that is our vowed life has its source in Jesus Christ. *“You alone are the Holy One, You alone are the Lord.*

You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ. Lord, you are holy indeed, the fountain of all holiness.”

15- It is to the person and the experience of Jesus Christ whom the writer of the letter to the Hebrews calls, *“the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”*(Heb 12,2), that we look as we walk on the road of our vowed life. Accompanying us on our road to Emmaus, the crucified and risen Christ is opening the scriptures to us and revealing to us the dynamism that lies – as it did for him – in living chaste celibacy, in yielding to the calls of obedience, in keeping his heart detached from the idols of wealth that he passed along the road on his way up to Jerusalem. With such dynamic force operating in his life, Jesus Christ was free to follow the lead of the Spirit: free to roam the margins of society, free to be in communion with the dispossessed, free to touch those in need of healing, free to calm anger and violence, and free to hear the voice of his Father who was well pleased in him.

16- His daily invitation to us is to share His experience. A Daughter of Charity will particularly cherish all that will make her free to touch and heal and serve Christ in the poor. His invitation is to live his experience in and through the Company to which we have been guided and in which we now find ourselves. St. Vincent had a certain fondness for likening the Company to a boat on the ocean. To a priest who was contemplating leaving the community, a proposal that St. Vincent did not agree with, he said that there were many boats sailing on the ocean and that God had placed him in the little boat that is called the Mission. There are other boats on the ocean that are bigger and more prestigious and famous than ours, but ours was the particular boat that God wished him to be in so that he might safely arrive at the port of heaven.

17-The same image came to St. Vincent’s mind when he was speaking to the Sisters on 25th January 1645. *“Have you ever heard tell of a ship’s crew that sails the broad seas, sometimes more than 1500 miles from port without ever seeing land? Mariners feel quite safe as long as they strictly observe the rules of navigation... The same is true of communities, and especially your community. Like a ship on a stormy sea, you are exposed to many and various perils. Your vocation is your calling in life and your rules are your guarantee of safety. You have, then, embarked on a ship to which God has guided you by His inspiration.”*

18- The particularities of your vows, prayerfully and frequently reflected on, together with the annual Renovation process, bring you, with Christ, down from the mountain of contemplation into the tensions and turbulence of life in the market place of your local community and send you out to the task of serving Him in the 10,000 places where he shines in the human features of the poor – “lovely in limbs, lovely in eyes not his.” Not only that, but it is the specifics of your vows and their annual renovation that give you your particular identity in God’s Church. That identity is not just a legal tag or a juridical classification of your Community in the family of Congregations and Institutes in the Church, but it is, if we have but eyes to see – a particular expression of that infinite kaleidoscopic beauty that is the holiness of God.

19- Our vows are like the great banks of a river that contain our lives and not only contain them but keep them on course. You will have observed how a river flowing within its banks, and sometimes within a deep, narrow gorge, will have a thrust, an energy, a movement and force greater than when you view that same river as it reaches a large estuary. By then it will have largely lost its banks as it empties itself into the great ocean. Vows, like prophecies and tongues, will cease when our little lives are gathered up into the immensity of waters that is the fathomless lovingness of our God.

20-The three vows of evangelical poverty, evangelical chastity and evangelical obedience in the Company of the Daughters of Charity, are directed into giving energy and drive to the service of Christ in the person of the poor. Your vows and their framework constitute the particular features of the personality that is the Company of the Daughters of Charity. You will have noticed that at your recent General Assembly a request was made to the Roman Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, that in your Constitutions your fourth vow be placed first – before the other three – thus giving prominence to what was so central in the lives and the vision of the Founders – the Sister’s total gift of herself to God for the service of the poor.

21- While your fourth vow is specific to the Company, we must keep in mind that the entire vowed life as presented in your Constitutions, is a quest to respond to the God who has already touched us and haunted us with his call. Living a vowed life is a quest for that particular holiness to which God has called you in the Company. *“O God, you are my God, for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water. (Ps 62).*

22- The biblical foundation for a consecrated life is not rooted in a distinctive type of service. It is not even rooted in the ability of a community to respond to human need. Rather it is rooted in the fundamental biblical call to be holy as God is holy. To live a vowed life is to listen with all one’s heart and all one’s soul and all one’s strength to the voice of the living God. Even the word “obedience” comes from the Latin root “ob-audire”, to listen to – a point made by Fr. Maloney on a number of occasions in his writings. We are committed to trying to listen to God’s call as Mary did in the joyful mystery of the Annunciation. Evangelical obedience may be the least appreciated of our vows today but it is the vow with the strongest biblical roots, as will be evident to an impartial reader of the gospels, particularly that of St. John.

23- May I conclude with a thought-provoking observation of that great and saintly layman, G.K. Chesterton. *“A saint”*, he wrote, *“is one who exaggerates what the world and the Church have forgotten.”* The vows of a Daughter of Charity, lived with fidelity, proclaim aloud:

-the truth that there is a special presence of Jesus Christ in the person of the poor,

-the truth that Jesus Christ is best served by those who have learned from Him to be humble of heart, and learned from Him, too, obedience through suffering

- the truth that the love which she radiates is a spark of that love that burned in the heart of God before the world was.

These truths may be overlooked or forgotten but can one ever exaggerate them?

Father Richard McCullen, CM
Talk given at Mill Hill, 11th October 2003

Appointments

PROVINCE OF ROMANIA: Sister Katalin Vincencia Boros was appointed Visitatrice, replacing Sister Kinga Peczeko, 24th November 2004.

PROVINCE OF BOGOTA: Fr Pedro Martin Gonzalez was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 16th December 2004.

PROVINCE OF HAITI: Fr Joel Vasquez Duque, was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 21st January 2005.

PROVINCE OF SAN SEBASTIAN: Fr Martin Burguete Indurain was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 8th February 2005

PROVINCE OF ETHIOPIA: Fr Girmay Abraha, was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 15th April 2005

PROVINCE OF JAPAN: Fr Amado Caballero was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 16th April 2005

PROVINCE OF SLOVAKIA: Fr Bohumir Dungal was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 2nd May 2005

PROVINCE OF PORTUGAL: Fr Jose Maria Pereira Gomes was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 26th May 2005

PROVINCE OF IRELAND: Fr Eamon Flanagan was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 26th May 2005

PROVINCE OF EMMITSBURG: Fr Joseph Daly was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 26th May 2005

PROVINCE OF NAPLES: Fr Roberto d'Amico was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 26th May 2005

PROVINCE OF SLOVENIA AND REGION OF ALBANIA: Fr Joze Zupanic was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 31st January 2004

PROVINCE OF PUERTO RICO: Fr Manuel Aznar was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 23rd June 2005

PROVINCE OF CURITIBA: Fr Odair Miguel Gonzalves dos Santos was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 20th July 2005

VISIT OF SUPERIORS

Mother Evelyne Franc
and Sister Rosa Maria Miro, General Councillor

Visit to the Province of Seville

18th-27th April 2005

Before Mother Evelyne arrived our hearts were already full of joy – we were going to get to know her.

On 18th April 2005 the two communities of the Provincial House and the school, met Mother Evelyne and Sister Rosa Maria. After the welcoming greetings from the Visitatrice, Mother Evelyne and Sister Rosa Maria greeted each Sister with great simplicity and cordiality before going to the community of elderly Sisters in **Mary Our Heavenly Queen Home**. We were very touched to see the shining eyes of our older Sisters, testimony to their spirit of faith and their respect for Superiors. Mother Evelyne regarded them as “the treasure of the Church and of the Company” as Saint Vincent would have said.

The Sister Servant of the House gave a very original and artistic presentation of the 87 years of the Province's service of the Poor. Mother Evelyne thanked the Sisters in the name of all the Poor and she confided, “*When some difficult problem is settled I always think that some elderly Sister has been praying for the mission confided to me.*” Then she met all the Sisters individually and had a sisterly word for each of them. When she came to three Sisters who couldn't see very well and who were in wheelchairs, she knelt down in front of them with great humility. This touching encounter ended with a lovely hymn and a visit to the exhibition of handwork done by the Sisters.

Then we made our way to **Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal School** which is very near Mary Our Heavenly Queen Home. In the concert hall, the headmistress introduced the teachers and the staff. One of the teachers welcomed the Sisters in French. An evening of dancing, poetry and music was presented by the pupils. Mother Evelyne greeted each group working in the educational community and expressed her gratitude to them.

19th April 2005: Badajoz. Visit to the Sisters of **Our Lady of Welcome Community** and the sick Sisters. Several Vincentian priests from the town joined us for a brief, friendly dialogue before having lunch with the Sisters.

At Caceres, “cradle” of the Conquistadores, the **Community of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal** welcomed the Sisters of that region for a meeting with Mother Evelyne. Sister Pilar introduced the Sisters. One of them welcomed her on behalf of all the Sisters. Mother Evelyne read out in Spanish the message she had prepared concerning community life: *“Relationships...building up our sisterly life together.”* While she was speaking the bells of the nearby cathedral began to ring, announcing the election of Pope Benedict XVI. Then followed a long dialogue session and Mother Evelyne, with great simplicity, answered questions in Spanish. The Sisters appreciated this gesture and were grateful for it. Then there was a short visit to the heart of the ancient city of Caceres, a city designated by UNESCO as “humanity’s heritage.” Afterwards, the local bishop came to greet Mother Evelyne and told her of his great affection for the Vincentian Family.

On 20th April we left for the **Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe** which has been a centre of Marian spirituality since XIVth century. We had Mass there and afterwards admired Zurbaran’s paintings in the cloister. Then we went back to Seville to learn about the different works carried out by the **Blessed Trinity Community**: welcoming migrants and promoting their welfare; day-centre, helping them to settle in, various workshops, the latest of these was “on breeding edible snails.” This work was inspired by the words, *“Love is infinitely inventive.”*

Mother Evelyne next met the Sisters of Seville, Huelva and Madrid, at the Provincial House. She was welcomed by the Visitatrice who introduced the Sisters. Mother Evelyne said she was very happy to be there and gave her reflections on the Action Lines: this was followed by sharing and dialogue. Then we left there to visit **Our Lady of the Rosary Social Centre** in the district of Triana. The Sister Servant, the Sister Coordinator of the Volunteers, and some families were there to greet us. One of the volunteers told Sister Evelyne about the aims of this work; to preserve people’s dignity.

On 21st April, at Jerez, we shared a meal with **the community of Our Saviour’s School and low-cost meals centre.”** One of the clients presented Mother Evelyne with a picture of St. Louise he had painted himself; another man read out a message of welcome that he had composed. Then, in the school playground, children from the infants’ school, dressed in regional costume, celebrated her visit and presented her with flowers. Later

on, Sisters from the other communities in the town told Mother Evelyne about their different missions.

In the afternoon, the Sisters of the two communities at Chiclana and the medical staff and volunteers, welcomed us at **Gerase House**. Mother Evelyne was very kind and talked to the patients. Everyone was impressed by the simplicity with which she related to people. One of them asked her “to send more Sisters to open Centres like this one so that many other sick people may find the same affection.”

On 22nd April, visit to Saint Vincent de Paul Day Centre at Rota. The community are very much a part of this district so the people are always interested in what is happening to the Sisters. When they found out that the Superioress General was coming they organised different events. The local television station recorded her arrival and the municipal choir sang Schubert’s Ave Maria in the chapel. The Zoilo-Ruiz foundation presented her with a plaque commemorating her visit to the town. Mother Evelyne greatly admired these warm-hearted and affectionate people.

Late that afternoon, the **St. Charles House Community**, together with the Franciscan community and some of the staff from the residence, assembled in the church of Our Lady of the Monastic Rule, to welcome Mother Evelyne. The Superior of this sanctuary and the chaplain, explained the history of Our Lady of the Monastic Rule, and then Mother Evelyne signed the visitors’ book. When they returned to St. Charles House, Mother Evelyne met the bishop of Cadiz, his bursar, the President of the Carolina Montes Foundation, the young people, the staff and the 17 children of the house. The teaching staff presented a montage showing the history of the work. The evening meal was followed by a concert of popular songs led by the children.

April 23rd, Gibraltar. Visit to **Marillac House** at Linea de la Concepcion, where we were able to meet AIDS patients – 15 young people were terminally ill with this disease and we were very moved by their condition. Then we visited the **Community of the Garden of the Cross College**, at Algeciras where two Sisters from Morocco had gathered with Sisters from a nearby house and a missionary Sister.

24th April, Mother Evelyne met the Provincial Council to exchange ideas on challenges, concerns, and plans for the future.

25th April, visit to the cathedral and museum at Cadiz and then on to **Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal College** (La Palma) where a little celebration was organised in honour of Sister Evelyne. After lunch, one of the Sisters recited a poem about the four hundredth anniversary of Don Quijote and presented Mother with a painting of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza. Then there was a meeting with the Sisters of Cadiz and the surrounding districts, in Saint Vincent de Paul College, and afterwards we returned to Seville.

On 26th April we went on pilgrimage to the village of Rocio. The priest in charge of the basilica explained the history of this Marian sanctuary, which is a centre of

spirituality for the whole of Andalusia. Mother Evelyne mentioned this shrine several times during meetings she had later with the Sisters. Then a surprise visit to **St. Vincent de Paul School** at Huelva. During the meal there, Sister Evelyne said that she was very pleased to hear about the Sisters' works. On the way back we stopped at **Holy Family House** to meet the elderly Sisters and those of nearby **Saint Fernando's Home**.

At the end of the day we arrived at **Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal Home for the Elderly** at Alcala de Guadaira. We met them in their everyday surroundings and in the different workshops they attend – handicrafts, gymnastics, memory exercises – and we met the people who organise these activities. The Staff gave an audiovisual presentation of the recreational, handwork and religious activities offered. The evening before Mother Evelyne left us, she had a short meeting with the Provincial House community.

27th April, Mass of thanksgiving in the Provincial House. The Sisters showed Sister Evelyne the “Berceau” of Seville, a reproduction of Saint Vincent's birthplace. Mother Evelyne said she regarded this as an expression of love for the Company. Then the Sister Servant drove her to **Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal Home** (for elderly Sisters) in Seville where she met 40 elderly Sisters in the Laboure community. Mother Evelyne greeted each one individually and the joy this gave them could be seen in their faces, as must have been the case when Mary met Elizabeth on the day of the Visitation. The Sisters expressed their joy in the same way, by singing the Magnificat. The Sister Servant spoke about the work done by these Sisters (who are 80 years of age or older) in the “St. Vincent de Paul” feeding centre where they distribute more than 200 meals every day. She said, *“These Sisters are the soul and the driving force of this work.”* The Sisters spontaneously told Mother Evelyne anecdotes about this service. They are helped in their mission by a group of young volunteers.

The visit ended with a meeting with the Cardinal of Seville. He had just come back from the Conclave and was still very moved by everything that had happened. We were able to share his emotion. It was a simple, informal and brotherly interview. Afterwards we visited the cathedral and the Episcopal Delegate for the Missions told us something of its history. It is a magnificent cathedral. Mother Evelyne was entranced by the beauty of the place.

The Provincial Council of Granada came to the Provincial House to join us for the final meal. There are always two sides to farewells; the joy of remembering what we had experienced, and the nostalgia we feel when we have to part company.

Thank you, Mother Evelyne, for your visit, for your message to us, and for the renewed vitality you gave us by your witness.

Sister A Molina G. de Pablos
Echoes correspondent

VISIT OF SUPERIORS

Mother Evelyne Franc
And Sister Daniscakova, General Councillor

**Visit to the three Provinces of Poland:
Cracow, Warsaw, Chelmno-Poznan**

Between 20th and 27th May 2005 Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, and Sister Zofia Daniscakova, General Councillor, paid a short visit to the three Provinces of Poland. Meeting Mother Evelyne was a moving and unforgettable experience for the Sisters because it represented a link between the past and the present. During her stay here, Mother Evelyne was very interested to learn about the Province's works for the Poor.

In accordance with Slavonic custom, our guests were welcomed with bread and salt, and with prayers in the chapel because as a Polish saying puts it, *"when a guest is in the house, it is God in that house."*

NO TYPE OF DISTRESS SHOULD BE FOREIGN TO THEM..(C. 11)

In the Province of Cracow, Mother visited:

An infants' school which is part of the Provincial House complex and which has 76 children.

A home for 60 children from families in difficult circumstances. These children come every day for a hot meal, to do their homework helped by Sisters and volunteers, to play and to chatter. These children asked a lot of questions and were delighted when Mother Evelyne said the Our Father in Chinese. They all promised to learn a foreign language.

Another children's home where the little ones and the older children performed dances and told Mother Evelyne about their plans for the future.

A home for 450 elderly and sick people. It was very moving to see Mother Evelyne bending down to speak to these old people, many of whom had been rejected by their families. She expressed concern about the Sisters' working conditions.

In the Province of WARSAW Mother visited:

The retreat centre at Czestochowa, built in 1930 in thanksgiving for the centenary of Our Lady's apparitions in the Mother House. The Sisters here welcome

pilgrims and groups of visitors as well as providing meals for the Poor. The house can accommodate 400 people.

A social services centre for 145 people in Czestochowa.

A home for children from poor families, very close to the Provincial House in Warsaw. Mother Evelyne placed these children under the patronage of St. Louise de Marillac, patroness of this house.

An educational establishment 30km away from Warsaw where there are 140 boys and girls between the ages of 7 and 24. They all attend a special school nearby. Mother Evelyne and her companions were invited to see a play called “Cinderella”: the actors were all boys. Mother Evelyne congratulated them. She said she was very familiar with this story but this was really a most original way of presenting it!

In the Province of CHELMNO-POZNAN, Mother first went to Poznan and visited:

The social services centre which has many residents.

A children’s home.

Then Mother travelled to Chelmno and saw:

A building complex for 250 old people and handicapped children. There was much singing and lots of flowers. The children wanted to show Mother Evelyne their bedrooms and one handicapped boy gave her his teddy bear as a token of friendship. Mother Evelyne had a very loving approach to these children. She bent down over the elderly people, giving them her warmest smile.

The Archives which house documents confirming the miraculous protection given to the Provincial House during the Second World War, and the Souvenirs Room where there are some very beautiful religious objects.

During their stay in Poland, Mother Evelyne and Sister Zofia were able to pray in the most famous Marian shrines: Czestochowa and Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, and in the Divine Mercy Sanctuary at Cracow, as well as in the Basilica of St. Vincent de Paul in Bydgoszcz. At Wadowice they visited the house where John Paul II was born and which is now a museum and a “place of pilgrimage.”

THE SISTERS ARE CONVINCED OF THE NEED FOR ONGOING FORMATION
(C. 58a)

In the three Provinces these meetings with Mother Evelyne were also a time of personal formation.

- With the postulants and the Seminary Sisters, Mother stressed among other things, the need to live in the presence of God.

-With the Sister Servants, she clarified some points regarding co-responsibility, domestic councils, communication, and the formation of young Sisters.

-With the Sisters she emphasised the need for a balanced and unified life, ongoing formation, co-responsibility, as well as participation in drawing up the Community Plan and in revising the works.

In each Province, Mother's meetings with the elderly Sisters were always very moving, particularly when she met them individually. The Sisters were able to tell her how closely united they were with Superiors and to assure them of their prayers; promising, too, to offer their sufferings for the intentions of the Company. Mother Evelyne said that every sick Sister is precious in the eyes of the Company and that she is counting on all of them.

Saturday, 28th May 2005: an historic date! The Councils of the three Polish Provinces came to Warsaw for a meeting. Also taking part were the Treasurers, Secretaries and Provincial Directors. Basing her remarks on the Constitutions, the Action Lines and the experience of other countries, Mother Evelyne encouraged us to have further meetings. In view of the tremendous social, political and historical changes that have taken place in our country, we need to search together for solutions to problems and ways of taking up new challenges. This was also the basis for our group work.

During this meeting, Sister Zofia Daniscakova gave a talk on formation and this was followed by group work. In the afternoon we reflected on the revision of our works and we confirmed that our priority was mission work in countries of the former Soviet Union. The Provincial Directors shared their experiences of being Director, their thoughts on the Revised Constitutions and on the "Directory for Provincial Directors."

Sister Stanislawa, Visitatrice of Warsaw, who took part in the session for newly appointed Visitatrices at the Mother House, presented the "Guide for Provincial Secretaries." We also realised how much we were able to enrich one another and help each other, in the spirit of our Founders, to find the answers to problems.

We thank the Lord for this visit which we see as a sign of God's Providence because it has taken place just as we are beginning to live the revised Constitutions. Thank you, Mother Evelyne and Sister Zofia for being with us and helping us to draw from the treasures and richness of our Vincentian spirituality. Thank you for the simplicity, cordiality, love and joy you brought. We will keep your words in our hearts.

Sisters Anna Brzek, Katarzyna Skupien, Anna Mamona
Correspondents for the Echoes

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Albany, New York

The dynamism of Sister Rosalie in the United States

How is the dynamism of Sister Rosalie lived today in the five Provinces of the United States? To illustrate this point, I have chosen three examples from among other possibilities. Two are from the Province of New York. The third is from the Province of St. Louis.

1. Saint John the Baptist Parish Centre in Brooklyn, Province of New York

Let us begin with Saint John the Baptist Parish Centre in the Bedford-Styvesant (or Bed Sty, as the inhabitants call it) in Brooklyn.

When you arrive there for the first time, you are overwhelmed by the density of the population – 500,000 inhabitants spread over six square kilometers – and by the visible extent of the poverty. The five large housing projects that dominate the horizon hide even greater misery and, moreover, are a breeding ground for violence and crime. The public schools are overcrowded and lack the human and financial resources to serve the young as they would wish. Even Federal Express, the large international corporation that goes all over the world, refuses to make deliveries there. All of this makes Bed-Sty the poorest area in the entire country.

This had not always been the case. When a group of Vincentian priests arrived in Brooklyn in 1868 to found the first Catholic parish in the neighbourhood, the inhabitants were mostly second generation Irish and Italian immigrants. They were not rich but they had jobs – frequently as police officers or fire fighters – which allowed them to live fairly comfortable lives in their little houses. Saint John's parish church became the centre of their spiritual and social lives. There was a school with 680 children, a preparatory school for boys, Saint John's Prep, which would become Saint John's University, and a diocesan seminary. The parishioners supported the church with their time, their talent and their money. There were hundreds of religious vocations including many Vincentians and Daughters of Charity. Starting in the 1950s, however, the face of the parish began to change radically. The Irish and the Italians left for the suburbs. Poor African-Americans from the south arrived seeking work, and Spanish-speaking immigrants from Puerto Rico, Cuba and Central and South America came, hoping for a better life for their families.

The first crisis was housing. The response of the government was the universal response of that epoch; to build large housing projects. The solution created problems that no one was prepared to deal with. At the same time, the parish was undergoing a transformation. The departure of the parishioners who had supported it left it with diminishing resources and increasing requests for services. Thus, in 1971, the pastor appealed to the Daughters of Charity of the Province of New York. In September, the first five Sisters arrived.

While preparing this testimony, I went to see Sister Mary Rose McGeady, the first local superior of this little community. She would spend thirty years in the parish, with an interruption of six years when she was named Provincial Superior and a few years during which she was the director of the Kennedy Child Study Centre for handicapped children in New York. Thus, she lived the origin and development of this work closely. When I explained I was looking for parallels with Sister Rosalie's charism in the service of those who are poor in Bed-Sty, she said, *"Every time I think about the evolution of this service, there is just one word that comes to my mind, 'daring'."*

I had not, however, told her what the theme of the Colloquium was to be, namely the "Daring of Charity." Nevertheless, as she spoke, I heard the echo of Sister Rosalie's response to the misery of "her poor" of the Mouffetard district. When the Sisters arrived in this overcrowded, miserable and dangerous area, they discovered they had no permanent residence. They were obliged to move twice before moving into an old building that had housed the preparatory school and Saint John's College. The pastor had asked only for Sisters to teach catechism to the children on Saturday. Other than that, they had no defined mission. It was up to them to discover the best way to bring assistance to these people who needed everything. Moreover, the pastor told the Sisters that he could provide no financial support for their service.

What to do? Faced with needs that went well beyond their capacity to respond, the simple solution would have been to leave. But, with the daring of Sister Rosalie's charity, they remained, placing their confidence in Divine Providence. The catechism classes began. Each class was followed by activities for the children: games, drawing, music and dance. In three weeks they had 280 children. But this service took only one day. After consultation with the Vincentians, the Sisters undertook the oldest form of Vincentian service: visiting families in their homes. Most of these were young families with many problems; a sick or handicapped child or one who did not go to school, or sick or unemployed relatives. Many of them suffered from malnutrition. The Sisters did what they could to comfort and encourage them and to send them to services that were available and to which these families had a right. At the same time, the Sisters learned of their hopes and desires. The bonds of mutual trust developed.

Then there was a meeting between the Sisters and the parish leaders to discern the most urgent need for them to address. A man stood up to speak for the neighbourhood saying, *"Sister, what we need for our people is to succeed in life in the American way. This means that we must learn those things that will allow us to find a good job, to earn enough to meet the needs of our families, to be independent, and to improve everyone's*

lot. Therefore I think you should teach us, help us to speak English better, and train us to become skilled workers. What we want most is to find a better job.” **New Horizons**, which opened its doors **in 1973**, was born from this meeting. Its goal was to offer a holistic programme of **Adult Education** in which those who were poor would be involved directly in the process, as Sister Rosalie was able to do.

But financial support was lacking. One of the Sisters worked for the diocese of Brooklyn. With her salary, the local community could live and also supply materials for the catechism classes. However, it was insufficient for effectively running an adult education programme. So they had to seek other funding in the public as well as the private sector. They went to plead the cause of those who were poor, not only to individuals but also to corporations. This adult education programme still exists and assists more than 500 persons. Funding for the programme remains precarious, of course. However, the Sisters share Sister Rosalie’s conviction that only close collaboration between the public and the private sector will enable them to respond effectively to the needs of those who are poor.

The Sisters quickly found themselves facing an even more urgent need than adult education, namely hunger. They thus began distributing canned goods. But they soon realised that there were persons who needed a hot meal. Thus the soup kitchen, **Bread and Life** opened **in 1983**. Sister Bernadette, the Sister who began this programme, which now distributes 1,000 meals each day, has become legendary. This is not simply because of the quality of the meals but because, like Sister Rosalie, she welcomed each person as a valued guest, serving them with respect, compassion and love. She comforted them and, when necessary, provided them with clean clothes from the little supply that had been given to her. This humble and self-effacing Sister became the “champion of her guests” with the wealthy and influential. She compelled them to listen to the clamours of those who were poor and touched their hearts by daring to call the hunger of these people “a shame just a few kilometres from Wall Street.” The public and private sectors ended up helping her. Despite her departure for heaven a few years ago, the climate of service she created continues. Today, because of the number of meals served every day, “Bread and Life” is second among the soup kitchens in New York. Despite its dramatic developments, however, each person is still recognised as a guest at the family table.

During the following years, other services were created so as to bring a more complete response to the needs of the inhabitants of this area: a social worker, an employment counsellor, spiritual advisors, and a Sister who is a lawyer, to help with the ever more complex process of obtaining legal status in the United States. Always open to new needs, three years ago the Sisters also began a mobile soup kitchen. Every day, a team composed of a Sister, a Little Brother of the Gospel, and volunteers, leave in their van to bring a meal to the homeless, who have fallen to such a level of despair and degradation that they are incapable of going to a soup kitchen. Without judging them, the team tries to encourage them, to direct them towards available services, and to light the little flame of hope which, otherwise, is in danger of being permanently extinguished. This service is physically and spiritually exhausting. In order to continue in it, the team

members pray together and live their spiritual sharing by recognising their privilege of being able to serve Christ in their most abandoned brothers and sisters.

Before concluding this example, it is important to note briefly two other aspects of Sister Rosalie's dynamism that are manifested in Bed-Sty namely, the universality of charity and the importance of volunteers, especially students. When Sister Rosalie learned of a new urgent need, she never hesitated to respond to it because she was confident that God would provide the means since, as she said, "*Charity is like God. The more we ask of it, the more it gives.*" But Sister Rosalie was also a realist. She knew very well that the Sisters of her house could not, by themselves, serve those in the neighbourhood who were poor. Her genius was her ability to mobilise the rich and the poor, the young and the old, men and women, especially students, to commit themselves to the service of Christ in those who were poor, and to undertake this work together. Sister Rosalie would feel very much at home in Brooklyn, surrounded by the poor, the Sisters, and the students from Saint John's University in view of a common service.

2- Our Little Haven in Saint Louis, Province of Saint Louis

The second example is a work in the city of Saint Louis which is at the service of the youngest victims of poverty, alcohol or drugs. It is a residential therapeutic centre for children who have been abused or who were born with a drug addiction or AIDS. This work has existed for ten years and is called **Our Little Haven**. Its mission is to welcome the infants, to love them, and to provide medical, psychological and social services for them as well as physical therapy and other therapies essential for their human development.

At the same time, this work provides families whose children have been placed with social services because of abuse, with an intensive programme of group therapy which lasts for three months. The objective of this programme is to help them to understand their role as parents, to stress what is positive in their family life, to transform it in such a way that, one day, the child might return home. The group therapists assure the families of their support in helping them to raise their child. This remains an ideal to be attained. There are certainly success stories but sometimes the child will find a more favourable climate in a foster or adoptive family that has been chosen by the establishment and is supported by its services.

Attracted by this type of service, which reminded her of the work with the foundlings, Sister Rosemary has been working at Our Little Haven for seven years. She brought to this new service her experience as an educator and as a social work administrator. After starting out as a programme director, she is now in charge of mission effectiveness at Our Little Haven.

According to the experts, the sooner an abused child benefits from therapy in an environment where it feels secure, the greater its chance of leading a normal life. Our Little Haven creates communities of children where they are loved not only by the professionals who care for them but also by numerous volunteers who help to look after

them and who play with them. These volunteers are called “Baby Buddies”. They try to re-establish a climate of affection for the child. It was this same desire that compelled Sister Rosalie and which enabled her to overcome opposition and criticism to open a day nursery for infants living in poverty and to create a programme for children who were too old for the Day Nursery but too young for school. As the only Daughter of Charity in this establishment, Sister Rosemary strives to witness to the Vincentian spirit with the personnel, the volunteers, and especially with each child, as did Sister Rosalie.

3. “RENDU” Services in a rural area of Pennsylvania, Province of New York

This third example is taken from a rural ministry. A few years ago, the Province of New York wanted to establish a work for persons who did not have access to quality services. After a long discernment process, four Sisters were sent to the poorest county in the state of Pennsylvania. In the past, this region mined coal. But for a number of years, now, the mines have been closed. This has caused widespread unemployment. The population, while in need of many services, is very distrustful of strangers. And if you are not from the area, you are considered a stranger.

It is in this rural area that the Sisters have established a work called Rendu Services. Like Sister Rosalie, the Sisters go to those who are poor where they are. But they are also available to the people in the little store owned by the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Here a Sister listens attentively to the persons who come. She determines their needs with them, and directs them to existing services or she provides emergency help thanks to donations that have been made and are available in the store. This resembles, in a small way, “the little parlour on the rue de l’Epée-de-Bois.”

What these people need most is medical services. Two of the Sisters are nurses and go out each day in their van to areas where the people congregate: in front of a church, the market or in a shopping centre. They provide some medicines for people who need them and do simple tests to try to detect health problems. They also distribute information to help people to look after their own health as well as that of their children. The Sisters collaborate with regional associations that offer medical or social services. They also reach out to students and older adults to assist them in their tasks.

This work is young. As the bonds of trust strengthen, Rendu Services will evolve to respond ever better to the needs of these simple people who resemble, from many points of view, those who were poor in the Mouffetard district.

Sister Louise Sullivan
Daughter of Charity

Intervention made during the Rosalie Rendu Colloquium
Paris 2004

THE POOR SPEAK TO US

Province of Belgium

Can you just simply listen ?

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving me advice, you are not doing what I asked you to do.

When I ask you to listen to me and you start telling me why I shouldn't feel like this, you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem, you are not helping me, strange as that may seem.

Listen, all I'm asking you to do is to listen. I'm not asking you to talk or to do anything; I am simply asking you to listen.

Advice is cheap, but I can act for myself; I am not helpless, a bit discouraged or unsure, perhaps, but not helpless.

When you do something for me, something that I can and should do for myself, you are adding to my fears, you are making me feel more inadequate than ever.

But when you accept as a simple fact that I feel what I feel, whether this is reasonable or not, I can stop trying to convince you and I can try to begin to understand what lies behind these irrational feelings. Then things become clear, the answers are obvious and I no longer need your advice.

Irrational feelings make sense when we learn to understand what lies behind them.

Perhaps that is why, for certain people, prayer is sometimes effective only when God is silent. He does not give advice. He does not try to arrange matters. He just listens and lets you sort out your problems yourself.

So please, listen and hear me. And then if you want to speak, wait just a moment and I will listen to you.

Anonymous

If we had to find a social symbol for listening to people
the best thing would surely be to return
to that ancient and lost practice of something
that might even seem impossible in today's world:
hospitality.

To listen is to do what the host does when someone comes.
The host does not ask anything from the persons he welcomes.
He is not concerned with teaching them,
guiding them or making them admit the truth.
He speaks, or he keeps silent, according to what he feels
the other person wishes.

Hospitality is discreet.
It simply gives the traveller
what he or she needs
to subsist during this halt they need to make on their journey.

Listening is spiritual hospitality.

NEWSBRIEFS

125 years in Paraguay (1880-2005)

The Daughters of Charity joyfully celebrated the 125 years they have been in Paraguay.

A little bit of history

This country which had been decimated by the "War of the Triple Alliance" during which three of our neighbouring countries, for some unknown reason, unleashed the full fury of their violence against Paraguay, tried to survive after five years of death and suffering (1865-1870). Ten years later, three Sisters arrived from Buenos Aires (Argentina) to work in the "Charity Hospital." On 4th November 1880 the Paraguayan government's request to the Argentinian Daughters of Charity received a favourable response. Three Sisters began work in this national hospital which admits patients from every part of the country. The hospital soon became known as "St. Vincent de Paul Hospital" and this marked the beginning of a huge work of charity, rebuilding the human, moral and spiritual fabric of the nation. Today the Sisters have 18 houses and provide a variety of services in several regions of the country.

Celebrating the jubilee

The year 2004 was devoted to preparing for this jubilee. The whole Province and indeed all the branches of the Vincentian Family, began to joyfully prepare for the event. To celebrate this jubilee as fittingly as possible, we undertook to become more authentic Daughters of Charity so that young people might be moved to give themselves to God to serve Him in the Poor.

The jubilee celebrations began in November 2004, to commemorate the date 4th November 1880. High Mass was followed by recreational and artistic activities organised by the Sisters and the different groups of the Vincentian Family.

On 12th February 2005, bishops, priests, religious and lay people (children, young people, helpers, professional people and elderly persons) from different parts of the country, all gathered in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption in thanksgiving. At the end of Mass, a Sister Delegate from the Province of Argentina (our Mother-Province), and some members of the Vincentian Family, carried a lighted candle up to the altar to receive a blessing and to be sent forth to continue to work boldly and creatively for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.

NEWSBRIEFS

150 years of devoted service in the Province of Cuba (1854-2004)

The Province of Cuba celebrated the 150th anniversary of two establishments near the capital, Havana: Saint Francis de Paula Home for the Elderly, and the Saint-Lazare Hospital and Leprosarium.

A brief history

In 1854 Cuba was a Spanish colony. The Governor of the island had heard of the good work the Sisters were doing in Mexico, and he, in turn, asked for their services. They were given charge of the four most important hospitals in Havana; the men's hospital, the women's hospital, the military hospital and the hospital for lepers. 150 years ago the Company undertook for the first time, the work of caring for lepers. These days the Saint-Lazare Hospital is managed and administered by the State of Cuba. The Sisters are now taking on more and more the work of looking after the elderly. Old age has become one of the most significant forms of poverty in this country because few families can look after their elderly relatives. Today, this work is one of the Province's priorities.

Commemoration of the 150th anniversary

Throughout the various celebrations, the Sisters recalled all those years of faithful and discreet charity

From 25th-30th September, *the Province* celebrated this jubilee in the presence of the Visitatrice, Sister Iliana Suarez, the Councillors, the Provincial Director, Fr Gilberto Walker, the Visitor, Fr Justo Moro, and the auxiliary bishop of Havana, Afrredo Petit Vergel. The programme showed great variety: exhibitions of photos and historical

documents as well as craft work done by the old people, a CD of songs to commemorate the 150th anniversary, performances by artistes, a competition for the employees, etc.

Throughout 4 days in November, *the Community* celebrated with the patients and the staff of the hospital: tours, games, competitions, a cultural soiree, songs of yesterday and today led by the singer Alredito Rodriguez, the choirs from the church and the hospital, a video showing “*a century and a half of devoted service*”, vocational activities for the young people. All this took place in the garden which was beautifully decorated; there were swings under the trees, a fountain in the shade of a palm tree, decorative plants on cement tripods that were made to look like macrame work. The thanksgiving Mass was presided over by the Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega. In his homily he urged us to live continually in the presence of God and to find Him in every human person but particularly in those who suffer.

VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Province of Mexico

The Saint Joseph of Guadalupe Foundation

In Mexico there are many centres that specialise in the care of AIDS patients. The Saint Joseph of Guadalupe Foundation where the Sisters work, is in the town of Nezahualcoyotl, one of the suburbs of the Federal District.

I had the opportunity of collaborating with the Sisters there. When I started working with them one of them said to me, “It is good that people show concern for these sick people and I am very happy that a young man like you can come and visit them: it helps them a lot.”

When the illness caused by the human immune deficiency virus first came to light, fear spread throughout the world, just as it did in Europe when the Black Plague was raging.

Today the illness can be treated with medicines that halt the development of the HIV virus. Also available are various treatments that are effective against the different infections that AIDS brings. These treatments increase the life-expectancy of AIDS sufferers and give them a better quality of life.

The Saint Joseph of Guadalupe Foundation, managed by the Vincentian Family, has been in existence for 8 years. In the beginning it concentrated on serving patients in the terminal stage of the illness. Nowadays, patients come at least once a week for medical monitoring and therapy. They can also obtain information about the disease and join others for a friendly meal together.

There are three storeys to the house. The first floor is set aside for treatment of the disease; the second comprises living quarters, and the third storey is available to small groups for sharing.

Four Sisters are in charge of the Centre and they work in conjunction with a doctor, a psychologist, a thanatologist and a good number of volunteer workers. The Centre receives grants and gifts of different kinds. The Centre can take in 50 patients, most of whom have very little money and cannot afford to pay for their treatment.

The patients tell us that at the Centre they find peace and they receive personal attention from every member of the staff. The doctor makes a weekly evaluation of their illness, discussing with them how their illness is progressing and how their treatment is working. They also get support from a psychologist.

From time to time the families of these patients are invited to come to the Centre for a day's respite. Different activities are suggested; for example, exchanging gifts, Mexican dances, etc.

On the first Saturday of every month the patients and their families take part in a formation meeting. This helps the families to learn more about the disease and how to support AIDS sufferers and help them to preserve a certain level of energy and enthusiasm.

One of the things that helps hope to do when they come and work in this Centre is to offer patients support in their faith, and to be witnesses of God's love for all who suffer. I would like to put on record that, in spite of their health problems, many patients show unwavering faith in the God of Jesus Christ.

Emmanuel Salvador Becerra Vasquez

VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Province of Turin

Missionary experiences of young volunteers in Albania

Some young people in Albania spend time with the Daughters of Charity and do voluntary work with them for the poor. Two of them share their experiences.

The rightful place of the Poor: at the King's side

The town of Gramsh is about 100 km away from Tirana. To get there you would have to walk for several hours; only a small section of the road is tarred, the rest is just flattened earth or stones, so progress is slow. You don't get to Gramsh by chance, you really have to be determined to go there. Along the main street of Gramsh there are small shops: on display are clothes and shoes that are often secondhand. There is also a huge

tent and inside this are people who have come to sell whatever they have been able to grow or produce. In the towns and villages, houses lack even basic amenities and many families and children live in these conditions.

Despair is a luxury the poor cannot afford to indulge in, and they overcome discouragement in a very dignified way. But there is a great temptation to become resigned to this state of affairs: so people who do not manage to leave for Greece or Italy have a vacant look in their eyes and have lost any hope of a better future.

Some NGO projects were unsuccessful because they didn't take sufficient account of people's needs. Some short-term projects were never completed (building a road, for example, because the Albanian workers did not have the resources or the skills to finish the work. But I have also met people who know how to listen and to study situations and who only commit themselves to action when they have had experience of the problems: they organise "mini enterprises" for the benefit of everyone but especially the poorest of the poor.

Since 1997 the Daughters of Charity in Gramsh have been sharing the life of these people, identifying real needs and visiting families. They get volunteers from Albania, Greece, Italy and other places, to become involved in the work and to put their time and resources at the service of their Albanian brothers and sisters. As well as parcelling up and distributing the material aid brought by the volunteers, Sisters Attilia, Vincenza, Christina and Marinora organise catechism classes, health and professional training sessions and they also run a small dispensary. Other activities provide an opportunity for children to come and play and to have fun as they learn. This shows them that other people care for them and they then rediscover the joy of being loved.

Through this mission at Gramsh the Gospel is really becoming "Good News" for the Poor. Saint Vincent called poor people "*our Lords and Masters*" whom we must serve in an imaginative way and with great respect. The Daughters of Charity in Gramsh really live out their charism with great joy and hope: they allow Christ to fulfil his Loving Plan. I remember a song that gives poor people their rightful place in our world. The words say: "*Where is the King? Where is his hand? Here is the King, the poor person, the one who suffers humiliations, the crucified, the one who has nothing at all.*"! *The King is here in the homeless, in the sick who cannot look after themselves, in the person of children.*"

God works through our hands and our actions. He smiles with our lips. He speaks through our words. Our tenderness and generosity reveal His compassion. God's love shines through our helplessness. Christ the Evangeliser of the Poor continues his mission through us. We rediscover the crucified Christ in the poor people He identifies with; and through our service we are able to "restore His dignity." The poor who beg for love know the meaning of the Eucharist: they will be seated beside the King.

A volunteer in Albania

Letter sent to the Sisters at Gramsh by another volunteer

Dear Sisters,

My “adventure” in Gramsh began on 30th August with a sign that I understood as something of a prophecy: the Word of God in that Sunday’s gospel from St. Luke, “*Blessed are you, because they cannot give you anything in return..*” Did these words come to me by chance? I don’t think so: the Lord never does things by chance.

These words from St. Luke (his is the gospel of mercy and of journeying) kept coming into my mind during the two weeks I was with you. I found these words taking flesh in the people I came across. Now, I know there is nothing romantic about poverty: quite the contrary, it is harsh and bitter. And yet there is something about poor people that makes them the Lord’s chosen ones because they possess genuine and dignified human values. I found it a deeply disturbing experience when they looked at me, touched me or embraced me. The poor “are” but they do not “have” anything. I “have” everything but at times I feel that “being” is something I lack.

The roads in Albania resemble those that Jesus walked along and it is you who make this comparison possible. What does this stage in my life signify? I don’t yet know the answer to that but I have many and deep emotions: they link me to you and to our brothers and sisters the poor, who are my brothers and sisters, too. I don’t feel able to thank you as much as I would like to but I can assure you that you have a special place in my heart and in my life. May the joy of the Lord always be your strength; I pray that you will be able to pass on this joy to people who, like me, appear to lack nothing and yet they lack the one essential thing. Thank you for loving me in the way that the Lord asked you to do.

Elvira, volunteer

VINCENTIAN FAMILY

**If you wish to do your work in the way
God is asking you to do,
do it for love**

Between October 2004 and July 2005 a new type of formation was proposed for helpers in two institutions of the Daughters of Charity in the Province of Austria. Sixteen of these helpers were able to take part in this 30 hour formation session for “Vincentian Helpers”: 8 from Cardinal Schwarzenberg Hospital in Schwarzach and 8 from St Vincent’s Home in Schernberg.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THESE TWO WORKS

Cardinal Schwarzenberg Hospital in Schwarzach lies about 60 km south of the city of Salzburg. With 500 beds and just over a thousand staff, it is the second largest

hospital in the federal state of Salzburg. Founded by Cardinal Friedrich von Schwarzenberg in 1844, this property has belonged to the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul since 1876.

From 1996 onwards we have been working with our collaborators at studying in depth our Action Lines and discovering in word and action the spiritual roots and the special spirit of our particular house.

The year 2005 was devoted to studying our Vincentian roots and this gave rise to the idea of initiating a formation programme for “Vincentian Helpers.”

As well as talks by different speakers, there was a variety of other projects; interviews with Daughters of Charity, ongoing formation, a Vincentian library, a Vincentian focus point, and the celebration of Vincentian feasts.

St. Vincent’s Home for people with special needs (the physically and mentally handicapped) in Schernberg was also founded by Cardinal Schwarzenberg and is situated 2km away from Schwarzach in a magnificent setting.

In 1846 two Sisters began this Vincentian work and looked after handicapped people who were abandoned and rejected by society. About 110 helpers are currently taking care of 166 people. Seven different services are offered: 2 residential units, 2 occupational therapy groups and a rehabilitation service. The staff are also very committed to working in accordance with the Action Lines of St. Vincent’s Home.

A VERY SPECIAL SORT OF FORMATION

“If you wish to do your work the way that God wants you to do, do it for love.” 16 helpers responded to these words of Saint Vincent by joining this venture which, from several points of view, is a very special sort of formation.:

The targeted group consisted of general helpers who had little or no formation; in other words, they were learning on the job.

For this formation programme we tried to bring two different works together. The speakers and those attending the session responded very positively to this idea. Everyone profited from sharing ideas and experiences, and new friendships were made.

The third thing that made this formation special was, as the title of this article suggests, that the underlying principle of this project was the life and work of Saint Vincent.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS FORMATION

Through this formation the helpers would learn the basic principles underlying Saint Vincent's life and works and then they would put into action a small-scale Vincentian project. Another objective of this session was to teach the helpers the fundamentals of dealing with sick people and how to dialogue with them.

The following themes were explored:

- **The life of Saint Vincent**
- **Vincent and the care of the sick**
- **Vincent and the Poor**
- **Vincent in his day and in our own times**
- **Dealing with people in specific situations**

PHOTO

As part of their formation the helpers visited three different Vincentian works. Their specific projects were to learn how to talk to sick people, to respond to the simple needs of the handicapped or sick people, to visit the lonely. One successful outcome of this was that a mentally handicapped man (who was deaf and dumb) was able to produce some wonderful work thanks to the loving attention paid him by the helpers who used a special way of communicating with him.

During the evaluation process, some of the participants said:

"I now feel more able to face life."

"I learned that contentment and simplicity are very precious things in my own life"

"the whole course was interesting, informative and joyful, the time passed too quickly".

This positive assessment leads us to say that this formation session was very successful both for the helpers and for the people in charge of these two works.

Personal testimonies reveal the excellent relationships that existed between participants, speakers and the persons in charge of the works. The people who thought up and "invented" the project are proud that they were daring enough to initiate such a formation programme.

Sister Katharina Laner
Daughter of Charity

N.B.

If you have any queries about this you can contact us at this address:
Rosa.laner@kh-schwarzach.at. We will be delighted to hear from you.

SOURCES AND UPDATES

**Sister Marie de Geoffre
and
the original documents
of the Company of the Daughters of Charity**

Introduction

Sister Marie de Geoffre de Chabrignac died on 2nd December 1893 at the Central House in Paris. She was 59 years of age and 35 of vocation.

In 1887 when she was placed in the General Secretariat of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, she drew up the notes on the life of the late St. Catherine Laboure which appeared in 1878. Father Laurentin called her “the first biographer of Sister Catherine Laboure.”

Reference was made to her in the circular of 1st January 1895: “when Sister Geoffre’s name is mentioned , anyone who knew her will immediately think of our holy Mother...”

6th August 1897

Father Fiat, Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, congratulated Monsignor Baunard who had written the life of “Venerable Louise de Marillac”, Foundress of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, “*on the masterly work you have just put the finishing touches to.*”

He went on to say, “*Yes, Monsignor, the work was inspired by our respected Sister Geoffre who, after wearing herself out doing the necessary research and work for the introduction of the cause of Louise de Marillac, named you as the best possible writer for making known to the public and to her own Daughters, this admirable widow who was St. Vincent de Paul’s chief helper in his works of charity.*”

Monsignor Baunard explained how Sister Marie de Geoffre had resurrected documents from the distant past in order to produce the precious heritage we know today as

**“Collection and inventory of documents”
by Sister Marie de Geoffre.**

The self-effacing Sister referred to above, had no plans to write the life of her Mother Foundress, herself. The more modest but none the less useful and arduous task

was the mission confided to this worthy Sister de Geoffre whose name is still held in good and holy memory within the Company and whose preparatory work for the biography is fittingly honoured and recognised in this book.

Sister de Geoffre wasn't long in the Secretariat when she came across the Archives of the Company and was impatient to find out what precious material these half-forgotten boxes might contain. Her heart told her that in them she would uncover the spirit of her saintly Mother. The following year, 1866, she was struck down by a painful and incurable illness. In spite of this she did not falter in her determination to dedicate to this research work the last vestiges of her health which was in such a bad state that she scarcely seemed to be alive. It was in this state of suffering that for 17 years she relentlessly applied herself to the huge task of unearthing, decyphering, classifying, transcribing, editing and annotating what was to be for us the most complete collection possible of the Saint's letters and spiritual writings.

In doing this, nothing was too much trouble for her and we should put on record what holy zeal, what wisdom and perceptiveness, what dogged patience and what religious fervour she brought to this work, not wanting anything to be left unclear or vague. She asked the Sisters for help, implored the assistance of the saints, and would often go and kneel at Our Lady's altar or at the tomb of that holy Mother she wanted to bring to life again by faithfully reproducing what Louise had written. She felt a certain triumph when she discovered the meaning of a line or a word in the text. She would then say a Gloria Patri in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, "in whom" she said, "she had confided all her troubles."

She did not stop there. After enlisting the aid of the most expert archivists, she herself went to the National Archives, the Bibliotheque Mazarine and Sainte-Genevieve, to continue her research. The curators and directors of these centres were astonished at her knowledge of the subject and they gave a respectful welcome, not unmixed with pity, to this poor, worn-out and breathless Sister who seemed like a ghost from those past ages she came to ask information about.

Thanks to this untiring labour, Sister de Geoffre was able to complete the work. It was a huge task:

1. She compiled, assembled, classified and arranged St. Louise's letters- -726 of them and most of them handwritten, arranging them as far as possible in chronological order.
2. She gave us the fine handwritten copies mentioned above with valuable notes and four different lists of contents.
3. As well as the letters, she collected together and codified the various spiritual writings of her Venerable Mother: thoughts, recommendations, rules etc.
4. She grouped together, transcribed or got others to transcribe, all the documents, reports, contracts, family or business papers concerning the life or the works of the holy foundress.

5. She produced a similar and equally well-organised work on Saint Vincent's correspondence with the Servant of God.

She was well able, then, to declare on oath: **“I declare on oath that every precaution has been taken so that the text of these writings is absolutely in conformity with the original: I can testify in the clearest and most positive terms to its authenticity when the writings are subject to scrutiny and I may not be there to repeat this testimony.”**

Two things sustained her courage. The first was that she had been able to do this work in preparation for the canonisation of the holy Foundress of her Company. Nobody could have done more for this glorious cause than she did by initiating the work, by her admirable depositions before the Church Tribunal: she only attended eighteen meetings of this Tribunal but what she said there shed so much light on the person and the life of Louise!

As she lay dying she offered her sufferings for the preservation of the Sovereign Pontiff and she expressed the wish that Leo XIII should be presented with the engraved portrait of Louise de Marillac bearing those words of this holy Mother, *“Provided God reigns, nothing else matters.”* This was the inspiration for her life as it was for the Pope.

This continual study of the Saint brought great benefit to Sister de Geoffre; she came to be like the foundress. She, too, was continually worn down by illness, she had the same spirit of simplicity, humility and integrity. And, most of all, she had the same charity. Right up to the time of her death she was thinking of each and every one of the bashful poor, the needy, unfortunate, afflicted and despairing folk who were her favourite clients and she would smilingly say, *“Like attracts like. Everyone who is to be pitied is part of my circle.”*

After long years of intense suffering, she died on 2nd December 1893, joyfully kissing the little picture given to her on New Year's Day that year. This picture showed Saint Vincent and his saintly daughter united in heaven: *“I've been waiting for you, my dear Father and my dear Mother, I've been waiting for you. You welcomed me when I came here thirty-five years ago and I was sure you would both come for me when it was my time to go!”*

The second thing that this Sister earnestly desired was to see that the life of her Holy Mother should be written in a fitting manner. With this in mind, the last thing she did was to add a series of annotations to M. Gobillon's work, with reflections, indications of source materials, correction of facts and dates, and a clear assessment of people and events. (All this took up 130-pages written in four columns).

But who was going to take up the work she had so carefully prepared for? Right up to her last agony she was heard to repeat, *“I am just a wretched little labourer who puts the material together and mixes the mortar. But I am confident that when the time comes Providence will send someone who will be able to use all this material to create a*

beautiful monument to the memory of our Mother, if such be God's designs."(Notes on Sister Marie de Geoffre. pp 30-35).

But what were the designs of Providence? Who could tell? And where was this person who would do the work? Did this person whom this true Daughter of Charity had in mind for the work, possess the gifts she believed he had, and even after all his best efforts, would he be able to produce the "monument" she expected from him?

That is not for me to judge. But what I can say is that I considered it such an honour to be asked to undertake this mission that I felt I couldn't refuse. Also, the pleasure I took in doing it and the benefit I gained from the work, more than compensated for the labour involved. My first reward was the joy I felt at being able to respond to the wishes of this predestined soul, to say yes, eventually, to the long-standing and insistent requests of her Venerated Superiors, and to offer, in this way, a joyful service to the Company of Servants of Christ's Poor, and to express my gratitude as well as that of the Church and all humanity, for being asked to present anew, for the glory of God and the edification of my brothers and sisters, the Mother of a great Congregation and one of the greatest personages of our greatest century.

Monseigneur Bounard
Rector of the Catholic University of Lille.

SPECIAL 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1830 APPARITIONS

PICTURE

**With Mary,
we move into a world of light**

Mary continues to beckon to us

She invites us to:

Enter into the mystery of God's presence

Welcome God's light into our lives

Radiate God's joy and goodness, ***"to the ends of the earth."***

The apparition of 27th November 1830

**The light of Christmas,
a “radiant brightness”**

The apparition of 27th November 1830 occurred on the first day of a particular liturgical season: “*on Saturday night, the eve of the first Sunday of Advent.*”

The Advent liturgy urges us to prepare our hearts to welcome Christ, the light of the world. On 27th November 1830 Mary appeared to St. Catherine as a woman bathed in light, as someone who precedes the Sun of Justice “*as dawn comes before morning.*”

In the Bible, light is the symbol of God’s presence among us: “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light: on those who walked in the shadow of death a light has shone.*”¹ These were the words used by the prophet Isaiah in speaking of the mystery of God’s grace coming down on humankind. In his gospel Luke tells us about the angels appearing to the shepherds, “*the glory of the Lord shone round them.*”² St. Paul’s letter to Titus puts it another way, “*The grace of God has been revealed and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race.*”³ In other words, the mercy, goodness and gratuitousness of God who takes the initiative in loving us, are already manifest.

On 27th November, the eve of the first Sunday of Advent, St. Catherine discovers, in Mary’s company, the beauty of a world that is loved and redeemed by God. Reading over these events in the light of the Christmas mystery, provides us with some pastoral guidelines that help us to come, with Catherine, into God’s infinite light, the source of love and joy for all people.

I. GOD’S INFINITE LIGHT IN THE HEART OF THE IMMACULATE VIRGIN

“I saw the Blessed Virgin, standing, dressed in white; she was of medium height and her face was so beautiful that it would be impossible for me to describe that beauty.”

Since 18th July, Sister Catherine had known from experience Mary’s sweetness, tenderness and consideration for others. In that very deep relationship she had with the Blessed Virgin, she gazed on the face of Mary and saw reflected there the mystery and truth of what Our Lady represents. However, during the second apparition, Sister Catherine is even more struck by Mary’s indescribable beauty, radiant with wondrous

¹ Is. 9,1

² Lk 2,9

³ Tt. 2,11

light. The grace of God is reflected on her countenance and this led Catherine to declare, *“her face was so beautiful that I couldn’t describe it.”*

Mary, mystery of humanity as a new creation

On 27th November Mary reveals to Catherine the source of her radiance: it comes from her special identity as the one who was *“conceived without sin.”* She is the Immaculate One, full of grace. In Mary Immaculate, Catherine discovers the “New Creation”, the creature who benefited from the Resurrection even from the first instant of her conception. She is the first fruits of the Risen Christ. She is the first among creatures to be resurrected and this shows that if Christ’s humanity has triumphed, so, too, has his plan of salvation. Mary, the first to be saved, is the model of all humankind. She reflects the glory that Christ radiated at the Transfiguration, just as one day it will be radiated by those who are raised from the dead.⁴

The colour **“gold”** is seen in the vision: it appears in the small globe and also in the lettering of the inscription, *“O Mary conceived without sin...”*. Is not this a presentiment of the mystery of humanity’s participation in God’s glory, just as Mary shared in it?

In Mary, earth welcomes its God

Throughout her entire life Mary was utterly transparent and completely open to the Holy Spirit. She allowed herself to be moulded by the infinite Yes of Love. In her, earth welcomes its God. At the foot of the Cross Mary is there to receive God’s Gift. She is there because she is the Mother. And she is the Mother because she is there. It was she who gave life to the God who is dying, but He alone is the source of life. At that agonising moment when Jesus gave his life for the salvation of the world, the Cross descended on her heart like a sword. The heart of Jesus is so closely linked to that of Mary that in this living union the disciple will always be able to draw from the life of God.

II. GOD’S INFINITE LIGHT AT THE HEART OF THE WORLD

“Mary held in her hands a golden globe surmounted by a small cross...Mary’s fingers that held the globe were covered in rings studded with precious stones. These stones gave out beams of light that were of dazzling radiance.”

Before she asked Catherine to have a medal struck, Mary used a very simple teaching technique to initiate her into the mystery of God. She chose symbols that everyone can understand: a golden globe surmounted by a cross, rays of light, a medal – and a significant date, the first day of Advent.

The golden globe surmounted by a small cross

⁴ 1 Cor 15, 43

The golden globe surmounted by a cross that Mary holds in her hands is her way of bringing us into the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption. At Christmas time, Christ comes among us and the light of Easter shines over our earth.

In a gesture of offering, Mary presents to God a world that is redeemed and resurrected. Is not this a prophetic vision of the universal harmony of nature and of history, of people and of the cosmos, towards which mankind is heading?

The rays of light

This apparition, coming as it does in the days before Christmas, could be asking us to share the experience of the shepherds in Bethlehem. Just as these men were led by a great light to Mary and the infant Jesus, the rays “*of dazzling brightness*” lead Sister Catherine to a deeper understanding of God’s grace. The rays of light coming from Mary’s hands are the symbol of God’s love that comes to dissipate the darkness in us and in the world.

In Luke’s account of the Nativity, Jesus is not the first focus of our attention. Although Jesus does take centre stage, the evangelist directs our attention first of all to Mary and then to the shepherds: it is as if he wants us to discover the mystery of God through them. Doesn’t Sister Catherine’s account of what happened on November 27th work in the same way? God reveals himself through Mary and then through the world that is illumined by his Presence.

The precious stones that “do not give out rays of light”

God has visited us and showed his infinite love, even to the extent of dying on the Cross. He still visits us today, to ceaselessly renew our world interiorly by the grace of his Holy Spirit. But the divine act of salvation is truly effective in human history only when it touches our hearts. In the Gospel, Jesus’ presence among people does not automatically bring salvation: very much the opposite; there are people who ignore or reject salvation, “*his own received him not.*”⁵

In the stones that “*do not give out light,*” are we not led to think about that line of the Magnificat: “*He sends the rich away empty?*” Isn’t Mary helping us to realise that we find it difficult to be always turned towards God, to give Him first place in our lives, and to ask Him for the grace to live as God’s children. Like the shepherds who received the Good News, we, too, are invited to live more and more in a spirit of evangelical poverty: “*Happy are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*” Mary reminds us how important it is to ask for this grace every day in our prayers.

III WITNESSING TO GOD’S INFINITE LIGHT

⁵ Jn, 1,9

Just as the shepherds, “*went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen*”,⁶ Sister Catherine is sent by Mary to proclaim what she has seen and heard and to “*have a medal struck after this model.*”

As happened to the shepherds, Sister Catherine’s spiritual experience transfigured her heart. Her whole life became for others a sign of hope, joy and blessing; a light shining in the darkness of human trials and suffering. Throughout the 45 years of her humble and simple service at Reuilly, Sister Catherine was able to communicate to everyone Mary’s beauty that she contemplated one 27th November.

A SIGN IS GIVEN TO US

The shepherds had an extraordinary experience at the crib, and Sister Catherine had an equally extraordinary experience with Mary. As St. Paul said to Titus, “*The kindness and love of God our Saviour for mankind were revealed.*”⁷

On 27th November 1830 a sign was given to us. Sister Catherine brings us a very specific sign; she is to have a medal made portraying Mary Immaculate whom she has seen radiant with the gifts of God. Mary wants us to wear the medal and to distribute it to others. Does not this gift from Mary reveal a God who comes to us to give us His peace and His joy? Through the Medal, Mary is leaving us a sign that she is here with Jesus: “*I am with you always, yes, to the end of time.*”⁸ The Medal is not just a gift that we receive; it also represents a task we have to carry out.

Wearing the medal: a gift accepted

Wearing the Medal means taking Mary into our hearts, taking her into “our home”⁹ and fervently praying, “*O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.*”

Wearing the Medal means welcoming Mary and entering into the radiance of her motherly love, learning from her words, “*to do whatever he tells us.*”¹⁰ It is to become, like her, the place where God finds a welcome in the world, it means bringing God to birth in our own times.

Wearing the Medal means being open to the presence of the Risen Christ in our world and joining with Him in serving our brothers and sisters.

Giving the Medal: a “reciprocal” mission

⁶ Lk 2,20

⁷ Tt 3,4

⁸ Mt 28, 19

⁹ Cf. Jn 19, 27

¹⁰ Cf. Jn 2, 5

Mary is asking us not simply to “distribute” the medal but also to “radiate” her smile and shed around us the light of the Risen Christ. Giving the medal to someone is a way of approaching others as Mary and Jesus did.

To fulfil this mission in accordance with the Medal’s message we need to have certain dispositions, and particularly these two attitudes:

Firstly we must be **welcoming towards others and see them with the eyes of faith**. If we do not listen to others attentively and with respect we cannot give genuine witness. If we are called to become “light” or “medal” for others we have to be able to recognise the light of God in them and look on them as “medals” and as bearers of God’s Word which evangelises us.

Secondly, we need to be **humble**. Mary was the humble servant of the Lord and, like her, we have to give to others, through our words and actions, what we ourselves have received from God. How can we give witness to the Risen Christ if He is not dwelling within us?

Conclusion

With Sister Catherine, let us allow Christ to meet us and to look at us; then, from gazing at Him, learn to see the world as He sees it.

PHOTO

St. Catherine’s gaze the day before she died.

Let us open our hearts to the beauty and humility of Mary, the “*Star of Evangelisation*”, so that like her, we may become a reflection of the Beauty and the Humility of God.

Let us allow the Holy Spirit to make of us a “new creation”, so that we may love the world and build it up in accordance with the Kingdom of God.

Sister Anne Prevost
Daughter of Charity

I, Mary, am your sister.

**I have the same Father as you have,
a Father who created me out of nothing.
I have the same Saviour as you have,
the Saviour who redeemed me from sin.
I walk the same path that you do,
inspired by the same faith.
So, I do not want a pedestal,**

a bronze cast, or fine words.
Mine is the lowliest place, with you.
It is there that I wait for you,
that I understand you, that I love you.

I, Mary, am your Mother.
And a mother's place
is to be very close at hand
so that she can help her children come to the world,
teaching them how to accept and appreciate life.
So I want to serve you
by showing you my Son who is Life
and by teaching you how to welcome Him.
I want to be close to you,
to teach you how to be close to God.
To do this, I do not need a pedestal
but I do need your heart.

Georges Madore