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5th study document on the revised Constitutions

CHAPTER III: LIFE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

(continued)

5. LIFE IN COMMUNITY FOR MISSION

(Constitutions 32-37; Statutes 19-24)

I. INTRODUCTION

In the first study document on the Constitutions we made an observation that it would be good to recall here: the texts of all the 1983 Constitutions and Statutes were revised by the 1983 General Assembly. Some of them were changed, others were not. The ones that the Assembly considered valid for our own times, both as regards their content and the way they were expressed, have remained unaltered. In this case, the revision took the form of reaffirmation. Something like that happened with regard to the section dealing with fraternal life for the mission. The basic contents of the earlier texts were retained. Some changes were introduced in the way they were set out, some paragraphs were reworked so that they presented a more logical sequence. For example, you can compare article 32 of the present Constitutions with 2.17 of the 1983 Constitutions. Some expressions or words concerning situations in community living today have been added. We will note all these a little later on.

The theme of life in community for the mission is a wide-ranging and complex one: it is so wide-ranging that it would be impossible to deal with every aspect of it in the space of a document like this. Also, we thought we would choose those aspects that are essential for giving community life the new impetus it needs today. All these aspects of the theme keep appearing in all the articles that make up this paragraph. Our choice of some aspects for discussion does not mean that others are less important. We invite and

we urge Sisters to read and meditate on all the articles as they appear in the Constitutions. These texts are very much interconnected. Each word, each phrase has been included for a reason, and each is important.

II. MAIN CONTENTS OF THE DOCUMENT

Before we begin to discuss further the different aspects of community life, we will analyse the reality. The Constitutions and Statutes clearly indicate the aim of the path being followed, of course, but those making this journey needs to be able to see what stage they are at so that they can know where they are heading and the pace they should be travelling at.

A glance at the reality shows us that there are communities where the members live in common according to the teaching of the gospel, where there is mutual acceptance, a common mission, reconciliation, and where people share what they are and what they have. In this case, the words of the psalm have become a reality: *“How good, how delightful it is for all to live together like brothers or sisters.”* (Ps 133, 1).

On the other hand, there are some situations which make for dissatisfaction and a certain feeling of unease in a good number of communities: refusal to accept differences in temperament or outlook, selfishness and individualism, personal projects that are not in line with the Community Plan, an absence of trust and dialogue, authoritarianism which makes for infantilism, disillusion and apathy on the part of some members of the community; being unwilling or slow to be reconciled with others, sensitivity and edginess, and the discrepancy between one’s high expectations of the community and the slight contribution one is prepared to make to it, exclusive friendships, not being open to others, immaturity and emotional hang-ups in one’s personal history, a different interpretation and expectation of what community life could or should be, and the non assimilation of the dual principle, freedom-obedience.

Every Daughter of Charity should ask herself where she stands in regard to this aspect of the Company’s identity, what are the causes of certain negative situations, how these can be overcome with the help of all the Sisters. Once again we need to remind ourselves that the revision of the Constitutions and Statutes was undertaken with a view to revitalising the charism, and that sisterly life in common is one of the components of the Company’s identity. Perhaps, this aspect of the Company is in quite urgent need of being revitalised. The Constitutions can help us in this because they have been drawn up in such a way as to show us the ideal, the goal towards which the Daughters of Charity should be heading. The ideal can become a magnet with power to draw to it a situation that is more or less distanced from that ideal. This means, of course, that the person must enter into the dynamism of ongoing conversion.

1. Community life for the mission

The Founders wanted the Daughters of Charity to live in community so that they could serve the poor better. *“Why did God institute the Daughters of Charity? Why did*

He call me here? To honour Our Lord and to render Him service in the poor and to labour at all those things in which He decided to employ me."¹ "My daughters, the service of the poor should be preferred to everything else."² "You are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God to serve the poor."³ The Founders wanted the Daughters of Charity to live in community so that the aim of the Company would be better fulfilled. This is what the revised Constitutions and Statutes are affirming all through this chapter we are presenting to you. We should point out a significant change: the heading of the 1983 Constitutions is "*fraternal community*", the present Constitutions have added the words "*for the mission.*" Article 32 is even more explicit: "*Called and assembled by God, the Daughters of Charity live **a community life**, the better to fulfil their specific **mission** of service.*" Bold type is used to emphasise this affirmation.

This article of the Constitutions gives a faithful interpretation of the Founders' thinking. In fact, while they insisted that the service of the poor should be given priority, at the same time they inculcated in the Sisters, the need for mutual love, cordiality, tolerance and reconciliation.⁴ It has to be said that "*community life*" and "*the specific mission of service*" are two dimensions that are inseparable. (Cf. C.9). The community will better fulfil the mission entrusted to it if there is genuine community life: similarly, community life should be moulded and galvanised by the service of the poor.

The revised texts take into account this twofold dimension that characterises the community life of the Daughters of Charity: it is a community that is oriented "outwards", that is to say, oriented towards mission, and at the same time, the fulfilment of that mission depends on the community's "inward vitality": sisterly love, spiritual life, mutual acceptance and support, reconciliation, dialogue and discernment (Cf. C.32, 33, 36). A community that is "oriented outwards" means that community life is here understood and organised on the basis of the mission entrusted to each community. A Sister's gift of herself to God is lived out through the service of the poor. This entails availability on the Sister's part because one does not give oneself to God to serve the poor in just one particular place or with one particular group of people; she goes wherever the poor need her services and where obedience sends her. Being a community for the mission means that the difficulties of community living should not be detrimental to the mission. The very opposite is true, the urgent needs of the mission should be a stimulus for facing and overcoming the difficulties of community life. Being a community for the mission means that the Community Plan is understood and drawn up as a tool for galvanising the service of the poor as carried out by Daughters of Charity. So even though some Sisters may think that community life is an obstacle to mission, their opinion carries no weight.

There is absolutely no conflict between the community that is "outward looking" and the community that "looks inward." There is no opposition but rather these two

¹ Coste X, p. 127: conference of 18th October 1655 on the end of the Company

² Coste IX, p.215, continuation of the conference of 22nd January 1645 on the practice of the Rule

³ Coste IX p.534, conference of 22nd October 1650 to Sisters being sent into the country

⁴ Coste X, p.458, conference of 4th march 1658 on mutual charity and the duty of reconciliation; p. 477, conference of 30th May 1658, on condescension and support; p. 486, conference of 2nd June 1658 on cordiality, respect, particular friendships; p. 521, conference on humility, charity, obedience and patience.

things complement each other and are interrelated; the closer a community is united to God, the more apostolic it will be. And the more sisterly the relationships within a community are, and the more the Sisters share their material and spiritual resources, the more apostolic will that community be. Saint Vincent gave the first Sisters the example of Jesus and his disciples as the model for community, “*Providence has brought the twelve of you together here, with the intention, as it would seem, that you should honour His human life on earth.*”⁵ Jesus called his disciples, not just to send them on mission, but also to be with them and form a community. (Cf. Mk 3, 14).

These two dimensions of sisterly life in common are plainly evident in the revised Constitutions: community life is for the mission, the quality of community life ensures that the poor are served better and this service builds up and nourishes the community. Article 16b of the Constitutions is very clear on this point: “*This service nourishes their contemplation and gives meaning to their community life.*”

2. Community is based on theological principles

Spiritual writers and Church documents that discuss the question of community living as part of the consecrated life have made the same observation; the mystique that ought to animate community life has become weakened. So the logical remedy for this would be to restore this mystique or give it due appreciation.

In the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II affirms something which at first sight seems different from what we stated in the previous paragraph, “*In community life, then, it should in some way be evident that, more than an instrument for carrying out a specific mission, fraternal communion is a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord.*”⁶ Throughout the whole section of the Constitutions that deals with community living we find various expressions which highlight the faith dimension and the theological foundations on which we have to build community life: “*Called and assembled by God....The local community is modelled on the Trinity* (C.32a). “*The Sisters, united in the conviction of responding to the same call, ...help one another to advance towards the Lord.*” “*Their desire for conversion*”. “*Reconciliation and mutual forgiveness*”, (C.32b), “*Assembled in His (Christ’s) name, in a genuine community of prayer*”, (they) “*find His presence.*”*This community draws its strength from a shared faith, from the Eucharist and from praising the Lord.*”(C.33). “*The Sister Servant creates with her Sisters a joyful atmosphere of faith, prayer....*”(C.36a). All these quotations help us to realise that what John Paul II was saying is not far removed from the revised Constitutions.

Indeed, community is first and foremost a faith reality and we can only understand community as such. When community is viewed with the eyes of faith, its members are seen to be people whom God has called and assembled. They are united by the one same vocation, one same spirit, one same goal; they are called to be a reflection of the Trinity – different persons united in love- the Lord is present when they come together in his name.

⁵ Coste IX, p.1, conference of 31st July 1634 on the explanation of the Rule.

⁶ *Vita Consecrata*, no. 42

All this underpins the mystique that should animate the community. Without this mystique, living together as Sisters in the spirit of the Gospel is pointless. In other words, the service of the poor is not in itself a sufficient reason for living in community. We could serve them in some NGO or in a working team. The community of the Daughters of Charity is something altogether different. In the articles of the Constitutions and Statutes dealing with community life, we can see that vision of faith that must serve as a basis for understanding and building up community. Only in this way will the community have solid foundations in line with the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel (Cf. Mt.7, 24-25). This is the mystique needed for community living. To show just how much community is God-based, we find in article 32 this quotation from Saint John, "*By this shall everyone know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for another*".(Jn 13, 35). Community is a God-enlightened space where we live together in mutual love, the sign that marks out disciples of Jesus.

3. Building community is the work of every Sister

Article 36 gives the Sister Servant special responsibility for building community, "*The Sister Servant creates with her Sisters a joyful atmosphere of faith, prayer, cordiality and apostolic zeal.*" The inclusion of those words "*with the Sisters*" is very important. The revised Constitutions emphasise that all the Sisters share responsibility for building community. This community "*is built day after day by each Sister's gift of self and commitment....(they) "accept one another with esteem, respect and trust....."accepting" differences"*(C.32a). We can also find this principle of co-responsibility in other texts: *The Sisters help one another to advance towards the Lord.*" (Cf. 32b). "*This demands personal responsibility*"(Cf. C.33), participation (Cf.C.34), because each Sister "*is aware of her responsibility to contribute with all the wealth of her personality and culture to the common mission.*"(C.35a). All this contributes to making community life become "*a communion where each one gives and receives, and where each Sister places all that she is and all that she has at the service of the others.*" (C. 32b).

Living in community means that all the Sisters are called to build up the community. So in view of this co-responsibility, those who complain about the poor quality of community life are not acting in accordance with their commitments, and the same can be said of those who settle for indifference or passivity. Such attitudes indicate a "consumer" approach to community rather than one of being a "builder." To help the Sisters in this task of building community, the Constitutions and Statutes do not simply present the ideal to be aimed at, but they also propose various ways of dynamising community life and mission. Among the things they mention as being particularly important are dialogue, sharing at various levels and the Community Plan. (Cf. C.32b, 34, 35a).

Without dialogue and communication there can be no community. If people are to get to know others as brothers and sisters they have to know one another. This means they have to communicate. Communication brings people closer together and gives them a sense of belonging to a family as well as fostering participation in and co-responsibility

for the common mission. On the other hand, a want of dialogue creates individualism, indifference to other people's needs, anonymity, isolation and loneliness.

A principle common to all Founders was to take, as the model for the communities they founded, that of the Acts of the Apostles (Cf. Ac 2, 42-44). This passage from scripture tells us that the members of the earliest community shared their spiritual goods (*"These remained faithful..... to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.*), their material possessions (*"they owned everything in common*) and mutual love (*"they were of one mind and one heart."*) In the Constitutions, article 34 speaks about these three levels of communication: *"Community living fosters among them a sharing that extends not only to material conditions but also to spiritual and apostolic commitments."* The different types of sharing proposed in the Constitutions and Statutes are along these lines, they are meant to nourish these three levels of community life and mission: spiritual life through sharing of prayer (Cf. C.33; St 3), mission, through apostolic sharing (Cf. St 11, 63), community review of the use of material goods and life style (Cf. St. 16a), spiritual charity, mutual correction and reconciliation (Cf. C.32b).

In the revised texts great importance is attached to these community dynamisms. Basically we have to see this as a call to reinstate and revitalise them. When it comes to putting them into practice, these texts leave a lot of room for creativity. It would seem that the Assembly had listened to the reflection made by Mother Guillemin, *"When a custom becomes just a matter of routine, it is absolutely necessary to find a way of reviving and reinvigorating it."*⁷ the frequency of these sharing sessions and the length of time they take will depend on the type of community and the apostolic commitments confided to it. That is why each community is responsible for drawing up its own Community Plan. Of course the quality of community life does not depend on the amount of time you spend together or on the importance of what you are sharing. However, to reduce these to a minimum or to suppress them, would show that you do not realise the need for communication and dialogue in building community. Without these the community would consist of a group of persons living alongside one another but not forming a genuine sisterly community.

The Constitutions also emphasise the importance of dialogue when it comes to community discernment before a decision is taken: *"In dialogue, experiences are shared, differences are minimised, and decisions are sought together."* The Sister Servant is *"responsible for stimulating reflection so that, as a community, they may have the necessary discernment when faced with needs, appeals and commitments."* (C 36a).

4."The local community is the primary place of belonging for the Daughters of Charity." (C.34).

Here we have a new statement introduced into article 34 of the revised Constitutions. As far back as 1985 the General Assembly document, "At the Crossroads" used this expression to point out the risk of having many forms of belonging. The document says *"Faced with the we multiplicity of allegiances and pressures which make*

⁷ Mother Guillemin *"Instructions to the Sister Servants"*, vol. 1 p.196

claims on us in the context of today's situations, we reaffirm our belonging to the Company."⁸ The document *At Jacob's Well* takes up the same expression that is used in the Constitutions, "*the community is our primary place of belonging.*"⁹ Some aspects of this statement are dealt with in articles 5c and 82a of the Constitutions and in no. 8 of the Statutes, but the formulation and the introduction into the new text are something new.

Why does this expression appear in the Constitutions? What do we mean by saying the community is the primary place of belonging for the Daughters of Charity? The word "belonging" implies adhering to, being part of the whole. "Belonging" carries with it the idea of being dependent on something that is seen to be most important. In many cases the Sisters serve the poor as members of public or private, civil or ecclesiastical bodies, but they have to act in conformity with their basic commitment as Daughters of Charity and the fact that "*any other commitment they may be called upon to make requires the agreement of the local community and the consent of Provincial authority because it is the Company as a whole that is committed in the person of each Sister.*"

Article 24 and Statutes 8 and 9 encourage the Sisters to collaborate with other groups. Their professional training means that Sisters are often members of different groups, for example, groups of nurses, teachers, social workers, etc. They collaborate with the local or diocesan Church in pastoral tasks such as catechetics, liturgy, social works. They go to meetings of different ecclesial groups or movements such as charismatic or catechumenate groups. We are sad to say that there are some Sisters who feel more united affectively and effectively with these groups than they do with their local community. It is with this in mind that the Constitutions have introduced the statement we are discussing, "*the local community is the primary place of belonging for the Daughters of Charity.*" (C.34). This means to say that the Daughters of Charity with whom they should be closely united, with whom they should share their faith, their resources, their affection, apostolic mission, joys and sorrows, are primarily the Sisters of their local community. They are united by one same vocation, spirit and mission. These are the people they have to feel closely united to, the people with whom they have to share what they have and what they are, and with whom they share responsibility for the vitality of the community. It is not a matter of cutting ourselves off from others and not cooperating with other groups, but of giving affective and effective priority to the main group to which they belong; the local community. Article 9 of the Constitutions states, "*This life in common is lived in a local community, where the Sisters accept one another in faith with simplicity of heart. They bear joyful witness to Jesus Christ and continually strengthen one another with a view to mission.*"

Some Church documents, too, make reference to the problem of multiple allegiances in consecrated life. The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, for example, offers us the following reflection: "*In recent years, many consecrated persons have become members of one or other of the ecclesial movements which have spread in our time. From these experiences, those involved usually draw benefit, especially in the area of*

⁸ General Assembly *At the Crossroads* p.4

⁹ General Assembly 1991, *At Jacob's Well* p.4

spiritual renewal. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that in certain cases this involvement causes uneasiness and disorientation at the personal or community level, especially when these experiences come into conflict with the demands of the common life or the Institute's spirituality. It is therefore necessary to take care that membership in these ecclesiastical movements does not endanger the charism or discipline of the Institute of origin and that all is done with the permission of Superiors and with the full intention of accepting their decisions."¹⁰ Moreover, the document, *Fraternal Life in Community* draws attention to "Increasing indifference that constitutes a real danger to the vitality of community" and "a certain kind of involvement in ecclesial movements which exposes individual religious to the ambiguous phenomenon of dual membership."¹¹

According to article 7a, "*The Daughters of Charity.....give themselves entirely and in community to the service of Christ in their brothers and sisters who are poor.*" By renewing their vows they reaffirm their total gift of self to God, in the Company. (Cf. C.5a, 40c). These two ideas expressed in the Constitutions appear again in the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, "*When the Church approves a form of consecrated life or an Institute, she confirms that in its spiritual and apostolic charism are found all the objective requisites for achieving personal and communal perfection according to the Gospel.*"¹² The Company and its Constitutions have been recognised and approved by the Church. So the Daughters of Charity can become holy in that state of life without needing to look to other groups for something different.

Finally, our modern culture promotes partial allegiances and the unilateral relationship with some elements of the charism to the detriment of others because of the subjectivism in which we find ourselves. Allegiance, without rejecting present day thinking, goes further than this aspect of our culture. Membership seeks identification, total allegiance of the individual person to the local community, the Province and the Company.

4. The Community Plan (Cf. C.35a, 83; St.6, 7).

Within and outside of the Company, people are talking about the need to create new forms of common life. We can say that it is a very relevant theme in writings about consecrated life. Up to now no models have been designed that are compatible with what Universal Law demands of Societies of Apostolic Life.¹³ If, one day, such designs appear, the Constitutions are open to accepting them.

If we take as our starting point, an analysis of the revised texts, we have to say that these present us with an understanding of community life that is in accordance with the secular tradition of the Company. They present communities that are oriented towards mission, supported and energised by faith principles; as privileged places of sharing

¹⁰ *Vita Consecrata*, no. 56

¹¹ Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal life in community*, "*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*" no. 46

¹² *Vita Consecrata*, no. 93

¹³ *Code of Canon Law*, c. 731-746

where each member can bring what she is and what she has, a privileged environment where acceptance, affection and mutual forgiveness promote the human and spiritual development of its members. The revised texts also offer dynamic means of expressing and revitalising the spiritual life, mission and life in common.

This model of community, when it is properly understood, should not provoke conflict with the priority given to mission. This is where the Community Plan is so useful. Article 35a tells us, *“It is in view of the service of Christ in those who are poor that the local community works out its Community Plan.”* This used to be termed *“Plan for [the community’s] way of life.”* The Community Plan is like an instrument to help the community to carry out the mission confided to it, and to balance the needs of this with other aspects of vocation. The Community Plan should be worked out by the whole community in an attitude of openness and acceptance. All the Sisters should feel responsible for the common mission (Cf. C.83; St. 67). If we think of inculturation, one of the criteria behind the revision of the Constitutions and the Statutes, we can readily understand the need for the Community Plan. For every community it is a means of giving concrete expression to the charism that has been handed down, according to its particular culture.

If the revised Constitutions and Statutes have aroused in the Sisters a general desire to revitalise the charism, a good Community Plan should channel these good intentions into practical actions. We will have to choose the most urgent requirements, clearly define them, motivate them, incorporate them into the Plan and evaluate them in order to see how they would work out in practice. It is now several years since communities have been drawing up their Community Plan. The results have not always been as people expected or desired. But since it continues to be a valuable and even a necessary instrument for reviving every aspect of the community’s vocation and mission, it seems that these days when we are studying the revised Constitutions give us a good opportunity to reinvigorate this practice and make it more effective.

5. The sick and elderly Sisters truly share in the mission.”(C. 35b).

In his conferences and letters Saint Vincent often spoke about the elderly and sick Sisters. His words can be summed up in these two ideas: we are to love our old Sisters and help them. *“If anyone, on account of her infirmities, or age, or great bodily weakness, stands in need of something extra, the Community of Charity which rules all things well, should take that into consideration.”the sick and delicate need some special care”....O Sisters, they must be helped when either age or infirmity has reduced them to that state; otherwise it would be most unjust.””The Company is a mother who knows quite well how to draw a distinction between her sick children and those who are well.”¹⁴ And he suggested that, as a mark of affection, Sisters from other houses should go to see those who were sick, *“for I think it is a great consolation for a Sister who is ill to see her Sisters.”¹⁵* On the other hand, Saint Vincent asks the elderly and sick Sisters not to be demanding. He says quite strongly, *“it is not reasonable for servants to be**

¹⁴ Coste X, p. 374-375, conference of 18th November 1657 on uniformity, chastity and modesty

¹⁵ Coste X, p.412, Conference of 23rd December 1657 on visiting and on the duty of warning Superiors

better treated than their masters."¹⁶ He concludes with a statement worthy of a philosopher who has reached the heights of wisdom, "*seniority is reckoned not by the number of years but by virtue.*"¹⁷

Saint Louise spoke in similar fashion. She wrote many letters to Sister Servants who had an elderly or sick Sister in the community. Her correspondence reveals her affection for the Sisters and the interest she took in their lives; she urges them to treat the elderly Sisters with gentleness and patience. She takes the opportunity to ask the young Sisters to love and respect their elderly companions.¹⁸ The Constitutions faithfully reproduce the Founders' interest in and concern for the Sisters who, because of their age or their health, need the community to take care of them. (Cf. C 35b).

The elderly Sisters are a blessing for the Company and for the Provinces. They have written a wonderful chapter in the Company's history. In spite of difficulties and trials they are faithful witnesses to their original call. What can the elderly Sisters teach us and what do they bring to the Province and to the Company today so that we can rightly describe them as a "blessing"?

The elderly Sisters, with their delicate state of health and related problems, speak to us of a truth that is just as undeniable as it is forgotten: the precariousness of life and our own limitations. When we see their serene faces and the joy with which they continue to live out their vocation, we are particularly reminded of these words of Jesus, "*Whoever loses his life for my sake and for the gospel, will save it.*" (Mk 8, 35). In other words, many elderly Sisters are proof that the Vincentian vocation is one that allows a person to find fulfilment and to live a fully human life. This letter from Saint Vincent to Anne Hardemont is testimony to this: "*O Sister, how consoled you will be at the hour of death for having consumed your life for the same reason for which Jesus Christ gave His – for charity, for God, for the poor.*"¹⁹ The elderly Sisters can be a real support to the younger Sisters in their vocation. The document "Fraternal life in community" states, "*An elderly religious who does not allow himself or herself to be overcome by the vexations and limitations of age, but keeps alive joy, love and hope, is an invaluable support for the young.*"²⁰

As stated in article 35b, the Sisters are an important part of the mission because they make a valuable contribution to the mission of the Church and of the Company. This contribution can only be appreciated when the Church and the Company are viewed from a perspective of deep faith. As the document *Fraternal Life in Common* says, "*However invisible it is, their fruitfulness is not less than that of more active communities. Indeed, these latter draw strength and fruitfulness from the prayer, suffering and apparent lack of influence of the elderly. The mission has need of both of them.*"²¹ The image of electricity installation can help us to understand this truth: in a

¹⁶ Coste X, p.686, conference of 25th November 1659, Summary of the Common Rules

¹⁷ Coste X, p.90, conference of 23rd May 1655, on obedience

¹⁸ Cf. *Spiritual Writings*, p. 182, 226, 237, 384, 402, 432, 590...

¹⁹ Coste VII, p.382. Letter of 24th November 1658.

²⁰ *Fraternal Life in Community*, "*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*", no. 68 and 3

²¹ *Fraternal Life in Community*, "*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*", no. 68 and 5

house, when bulbs light up we know there is electricity. But for this to happen there has to be a whole lot of electric wires installed in the walls, and these produce the marvel of electricity. This network of wires that are hidden from view and yet have the most important function, are the elderly and sick Sisters who by their prayers and sufferings contribute to the mission of the Provinces, and of the Company in the Church. Saint Vincent said something similar when, speaking about sick Missionaries, he declared that *“they merited more by their suffering than the others did by their labour.”*²² When Mother Roge addressed the Sister Servants of communities of elderly Sisters she asked them to help these Sisters to understand *“that they are the most militant and the most missionary section of the Company. I say this because I believe it, I have no doubts at all about this.”*²³ The same conviction was expressed by the 1991 General Assembly, *“We will mobilise all our energy for the Mission: the elderly and sick Sisters are our powerhouse of prayer.”*²⁴

III SOME QUESTIONS TO HELP US WITH OUR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND COMMUNITY SHARING (BETWEEN COMMUNITIES OR AT PROVINCIAL LEVEL..)

- Compare the revised Constitutions with those of 1983 and look up the changes that have been introduced into the articles dealt with in this document.
- Compare your life with what you read in the texts. What inconsistencies and contradictions do you find?
- On which points should you be concentrating in order to improve your community life?
- What can you do to revitalise the different types of community sharing? (review of life, apostolic reflection, faith sharing etc)
- What do the following words mean for you? *“The local community is the primary place of belonging”*.
- Is the Community Plan understood and worked out in accordance with the guidelines presented by the Constitutions and Statutes?

IV SUPPLEMENTARY READING FOR IN-DEPTH STUDY OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS 5TH DOCUMENT

Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life:
Fraternal Life in Community:

Chapter II: *The (religious) community, place where we become brothers and sisters (nos 11-57).*

Chapter II: *The community, place and subject of the mission (nos. 58-70)*

Father Quintano: *Recreating community life”*, Echoes of the Company, April 1999

²² L. ABELLY, *The life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, III, Paris, 1664, 167

²³ Sister L. Roge, *“One is a Daughter of Charity all one’s life”*. *Echoes of the Company*, May 1980 p. 72

²⁴ 1991 GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *At Jacob’s Well*, p.11

“Convictions for recreating community” Echoes of the Company, May 199.

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

FATHER J ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Reflection guidelines for the monthly retreat

Jacob wrestles with God

In Sacred Scripture there is a mysterious passage which, from the point of view of exegesis, remains obscure, but the text is impressively powerful. It has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for our Western spiritual tradition. It speaks of Jacob wrestling with God himself.

Here is the passage:

“That same night he arose and taking his two wives and his two slave-girls and his eleven children he crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream and sent all his possessions over too. And Jacob was left alone.

And there was one that wrestled with him until daybreak who, seeing that he could not master him, struck him in the socket of his hip, and Jacob’s hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him. He said, ‘Let me go, for day is breaking.’ But Jacob answered, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ He then asked, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Jacob’ he replied. He said, ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have been strong against God, you shall prevail against men.’ Jacob then made this request, ‘I beg you, tell me your name’ but he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ and he blessed him there.

Jacob named the place Peniel, ‘Because I have seen God face to face’, he said, ‘and I have survived.’ The sun rose as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip. That is the reason why to this day the Israelites do not eat the sciatic nerve which is in the socket of the hip; because he had struck Jacob in the socket of the hip on the sciatic nerve.” (Gen. 32, 23-33).

I. “NIGHT-TIMES” ARE PART OF LIFE

“Night-times” are part of everyone’s life, no matter what our state of life or vocation may be, so they are bound to be a feature of consecrated life, too. In section 38 of the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, this passage of Scripture describing Jacob’s combat with God is seen as a typical example of a person *“wrestling with the mystery of God, whom he confronts in order to receive his blessing and to see him.”*

The circumstances of our periods of darkness vary widely and they can have many causes.

There might be **an external factor**, for example:

- being moved to a new house, and even to a new work; all this can create many problems;
- little or no success in apostolic work
- failure, loneliness, misunderstanding or indifference on the part of other people, God being silent;

Other **factors** may be **internal**, illness, depression, sadness, fatigue, crises of faith.....

Saint Vincent suffered these painful experiences. We might remember, for instance, the occasion when the Judge in Sore wrongly accused him of theft, or when he was beset with doubts against the faith as he tried to help an indolent chaplain at the court of Queen Marguerite, or the time when he confronted Mazarin, etc.

Saint Louise, too, experienced this type of suffering. She would often say, *“God wishes me to go to Him through the path of suffering, a path I’ve followed ever since I was born.”* We might recall her dark days before the eve of Pentecost, 1623.

It is good for all of us to be aware of our darkest nights: these may happen only rarely or they may come frequently; they can come upon us unexpectedly and vanish just as quickly or they may persist for long periods of time. People are tested in different ways and to different degrees. What does not change in these situations is that in the darkness God is thought of as an adversary. Several Sisters have said to me, *“I have been wrestling with God for days, for months.”* This replicates the image of Jacob wrestling with God.

II “NIGHT TIME” IS NECESSARY

We have to pass through the night hours in order to reach “dawn” and also to be given “a new name.” Crises are times of growth. In the history of SALVATION darkness has always been, and continues to be, mysteriously fruitful: it was out of the darkness mentioned in Genesis that light came into being. Abraham’s long “night” ended in blessing. From the darkness of the exodus came liberation. Jacob’s time of darkness opened up to him the possibility of entering the Promised Land and bringing others there with him. The night of Gethsemane preceded the dawn of the Resurrection. According to one of the hymns for Vespers, night is the time of salvation.

In this ordeal of darkness people grow stronger, persevere in the ways of God, and allow God to purify them. (Cf. Ac. 14,22). For two different entities to become united one of them has to cease resisting. So the sap becomes part of the plant, a drop of liquor dissolves in water, iron is transformed by fire. This struggling with God strengthens the

person, provided that he or she perseveres in faith. Every “night time” can become an opportunity to draw near to God and strengthen our vocation to be servants.

III CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR “NIGHT TIME” TO BE FRUITFUL

Perseverance

If Jacob had turned back he would not have been fit to enter the Promised Land, lead his people there, and bring future generations to it. He would not have been given a new name, in other words, a new vocation. People who cannot endure the aridity of the desert will not experience God’s saving action.

Prayer

When trials come, the hardest thing is to persevere in prayer; this seems to be a waste of time, something that is dry and meaningless. However, we should not forget that perseverance can bring a blessing from God. Prayer helps us to recognise that God is not simply the goal of our desires but the One who takes the initiative and with whom we have to co-operate. When God tests someone and causes them to limp, it is better to limp after Him than to run down blind alleys.

IV CONCLUSION

No other person could have written about this spiritual combat in a more systematic, elegant and striking way than St Francis de Sales, the author of Christian optimism. “*God never wrestles with us, “* he says, “*unless it is to surrender to us and bless us.*” It is a great consolation to know that all God wants to do is to surrender to us. If at times he might seem like an enemy, in reality he is the most warm-hearted friend who wants to give us the joy of vanquishing him and “dragging out” of him the blessing of a fruitful vocation. Our life, which is a life completely given to God, has meaning; He blesses us.

V FOR MEDITATION AND SHARING

- Meditative reading of Lk 4, 1-3 and/or the Spiritual Writings of St Louise “Light” (p.3)
- During prayer I bring before God the difficult situations of my life. I ask him for light, strength and acceptance.
- How do I react during my “nights of darkness?”

Father Javier Alvarez
Director General

FATHER RICHARD McCULLEN CM

**Saint Vincent de Paul.....
on the motorway!**

1. Nearly forty years ago, a very fervent lady – member of a small Vincentian group in Dublin – wrote a most interesting book entitled, “The World of Monsieur Vincent.” This lady was Mary Purcell and she had already written several fine biographies of Saints – or of people who were close to sanctity. As a member of the Vincentian Family she had for a long time cherished the ambition of writing a biography of Saint Vincent. She devoted much time to studying his writings and finally decided to portray in detail the background to the society in which he lived in order to help people understand him more fully and in greater depth. She gives us the broad outlines and does not go into the finer details of Saint Vincent’s psychology and spirituality. Nevertheless her work is a valuable contribution to the understanding of our Founder, and the book, judging from its wide circulation, proved very popular in the English-speaking world.

2. In the introduction to her book that was published in 1963, Mary Purcell wrote these lines at a time when motorways – at least in my country – had not yet been built:

“If he lived today he would surely take the fullest advantage of jet travel, intercontinental telephones and other modern inventions to help him solve the problems that beset mankind. He would be in the vanguard of those trying to cope with such global problems as the rehabilitation of refugees and the food-for-the-hungry and aid-to-underdeveloped-countries campaign. He would be dispatching priests to Latin America, training them to slip through slits in Iron and Bamboo Curtains, encouraging Africa’s native clergy to lead their emergent peoples on the way to God. With his vision, his genius for organisation, his intense spiritual life, he would look at our world as he looked at his own, locate its needs and plan the best means of relieving them.”¹

If, forty years ago, Monsieur Vincent would not have hesitated to travel by plane, he would not have recoiled from using our modern motorways, even if he might have been a little apprehensive when he learned who his driver was to be on this occasion. He would, I think, have made a quiet reference to his personal devotion to, and trust in, Divine Providence and murmured a silent prayer to his Guardian Angel, and then we set off on our journey.

3. Quoting the words of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical “*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*”, Saint Vincent remarked,

¹ “*The World of Monsieur Vincent*” p.14- Dublin 1963

“The whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every creature, and in particular for the “prodigal son” (cf. Lk 15: 11-32), we discover anew each day. This pilgrimage takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community and then reaches to the whole of humanity.”²

So we made a pilgrimage. This was the object of our journey on the modern motorways of France. The phrase “whole of humanity” made a deep impression on my passenger because it evoked the great missionary enterprises he initiated while he was on earth. The mission in Madagascar was particularly dear to his heart and that is why he expressed a preference for travelling west in the direction of the port from which he had organised many voyages by his missionaries whom he sent “to the whole of humanity.”

When we left the city of Paris Monsieur Vincent, who was holding a letter in his hand, asked me politely if I would stop and send the letter if we found a post office. He told me that this letter was a reply to a man – he didn’t mention his name – who had spent a short time at Saint Lazare and had left the Community but now wanted to come back to it. He shared with me part of the letter’s contents:

“ I can quite easily believe that you are still attached to our Company and its works: your conduct in the past has convinced me of this. I also respect the opinion of the religious who told you that it would be a temptation if, because of your difficulties in prayer you stopped being a Missionary, for it is true that in every community there are many people, often the best people, who cannot apply themselves to meditation where o the imagination or reason plays a part, because this is not their way of praying. But the blessed Bishop of Geneva taught his nuns a different type of prayer, one that even sick people can use: it consists of gently placing oneself in the presence of God and telling Him one’s needs, without any further effort of the mind, like a poor man who shows his sores and incites passers- by to help him, which they will do more readily than if he wears himself out trying to persuade them of his needs. So we pray well when we remain in the presence of God, with no exertion of the understanding or will. So you would do well to listen to God in the urge you feel to return to us. I would only like to know how you feel about preaching, teaching catechism and hearing confessions, especially since it is a good sign if you are not upset by them. Ask God, if you please, Monsieur, to help you to know what He wants of you, take up some special devotion for this intention and try to keep yourself in a state of indifference as far as you can, so that you will be more ready to follow his lead and his will in so important a matter. Then, after the feast of Our Lady next August you can let us know your dispositions so that we can reflect on whether it would be advisable for you and for the Company for you to return to it”³

6. Monsieur Vincent’s remarks in his letter were, I could see, simple, direct and practical. For him, prayer is first and foremost a gift from God; *“That is why I tell you...No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ unless he is under the influence of the Holy Spirit.”*

² No. 49

³ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste IV, 390-391

⁴ Since prayer is a gift from God, we need to cultivate an attitude of tension with regard to the Lord, something that the psalmist often refers to: *“My soul is waiting for the Lord, my soul waits for him, I rely on his promise.”*⁵ Bette still, we should be like the paralytic in St. John’s gospel, waiting for the stirring of the Holy Spirit. We might ask ourselves whether this conviction was not the foundation of Monsieur Vincent’s deep and fervent devotion when he said we should follow Providence rather than anticipate it. Straining and forcing oneself might be too human an approach for establishing dialogue with the Incarnate Word of God. It is quite true that there are some conditions needed on our part to stir the waters coming from the Holy Spirit. We must, so to speak, go to the source of these God’s healing waters – and so Saint Vincent insists on the importance of remembering the presence of God as we begin our prayer or meditation. So we have the fundamental and practical advice he gave to the priest to place himself in the presence of God without any effort by the understanding or the will. This is something Vincent used to refer to on many occasions during the conferences he gave to the first Sisters when he was initiating them into the practice of mental prayer. And to facilitate this awareness of the loving presence of God at the beginning of their meditation, the Sisters were often encouraged to get into the habit of letting their minds rest in God at different times of the day so that when it was time to make their meditation, they would be able to focus their attention and open themselves to the Lord.

*“First of all, place yourself in the presence of God, thinking about him as he is in heaven, seated on the throne of his Majesty and looking down on us and seeing all things: thinking of him either in his greatness and his presence everywhere, here and elsewhere, from the highest heavens to the depths of the abyss, seeing our hearts and the secret recesses of our conscience; or else thinking of his presence in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar: O Saviour, here I am, a wretched and miserable sinner, here I am at the foot of the altar where you rest, - O Saviour, may I not do anything unworthy of that holy presence, or finally, thinking of him dwelling within us, penetrating our whole being and dwelling in the depths of our heart.....It is very important that we do this part very well because the whole body of our prayer will depend on this stage; the rest will follow of its own accord. Let us ask God to give us his grace so that we can converse well with his divine Majesty, recognising that of ourselves we can do nothing, and begging this grace through his great love for us, through his infinite merits and through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and the saints.”*⁶

All this should be done calmly and without anxiety, *“to place oneself in the presence of God, but not to strive too hard to do this because excess is always harmful.”* Making the effort to place oneself in the presence of God was in fact an attempt to control what St. Teresa of Avila used to call “the mad part of the house” (the imagination), something that Saint Vincent, in his turn, described as *“runaway and wandering.”*⁷

⁴ 1 Cor 12,3

⁵ Psalm 129

⁶ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste XI, 404, 405

⁷ *Ibid* 404

Perhaps it is precisely because the imagination is runaway and wandering that Saint Vincent insisted so much on the need to follow a method of prayer. We should note, too, that prayer, for him, was a discipline that had to be in line with another form of discipline that formed part of one's whole life, not just of prayer. He quoted spiritual writers who were authorities on the subject, to say that anyone wishing to make progress in the way of prayer would need to practise interior and exterior mortification of the senses.⁸

7. Following a method in mental prayer presupposes a certain degree of discipline and the particular method of prayer that Saint Vincent recommended to his communities was the one proposed by Saint Francis de Sales in his book, "Introduction to the Devout Life." Saint Vincent insisted on this method when he spoke about prayer. No doubt he dealt with this question so often that he seems almost to be justifying himself for this when, during a conference to the Sisters on 17th November 1658, he refers to the place that this method should have in mental prayer:

*"You know how to make it because you have often been told about it and learned it by rote, perhaps it is not much use for me to tell you of the method of Blessed Francis de Sales; nevertheless, since it is the easiest, I will do so."*⁹

Just at this moment we stopped at the motorway toll booth and when I explained to my passenger that we had to pay a toll to use the motorway and that sometimes this could be expensive, particularly if we were making a long journey, he reflected that the same could be said for entering into the mystery of God on the road of prayer:

*"I was thinking to myself how it could come about that some people should make such little progress in this holy exercise of meditation. We have reason to fear that the reason for this is that they are not mortified enough and they allow their senses too much liberty. If you read what the greatest masters of the spiritual life have written about prayer you will see that everyone of them maintained that practising mortification was absolutely necessary for making one's prayer well, and to have the right dispositions one needed to mortify not only the external senses but also the faculties of the soul, understanding, memory and will; by doing this, mortification will help people to pray well, and prayer, in its turn, will help them to practise mortification."*¹⁰

9. Methods of prayer, however, do not constitute prayer itself and sticking slavishly to one particular method when our will is already tending towards action, would be to restrict the influence of the Holy Spirit. Monsieur Vincent noticed that I didn't stop the car's engine while I collected the toll ticket. I think this may have prompted him to make this comparison with our prayer life.

"When we want a light we use a flint; we strike this and when the flame appears we light the candle; it would be absurd to go on striking the flint once the candle is lit."

⁸ Ibid 90-91

⁹ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste X, 586-587

¹⁰ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste XI, 72

Similarly, when the soul is sufficiently enlightened by its reflections why would it need to look for further ones and why should we cudgel our brains over and over again in order to multiply reasons and reflections? Don't you see that this is a waste of time and that you should be applying yourself to inflaming your will and rousing your feelings with regard to the beauty of a virtue or the ugliness of the contrary vice? This will not disturb you because the will follows the light of understanding and does what this suggests to be good and desirable.”¹¹

10. As we left the toll booth, the multiplicity of road signs excited Monsieur Vincent's curiosity. He asked the meaning of these numbers displayed along the roadside, and since we were travelling on a French motorway the simple little word RAPPEL was often added. I explained to him that the numbers indicated the speed limits that had to be observed on different sections of the motorway and that many drivers needed to be reminded about these. Hence the little word RAPPEL. When two or three drivers had overtaken us by exceeding the speed limits, Monsieur Vincent began to reflect on how quickly life seems to go by in our century: he noticed that people seemed to be rushing in all directions and always in a hurry. However this might be in the world of commerce, Monsieur Vincent was convinced that haste and feverish activity should be seen as negative forces in working for the Kingdom of God.

“Good works are often spoiled by moving too quickly. We act according to our own inclinations, which bypass mind and reason, making us think that the good we see to be done is feasible and timely, which is not the case. Later on we recognise this through our failure. The good which God desires is accomplished almost by itself, without our even thinking of it. That is how our Congregation came into being, that missions and retreats for ordinands began, that the Company of the Daughters of Charity was formed, that the Ladies of Charity for the assistance of the poor at the Hotel Dieu of Paris and the sick in the parishes were established. That is also how the care of the foundlings began and, in a word, how all the works for which we are now responsible came into existence. None of the above was deliberately undertaken by us, but God Himself, who wanted to be served in such circumstances, brought them imperceptibly into being. If He made use of us, we had no idea, however, where that was leading. That is why we allow Him to act, far from busying ourselves with the development of these works, any more than we did when they were just beginning. Mon Dieu! Monsieur, how I wish you would moderate your ardour (I think he had just caught a glimpse of my speedometer, and I slowed down) and examine matters thoroughly in the presence of the Lord, before making any decisions on them. Be acted upon rather than active. In this way God will do through you alone what all men together could not do without Him.”¹²

11. “Examining matters thoroughly in the presence of the Lord” is surely a very revealing commentary on how Saint Vincent himself used to act – and if such was his practice, we can see it as one of the foundation stones, not just of his prayer life, but also of his spirituality, that is to say, his devotion to following out, step by step, the way pointed out by Divine Providence. For Saint Vincent, the Incarnation took place in the

¹¹ Ibid 406

¹² *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste IV, 122-123

fulness of time and since the Risen Christ is always with us and since the Incarnation continues today in us and through us, there will always be that mysterious “fulness of time” – the *kairos* of God has to be respected in all matters concerning the coming of God’s kingdom and our co-operation with Him. (Monsieur Blatiron always tended to act first and reflect later).

*“The works of God have their moment; His Providence brings them about at that time and neither sooner nor later. The Son of God saw that souls would be lost yet He did not advance the hour ordained for His coming. Let us wait patiently but let us act, and so to speak, let us make haste slowly in the negotiation of one of the most important affairs the Congregation will ever have.”*¹³

12. By now it had begun to rain very heavily and visibility on the roadway was greatly reduced so I switched on the windscreen wipers. This led Monsieur Vincent to speak about the need for vision in our lives and particularly the need to see things as Christ did. In some way prayer functions in a similar way to what the windscreen wipers were doing for us now, as we drove along the motorway in the pouring rain. In the spiritual order of things we need Faith in order to be able to see, and our Lord has assured us that the pure of heart will see God. Monsieur Vincent found in the virtue of evangelical simplicity a means of preserving spiritual clear-sightedness, just as windscreen.wipers give drivers a clear view of the road ahead. In the three well-known conferences on the spirit of the Company, the virtue of simplicity is mentioned at least as many times as the virtue of charity. And simplicity, like humility and charity is something we should pray for every day.

*“Sisters, I recommend two things to you; the first is to ask God for it every day during your mental prayer, at Holy Mass, at midday, in the course of the day, especially at the beginning of your principal actions, saying interiorly: ‘Am I doing this our of charity, for the love of God? Am I not doing it from vain complacency, from natural temperament? For instance, I have come here to mention my faults to Mademoiselle; have I sufficient humility to do it? Am I simple? If I use ambiguous language, if I speak of things other than they really are, I have no simplicity at all.”*¹⁴

13. It is easy for us to see how important gospel simplicity is in the life of a Daughter of Charity. Saint Vincent was given the charism of being able to recognise in the broken bodies and disturbed minds of the Poor, the features of Jesus Christ imploring us to help and to give much more than a cup of cold water. For those who have been called to share this charism, purity of heart and purity of intention are of paramount importance. The French writer, Georges Bernanos, once wrote: “Ask for the only thing you need, a pure heart and a star.” We can believe that Monsieur Vincent spent a long time in prayer asking for purity of heart or, as he would say, gospel simplicity, and contemplating the Star who is the Light of the world. And the more he came to see the Star of Christ’s humanity, the more able was he to make the power and presence of the Resurrection prolonged and rendered effective among the Poor.

¹³ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste V, 396

¹⁴ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste IX, 596-597

“If Elias, endowed with a twofold spirit, wrought such wonders, what will not a person do who has God within her, who is filled with God? She will not be acting of herself; she will be doing the actions of Jesus Christ; she will tend the sick with the charity of Jesus Christ; she will have the sweetness of Jesus Christ in all her life and conversation; she will have the patience of Jesus Christ under trials; will have the obedience of Christ. In short, my daughters, all her actions will no longer be those of a mere creature, they will be the actions of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

These few lines show us Monsieur Vincent’s vision of prayer and the way he expected this to affect a person’s life.

14. We left the motorway and came to one of those complicated roundabouts that are a feature of our modern highways. We could have continued in any one of several directions. I wasn’t at all sure which exit to take so I drove round the roundabout twice. I think my passenger was amazed at this and decided that I didn’t really know which way to go – in other words, that I couldn’t make up my mind. In any case, Monsieur Vincent went on talking and said that prayer was not simply a matter of placing oneself in the presence of God. We have to love the Lord in the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow. If we might use this expression, “God is not to be loved in a cupboard.” Otherwise we continue to go round and round in prayer just as we can go round and round a roundabout getting nowhere. This, he added, shows the importance of making resolutions (at this point I found the right exit). When he spoke to his communities about prayer he insisted on the need to make resolutions and this was certainly his personal practice.

“Hence your resolutions should be something like this: ‘I will go and serve the poor; I will try to go to them with a modestly gay demeanour so as to console and edify them; I will speak to them as if they were my lords. There are some people who seldom speak to me; I will bear with them. I am in the habit of making a Sister sad on such or such an occasion; I will refrain from doing so. She also displeases me sometimes; I will bear with her. One Lady (of Charity) scolds me, another finds fault with me; I will try not to turn away from doing my duty and will show her due honour and respect. When I am with such or such a person it is always to the detriment of my perfection, I will, as far as possible, avoid occasions for this to happen.’ That, I think, is how you should make your prayer, Sisters. Does not this method seem useful and easy?”¹⁶

15. By now we were on the outskirts of Nantes and Monsieur Vincent began to speak about St. Paul’s experience as he drew near to the city of Damascus so many centuries ago. For tens of years he had had a special devotion to the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. Perhaps it was because Nantes was the port from which so many Missionaries left for Madagascar, and the town where the Sisters had a hospital that he and Mademoiselle Legras had set up, that this association of ideas led him to speak about conversion and mission. For Monsieur Vincent, Nantes evoked the idea of mission, and

¹⁵ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste IX, 332-333

¹⁶ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste IX, 30

to be a true missionary for Jesus one needs to be in a state of continual conversion – conversion like that granted to St. Paul when he lay on the road, bathed in a light that was not of this world. And for conversion to be lasting, we need an ongoing vision of Jesus Christ and his deep love for the poor.

16. “Mission”; one of Monsieur Vincent’s favourite words. He placed this word at the very heart of the Community that the Spirit of God had so mysteriously raised up through him. His priests would always have to be on mission wherever Divine Providence led them. He linked the word “mission” with the word “poor”. The members of his Congregation would always have to be on the motorway leading to the poor, bearing in their hearts the sufferings of the poor and bringing them words of encouragement and the practical service that the Crucified and Risen Lord had entrusted to them.

17. Referring to the meeting of Cardinals that took place in Rome last May, Monsieur Vincent said he had been impressed by the words of Cardinal Etchegaray (almost a neighbour from the Landes, a region of France that Vincent knew very well), at the opening session of that meeting. “The Church of Jesus Christ”, declared the Cardinal, “has been called to witness to Christian poverty and to move on from being a Church for the poor to being a Church that is utterly poor.” And the Cardinal continued, “This may be the most challenging and urgent question for the evangelisation of the world in the new millennium. Only a Church that is poor can become a missionary Church.”

18. Monsieur Vincent went on to say that he was impressed, too, by the Cardinal’s frequent references to the importance of and the urgent need for personal holiness in every evangelisation programme today. Cardinal Tomko from Czechoslovakia spoke of the importance of what he called the “globalisation of sanctity” while the Cuban Cardinal suggested a “pastoral programme of sanctity.” All this, said Monsieur Vincent, reminded him of what at the end of his life he had repeated to his missionaries, just as he had said so many times to the two communities: the need to *“work at one’s own perfection, doing everything one can to practise the virtues that our Sovereign Master has deigned to show us by word and by example.”*¹⁷

This brought to his mind the words he had said to the Sisters on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, January 1643:

“...Do not worry about the future; spend what you are accustomed to spend throughout the year and, if anything remains over, bring it to the Mother House with the idea of helping to train Sisters for the service of the poor. You have a right only to food and clothing; the surplus belongs to the service of the poor. O my daughters, have you ever heard that God chooses the poor to make them rich in faith?How do you know, I repeat, my daughters, whether God, by calling you for His glory and the service of the poor, does not mean to try your loyalty in order to show forth this truth – that God has chosen the poor to make them rich in faith? O my daughters, if you are really and truly poor, you are really and truly rich, for God is your all. Trust in Him my dear Sisters.

¹⁷ Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission

*Who has ever heard it said that those who relied on God's promises are deceived? That has never been seen and never will be. Yes, my daughters, God is faithful to His promises, it is very good to trust in Him and this trust is all the riches of the Daughters of Charity and their complete security. How happy you shall be, my daughters, if you never lack this confidence."*¹⁸

20. "To serve the poor...to serve the poor... to serve the poor." Monsieur Vincent repeated these words because we were now driving through one of the poorest districts of Nantes, where he was quick to spot the number of African and Asian refugees in the streets. He remembered the words of encouragement he once wrote to Sister Anne Hardemont:

*"For charity, for God, for the poor! If you only knew your good fortune, Sister, you would truly be overjoyed; for, in doing what you do, you are fulfilling the law and the prophets, commanding us to love God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves. 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. Our entire perfection consists in this. It only remains for you to combine zeal with action and to conform yourself to God's good pleasure, doing and bearing with all things for the same intentions Our Lord had and for which He suffered similar things. I pray that He will grant us all this grace."*¹⁹

21. As the rush hour traffic was getting heavier and called for greater concentration, my passenger fell silent; I'm sure this was out of consideration for his driver. When I glanced at him from time to time, I noticed that his lips were moving in silent prayer. But whether this prayer was for the suffering people he noticed in the streets, or whether he was begging God not to let his drive take any dangerous risks when the lights changed, I don't know. I finally decided that this great-hearted man had surely included both intentions and many, many more.

22. As we both fell silent in the car – while the traffic roared by outside, I felt this was the moment to remind myself of the presence of God, believing, as did Helder Camara, that we humans can wear ourselves out so much by talking that we can no longer hear the silence of God.

Father Richard McCullen CM

¹⁸ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste IX, 89-90

¹⁹ *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Coste VII, 382-383

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Provinces of Latin America and the Caribbean

Meeting of “Formators and Provincial Directors”

Mexico, 26th June-6th July
“Formed by your hands.”

From 22nd June to 6th July 2005, **59 Sisters in charge of formation and 15 Provincial Directors from Latin America and the West Indies** gathered for a meeting in Mexico, the country of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Mindful of the importance of formation, they reflected together on the future of this mission for “the continent of hope” in the context of today’s world. After sharing experiences they set themselves some goals to achieve.

The presence there of Mother Evelyne Franc, Father Gregory Gay, Father Javier Alvarez and Sor Blanca Libia Tamayo was an indication of the interest that Superiors take in formation, and it also demonstrated the bonds that unite us to the whole Company.

OPENING CEREMONY

The opening ceremony for this encounter was held round a well, reminding us of Jacob’s well.

“In the name of the Father” the Creator who supports and continues his work in each person.

“In the name of the Son” who accompanies and forms his disciples with respect, devotion and confidence.

“In the name of the Holy Spirit” who inspires us and dwells in our hearts.

In addition to the icons that were chosen for the International Congress on Religious Life, we had symbols illustrating two texts: the gospel account of the Samaritan woman and that of the Good Samaritan. We all drew a little water from the well and then walked in procession, asking ourselves “what would the Samaritan woman be saying to us today?” In the Garden of the Virgin we were given oil, wine, bandages and a coin, the things used by the Good Samaritan for tending the wounds of the traveller. As we made our way to the room where the meeting was to take place, we reflected that the mission of formation implies “helping the human cause to resound within each person and to see this as God’s cause, in order to be a united body serving a wounded world.”

When we arrived at the meeting hall we lit our candles from the Paschal Candle and intoned the Veni Creator. Mother Evelyne proceeded to the official opening and placed our work in the hands of God and Our Lady of Guadalupe. She also added that the martyrs of Arras, whose feast it was that day, must have been happy and smiling on us from heaven. Then she began the official opening of our encounter.

THE ENCOUNTER'S OBJECTIVES

Sister Blanca Libia presented the aims of this encounter in the light of the revised Constitutions:

- to have uniform criteria and introduce bold changes in formation.
- to take up and confront today's challenges in Latin America and respond to these in an appropriate way.

The specific objectives were as follows:

- to share our experiences of formation and listen to the experiences of others.
- to reinforce the idea that the work of formation is vital for the future.
- to reflect on, and study in depth, the topics that could unite us in our formation work.

After the opening Mass presided over by Father Alvarez, we felt ready to tackle, in a spirit of hope, the challenges of formation. This revised method of formation which, through the anxieties and sufferings of the poor and through the reality of the situation of young people in Latin America and the West Indies today, challenges us and commits us to work at a deeper and a higher level and to advance further. By listening to the Holy Spirit, by our personal reflection, group work and sharing experiences, we went forward in a spirit of prayer and community sharing.

THEMES DISCUSSED

- **The identity and secular nature of the Company**, presented by Father Javier Alvarez, Director General. What is the Company, according to the Constitutions, to the Church and the world in which we live? How is this seen in practice? How should we live out our relationship with God, our community life, our service of the Poor, and our openness to lay people and collaboration with them?

- **The sense of belonging to the Community**, presented by Mother Evelyne Franc. In civil society and in the Church people have different ways of belonging. As Daughters of Charity we are members of the Company according to the charism of our Founders, we share in the Church's mission and have a specific spirit characteristic of being servants. Belonging to this Company strengthens our motivation, dynamises our vocation, increases the Sisters' fidelity and inspires vocations. This sense of belonging promotes participation and co-responsibility in community life.

- **The essential features of formation**, presented by Father Aaron Gutierrez, Mexico's Provincial Director.. What sort of formation do we have in mind? Does it meet the needs of the individual and the times we are living in? Which elements are essential and which of them are secondary? In general, we are not dealing with a large number of young people. Sometimes we try to bring young people into our way of living, a life style for which they are not sufficiently prepared.

- **Agents of formation, a collective task**, presented by Sister Libia Tamayo. The whole Company, the whole Province, is responsible for the work of formation. Formators act as

delegates of the Visitatrice and her Council. One of the main functions of the Director is to collaborate in the work of formation.....The Company regards initial and ongoing formation as very important for strengthening motivation and the dynamics of vocation. We find the perfect model of a formator in Jesus. Mary is the living example for every formator. We also have a rich inheritance of teaching about formation; Saint Vincent was a great formator and Saint Louise an excellent teacher.

- **Consecrated Life and human affection** was the subject dealt with by Brother Alejandro Gonzalez. The gospel value of consecrated virginity, human affection, what this means and how we are to understand it so as to make it the basis of our consecrated life. How are we to face up to things that might cause difficulty in living a joyful consecrated virginity?

- **Sexuality, the emotions and consecrated chastity**, presented by Sister Giraldo de Cali from Colombia. She gave her talk to the Sisters and then to the Priests. How do we understand and live out our chastity? We do not always talk about this in a satisfactory manner when discussing the subject. When dealing with young women we have to help them to open up on this matter. They prefer to be accompanied by women so this subject needs to be presented to them with respect for the person and for truth.

Spiritual accompaniment and discernment, presented by Fr. Gerardo Cortes, SJ. In tracing the broad outlines of this theme he filled out the general picture of these young people's situation. He spoke about the temptations and dangers in formation and offered criteria for discernment in the different stages of vocation, gave some markers for spiritual accompaniment, and emphasised the main points of psychological, historical and spiritual accompaniment. He made us do a practical exercise on the way we accompany people

- **The characteristics of young people today**, presented by three Sisters from Mexico and Central America.

After this we began the work of **synthesising** the shared experiences of the formators from the different Provinces.

On 29th June, the two great personages of the Church, Peter and Paul, urge us to "launch out into the deep" and they shed light on our Christian and Vincentian vocation.

Our intensive work session was punctuated by a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Guadalupe, a visit to the pyramids of Teotihuacan, and a rich variety of folklore from various regions extending from the Rio Bravo as far as Patagonia. This was the background to our times of relaxation throughout the session. We took away as a souvenir, a little Mexican hat made by the patients in the hospital of Tepexpan. We appreciated very much the wonderful meals prepared for us by young people with problems, at the Rehabilitation Centre of Cotolengo de Merida, Yucatan. The welcome and the sisterly service given to us were marked by many acts of kindness.

THE CONCLUSIONS REACHED AT THE SESSION

Finally, the conclusions (this is not a legal document) brought together what we had gathered from the session so that we could take this back to our Provinces and put it into practice in the best way we could.

To make ourselves rooted in Jesus Christ

- We will develop a solid spirituality incarnating reality and centred on the person of Jesus Christ as Adorer of the Father, Servant of His loving plan, and Evangeliser of the Poor.

- We will reinforce the sense of belonging to the Church and the sense of ecumenism at every stage, and we will practise the spirituality of communion.

- We will strengthen our bonds with the Company and our life as servants by a new understanding of our Vincentian charism.

- We will deepen our Marian spirituality and our missionary zeal.

- In order to reach greater heights

- We will organise an integral pattern of formation for every state and encourage a community way of living based on human, Christian and Vincentian values.

- We will give a formation that promotes unity of life, fidelity and joy in one's vocation, and avoid activism.

- We propose to have personalised accompaniment to train people in discernment and critical judgment.

- We will set up formation communities that will welcome and support young Sisters in their vocation.

To go that step further:

- We will update and evaluate our formation plans in the light of the new Constitutions, the Guide to Formation and the reality of different cultures.

- We will support the Formation Commission by providing formation for its members.

- We will give impetus to the formation of Sister Servants, Formators and Sisters who accompany others on their vocation journey. We will encourage personal responsibility for one's own formation.

- We will share the human resources of every Province and organise, if possible, an inter-Provincial formation team for those Provinces that ask for it.

We will revitalise the vocations ministry teams by involving the whole Province.

We will encourage the setting up of inter-Provincial seminaries for Provinces which have features in common, and according to need.

We would like to say yes to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and to our membership of the Company. We would like to develop in ourselves the attitude of a servant. We want to offer a form of accompaniment that is both solid and cordial, one that is based on attentive listening and being honest with ourselves, with Superiors and with the young people in formation. We will strive to fearlessly correct faults but to do so with gentleness, and to inspire deep convictions.

PHOTO

Finally, Father Alvarez and Sister Blanca Libia pointed out some important directives drawn up by the General Council for drawing up formation plans.

After the closing Mass, we went home wishing to maintain our enthusiasm for the work of formation. This mission is a gift from God that we accept, and a task to be accomplished with the help of the Holy Spirit and in the company of Our Lady, the model of all formators.

Some Sisters who took part in the Encounter.

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

First international session for Daughters of Charity working with migrants

Mother House, 5th-20th September 2005

The first international session for Sisters working with migrants was held at the MotherHouse, Paris, from 5th-20th September 2005. 75 Sisters from all the continents attended this gathering which had as its theme: "Bearers of hope for a world without frontiers."

When the European Visitatrices met in Salamanca in 2002, one of the questions they discussed was the worldwide phenomenon of migration. A committee of Sisters from the European Provinces had prepared a report that was presented to the General Assembly in 2003.

Sister Evelyne and the General Council suggested that these discussions should be followed by an international session for Sisters working with migrants. Sister Julma Neo

and Sister Mariarosa Camminati, General Councillors, organised the contents and the objectives of this session and they convoked the Sisters.

HOW THE SESSION DEVELOPED

The session began with a discussion, the Sisters being divided into small groups according to countries speaking the same language. The aim of this introductory stage was to examine the situation of migrants in their own countries, in line with globalisation. After sharing their personal experiences and trying to see things from the migrants' point of view, the Sisters shared their ideas about the causes of migration and the consequences for the migrants, their families, their country of origin and their host country. This input was enriched by a Round Table of migrants from Cambodia, the Ivory Coast and from Martinique, who told us about the positive and the negative experiences of their cultural, religious and social integration into France.

In the second stage of the session various speakers put before the Sisters a wide range of topics that included the socio-cultural, political/juridical, religious and inter-faith dimensions that affect migrants. The world becomes a very small place as we begin to understand more deeply the way that each of these dimensions affects nations and has international consequences for migrants, immigrants and refugees. Migrations within the same country as well as the increasing displacement of people from one country to another and from one continent to another, demonstrate the interdependence of migrations in this world wide phenomenon. At this stage of the proceedings, too, speakers helped us to situate our reflections on migration within the context of contemporary theological thinking and our Vincentian charism.

THEMES OF THE CONFERENCES

The wide variety of topics dealt with by competent speakers served to deepen and to widen our understanding of the problem:

- **“Facing up to worldwide migration: the reality, its causes and effects”** by Doctor Gabriela Rodriguez Pizarro, United Nations rapporteur, from Costa Rica.
- **“People-trafficking”** by Agueda Marin from the International Organisation for Migration,(OIM), from Costa Rica.
- **“Political and legal problems of migration”** by Mark Von Sternberg, a distinguished lawyer working with communities and Catholic charities in the archdiocese of New York, USA.
- **“The religious and inter-faith aspects of migration: reality and challenges”** by Fr. Thomas Michel, SJ Director of the Office for inter-faith dialogue in Rome.
- **“Migrants, a gift for the Church and for society”** by Fr. Eddy Jadot, Director of Jesuit services for refugees in Belgium and by M. Gabriel Katuvadioko, national chaplain for African religious communities.
- **“Reflections on migration as presented in Scripture and the social teaching of the Church”** by Cardinal Stephen Hamao, President of the Pontifical Council for migrants

and displaced persons, Vatican City, and by Nilda Castro from the same division of that Council dealing with migrants.

- **“Migration and the Vincentian charism”** by Fr. Giuseppe Turati, CM.

These conferences opened up for us wide horizons with regard to the socio-cultural, political-legal, and religious and inter-faith aspects of migration.

When discussing the socio-cultural dimensions of migration the Sisters spoke of cultural sensitivities and the need to be aware of our own attitudes and those of other people with regard to cultural differences.

The political-legal aspect of migration was something quite new to the Sisters and they were helped to understand:

the tensions between legislation affecting immigrants and refugees, and the way these laws are put into practice,

- the conflicts that arise between legislation aimed at protecting the rights of individuals so that these can live in dignity, and the rights of States to monitor their borders.

- The religious and inter-faith aspects of migration led the Sisters to a better understanding of Islam, the importance of inter-faith dialogue with migrants, and ministry to migrant people. All the points mentioned above were studied in the light of our faith and our Vincentian charism.

In her opening talk, Sister Evelyn Franc, Superioress General, challenged the Sisters to:

- view the world-wide dimensions of migration in a new light in order to make the most of being an international community dealing with this world wide question.

- work at inculturating the richness of our charism.

- collaborate with others in the work.

- carry out this task while maintaining a balance between service and community living.

Father Gregory Gay, Superior General, joined the Sisters mid-way through the session and celebrated Mass. His homily was on the readings of the day, “The sower and the seed”. He challenged us to have an open and generous heart as we listen to the words of Scripture and when we experience the presence of Christ in the poor and in one another. After the Eucharist he had an informal dialogue with the Sisters and, referring to his personal experience in Central America, he spoke about our Vincentian response to immigration.

These conferences were interspersed with times of personal and group prayer; the Eucharistic celebrations were at the heart of our living together. The beautiful hymns, the musical instruments and the liturgical dances presented by Sisters from many countries and nationalities were expressions of cultural diversity and innovative forms of prayer. Sister Christina Conti played the violin for all the liturgies of the different language

groups. Her generosity in sharing her talents with us all shows the potential we all have for relating to things that are new and different.

The testimonies given by the Sisters added yet another dimension to the session. Sisters who had been refugees themselves told their story of their personal journey to a new country and the sufferings and joys they experienced. Other Sisters spoke about their work with immigrants, offering apostolic reflections or giving talks or power-point presentations.

The whole session was characterised by an atmosphere of joy and genuine sisterliness. As most of the Sisters spoke two languages there was more interaction and sharing between Sisters of different languages and more effective listening to one another's experiences and work for migrants.

Compiling a document

Our discussions in small groups were based on a series of questions that helped us to integrate everything we had gathered from the different talks. A summary of our replies to these questions was presented at a plenary session and then synthesised by the Document Editing Commission. This outline draft was put before the Sisters before the final version was ratified.

Our account of this session would not be complete without a mention of the wonderful hospitality provided by the Mother House Sisters, the work done by the Secretaries, by Sr Esther Cavanagh and the team of translators, without whom this session could not have taken place. The Sisters attending the session experienced the inimitable kindness of Sister Maria Teresa Sanz and her staff who were ready at any time of the day to respond to any request for help, the dynamic Vincentian tour organised by Sister Marie Genevieve Roux and Sister Ascension Larrad, the profound expertise and enthusiasm of Sister Claire Herrmann and the other Sisters from the Archives office who showed us the great treasure we have in our common heritage.

Some comments made by the Sisters at the Session

"It has been a wonderful experience! The Sisters who participated were very much involved in the proceedings and their experiences and work with immigrants showed deep commitment." (Sister Yonide Midy, Haiti, Quasi-Province).

"For me it was enriching to learn that we Daughters of Charity are working to combat this new form of poverty among migrants in the five continents and that we are responding to this challenge by engaging in different forms of social and pastoral work." (Sister Consuelo Gomez, Mexican Sister from the Province of Puerto Rico who has recently been working with migrants in Miami, Florida, USA).

"We felt very close to one another and this was no doubt due to our shared commitment to the cause of migrants. It is these people who brought us together and the

Holy Spirit has allowed us to be open to one another so that we can learn how to support one another in our mission.” (Sister Michelle Nguyen, Vietnamese Sister from Albany Province, New York, USA).

“It was my first experience of the Company’s internationality. It was wonderful to see the way we worked together in spite of our different languages and cultures.” (Sister Ecaterina Ciobanu Iuliana, Province of Romania, Bucharest).

“I feel that I am going back to my country with stronger faith and with the hope that I will make progress even when I meet with difficulties. This is due to the fact that I have been able to listen to Sisters who, themselves, have been refugees and who shared their stories of what they had to endure during forced migration and yet never gave up hope.” (Sister Tsigue Petros, Province of Ethiopia).

Sister Consuelo Tovar and Sister Joanne Dress
Daughters of Charity

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

Irish Province

Ten years of working for social justice

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice was established in 1995 by the Daughters of Charity, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, the Vincentian Congregation and the Holy Faith Sisters.

The Partnership seeks to continue the work of the founding members of the four constituent groups; Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Margaret Aylward and Frederic Ozanam. All these people were pioneers in their own times. Each had a profound respect for the dignity of the human being, a dynamic commitment to the gospel values of love, compassion and justice. They were creative and innovative in their efforts to create with others a society which promoted human dignity and human rights.

In the light of the injustices created by the growing gap in Ireland between people in poverty and those in wealth, the four groups came together to establish a Vincentian initiative for social and economic change. A distinctive feature of the Partnership’s efforts to work for justice is the focus on working directly with people in poverty.

The following are the core values of the Partnership:

Vincentian spirituality. Jesus and the poor person are at the heart of Vincentian spirituality. The call to view the world from the perspective of people who are

economically and socially excluded from participation in society, and the call to personal transformation as a result of encountering the suffering of people who are marginalised, are also two central elements of Vincentian spirituality.

Dignity of the individual: This fundamental value is expressed by respect for the dignity and rights of all persons and by the recognition of every person's potential ability to contribute to society.

Solidarity with people in their poverty: In attempting to see society from the perspective of people who are economically or socially excluded, there is a commitment to work for change in the structures that cause exclusion and poverty.

Empowerment: In engaging with people in poverty, the emphasis is on working with people rather than for people, to create a more just society.

Promoting equality: The Partnership actively supports efforts to achieve equality at all levels in terms of access to economic, educational, social and cultural goods and services.

Confrontation without aggression: In working to change the values and structures which give rise to poverty and injustice, the approach is primarily one of education and persuasion.

Reflection: Processes which promote reflection, evaluation of action, and learning from experience, are integrated into the activities of the Partnership.

Over the past 10 years, two main approaches have been used to promote a more just society:

- 1. Promoting an Active Citizen / Voter education programme**
- 2. Researching the impact of poverty on the daily lives of individuals and families.**

1. Facilitation of an Active Citizenship/ Voter Education Programme

Since the 1980s there has been a diminishing voter turn out in different parts of Ireland. The areas showing the lowest participation are those with the highest incidence of poverty and exclusion. People in those areas saw no point in voting. Politicians did not pay attention to them. As a result, for the most part in Ireland, the voices of the wealthy and the comfortably off were being heard. The silent voices were those of Ireland's most disadvantaged people. People in poverty did not realise that their vote could become their voice. The Active Citizenship/ Voter Education Programme which is being used by the Partnership was developed by NETWORK, Washington, and adapted, with permission, to the Irish situation.

The programme is run in a series of workshops which show people how to vote, assists them in identifying issues which are important to them and to their community,

and presents an approach to choosing a politician who will promote their concerns. Participants discover the power of their vote. The Programme has been facilitated with approximately 500 community groups in other parts of Ireland. Since the year 2000, community leaders/workers are being trained to facilitate the programme and in 2002 a small national network was established. This network consists of 250 people committed to encouraging people in disadvantaged areas to become active citizens, to participate in elections and to work for change in their areas. To celebrate the year 2005 as the EU Year of Active Citizenship, it is planned to hold a national meeting of Network members in the autumn. In the 2004 elections, there was an increase of 20%-40% in the number of people in disadvantaged areas using their vote. The following are some of the reflections of a group of women who now call themselves “The Concerned and Active Citizens’ Group”.

“If you come from an area like ours you won’t see many politicians walking round. But then people in our area did not vote for them in the past. Politicians are learning that we, and many others, are voting, so they know they must listen and do more. Some areas have great roads, parks and sports facilities. But there is a big voter turn out in those areas. We don’t have a swimming pool, sports facilities and well-kept parks. Why? Because the people felt there was no point in voting. If we want a better Ireland for all of us we have to get out and work and vote for it.”

2. Research into the impact of poverty on the daily lives of individuals and families.

Ireland is now one of the wealthiest countries in the EU. However, approximately 23% of the population (700,000 of which 250,000 are children) live in poverty. They do not have sufficient income to live with dignity. And yet their failure to make ends meet is seen by a large proportion of the more comfortably-off members of Irish society as the result of bad management or irresponsible behaviour. In order to draw attention to the harsh reality of never having enough to live on or to influence decision-makers regarding the need for adequate income, the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice undertook two studies. Both studies involved the active participation of people in poverty. The 2000 study, *“One Long Struggle – a Study of Low-Income Families”* showed that it was not possible to live with dignity and provide children with adequate food, clothing etc. on the lowest social welfare payments by the State, or the National Minimum Wage. The study showed that the financial shortfall was not due to bad management but to what was a totally inadequate income. In 2003 the Partnership decided to establish the cost of “low but acceptable standards of living for three households.” A low-cost but acceptable standard of living marks the threshold below which good health, social integration and satisfactory standards of child development are at risk. The budget standards developed in the UK were used in the study and involved pricing 2000 items ranging from bread to furniture. The findings showed that the weekly income necessary to enable a “low-cost but acceptable standard of living” was considerably greater than the social welfare payments given to a One Parent and Two Children Household and a Two Parent and Two Children Household dependent on unemployment payments.

The cost of childcare makes it impossible for mothers in such households to avail of work or education. Both studies received considerable media coverage but more needs to be done to convince the Government that people dependent on the State for their income need payments which meet the actual cost of living.

Mary, one of the women who participated in the study, told her story on the radio.

“Every Thursday I pay the bills first – rent, electricity and gas, and then I spend most of the rest on food. I never bring the kids shopping as they would want things we couldn’t afford- like cereals instead of porridge. We hardly ever buy real meat – mostly sausages, fish cakes, chicken nuggets, burgers. I try to get some fresh vegetables but mainly they are tinned. The kids need clothes from time to time. Some weeks things break down, like the kettle or the fridge and that sets me back. A bottle of Calpol can mean no biscuits or sweets that week. The children sometimes have to wait weeks for the tooth fairy money. You can imagine how I felt when my son said I could use his child allowance money for the school trip. I had to tell him it had all gone on food. I dread getting into debt. Once I had the moneylenders after me and that frightened me. I am a good manager so I feel bad when I hear people like me called “a scrounge.” I can’t work because of the cost of child care and in the meantime, the allowances do not cover the cost of living.”

Other activities of the Vincentian Partnership

In addition to the two main approaches to working for justice, the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice produces a bi-monthly briefing, JUST NOW, on current local and international issues, and networks with other justice groups on a regular basis.

The Partnership also promotes work for justice through three groups: “The Daughters of Charity Justice Group”, “The Vincentian Partnership Catholic Social Teaching Group” and “The Vincentian Partnership Advocacy Group.”

When Pope John Paul II met some Irish priests who went to Rome, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of their ordination, he said to them, “*Ten years isn’t much but it is something!*” The same can be said about the first 10 years of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice! But we thank God who made that something possible.

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, June 2005

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SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

Province of Cologne (Germany)

XXth World Youth Days
Cologne, 16th-21st August 2005

“We have come to adore Him”, was the theme of the XXth World Youth Days in Cologne, to which John Paul II and his successor, Benedict XVI had invited young people from all over the world. With great enthusiasm many of them set out from different countries of the world; among them the JMV, members of the Vincentian Family, Daughters of Charity and Vincentian priests.

Tuesday, 16th August 2005: Opening Mass presided over by Cardinals Meisner, Lehmann and Bode, in the respective towns of Cologne, Dusseldorf and Bonn. This marked the beginning of our pilgrimage. More than 60,000 young people and some Daughters of Charity had the happiness of taking part in the ceremony held in Rhein Energie stadium at which Cardinal Meisner presided. Different cultures and different languages came together in praying to God. We felt that it is possible to live together in peace because we are all focused on Christ.

Wednesday, 17th August 2005: Vincentian Day in what used to be the Provincial House of Cologne-Nippes, for the members of the Family, with Father Gregory Gay, Superior General. The theme was, *“Giving happiness and receiving it.”*

Thursday, 18th August 2005: Arrival of Benedict XVI. A vast number of young people came to meet the Pope. The city of Cologne was too small for such crowds. We followed Benedict XVI’s journey along the Rhine to Cologne cathedral which he entered together with a young Bolivian woman and a young man from Africa. Then we listened attentively to his powerful address that was filled with conviction. This special time at the Cathedral and the unveiling of the Reliquary of the Three Kings, led us to reflect on the way we seek Christ.

Friday, 19th August 2005: 3rd Vincentian Youth Festival in St Margaret’s parish, Dusseldorf-Gerresheim, where the members of the Vincentian Family from all over the world came together. After greetings from Father Gregory Gay, we listened to Rita Oliva, International President of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. She talked to us about the spirituality of young people in the Vincentian Family, reminding us of the need to put all our youthful enthusiasm into making the Vincentian charism relevant today, while at the same time remaining faithful to the insights of that charism: practising charity in our personal relationships and promoting the welfare of people in an integral way. After her talk, people shared their experiences and then there were prayers and performances of folk music.

Saturday, 20th August 2005: Pilgrimage to Marienfeld (Mary’s Hill) some 30 km distant from Cologne. Here there was a Vigil and the Pope celebrated the Closing Mass. In this place where a monastery was founded in the year 1150, the arrival of Benedict

XVI was greeted with great joy. The vigil began with the World Youth Days' Cross and the icon of Our Lady being carried in procession. The prayers of the psalms, the celebration of light and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament enabled us to adore the Real Presence of Jesus, Light of the World and Bread from Heaven. The vigil ended with various performances of folk music. After a very damp and cold night we celebrated next day the Closing Mass. Each part of the Mass was sung to melodies from the five continents. At the end of the celebration the Pope blessed more than a million young pilgrims who had come together from 193 countries for this occasion.

By way of conclusion, let us listen again to the words that Benedict XVI addressed to young people all over the world: *“Now they (the Magi) are learning that their lives have to be conformed to the way that God exercised his divine power, to the ways of God himself. They have to become men of truth, integrity, goodness, forgiveness and mercy. They must no longer ask the question: what good will this do me? Instead, they have to ask: how am I going to serve God’s presence in the world? They have to learn to lose themselves in order to find themselves. When they leave Jerusalem they have to keep following the trail of the true King, following in the footsteps of Jesus.”*

Some notes made by a Sister from Cologne

Ursula took part in preparations for the Vincentian Day at Cologne-Nippes and she said, “My father encouraged me to help with these preparations. I had imagined that some ‘not very young’ Vincentians and some ‘rather old-fashioned’ Sisters (I had not even met them) were going to prepare a sedate and quiet meeting...As it turned out, I have seldom known so many people set to work with so much enthusiasm, cordiality and openness. For me it was fantastic to meet young Australians who were members of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul.”

An Islamic official working for the urban traffic corporation said to me, ‘I will miss these people with their blue rucksacks.’

A resident of Cologne who speaks Spanish helped a young girl from Panama to get to the airport on time.

For the first time, a helicopter touched down on the new landing ground at Saint Vincent’s Hospital. It brought a sick person from “Marienfeld” who was accompanied by a Priest of the Mission from Lippstadt.

Seeing a group of Italians who had lost their way, a bus driver offered to drive them straight to where they were staying in Monchengladbach.

One day there was an unexpected influx of pilgrims and one of the canteens in Bonn immediately prepared a meal for these thousand extra people.

After the Closing Mass, more than 200 people came to the Provincial House to have a rest and something to eat before returning to Paris by coach.

We discovered the dynamic and international reality of the Vincentian Family at the heart of the Church. We saw and we experienced a young Church that has a future. It is good to be part of it.

Sisters Petra Schupp, Stephanie Kallenborn and Ursula Ackermann
Daughters of Charity

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Central Africa

The street children of Kigali- Rwanda

In 1984 a Dominican priest, Father Guy Musy, had the idea of setting up a Centre for children who were roaming the streets of the capital of Rwanda. He brought some boys together and the group was called *Abadacogora*, “the brave ones”, and a group of girls who became known as *Intwali*, “the strong ones.” These names were meant to express a more positive vision of the future.

After the war that ravaged Rwanda, more and more children went on to the streets, so the Centre needed even more support in responding to this challenge. Father Dion Marius, the present Director of the Centre, appealed to the Daughters of Charity and other persons of good will, asking them to collaborate in promoting the welfare of these children whom God loves. Saint Vincent would have said to us today, “*God has chosen you for this....to be mothers to these children.*” (X, 113-114)

I have been engaged in this work since the year 2000 and found it a wonderful experience. I would now like to share this with you.

Why are they on the streets?

In 2004 a survey was undertaken to help us to have a better idea of the causes underlying this problem. Together with people from other Centres of the country working with street children, we spent six months doing the groundwork in the seven biggest towns in Rwanda. We talked to 150 children who live on the streets day and night, with 60 children who are only on the streets during the day because they have a family, and with about 60 families whose children are on the streets. Finally, we had a meeting with the local civic authorities to ask their advice on this problem.

After this survey we knew the basic reasons why children take to the streets. The most common causes of the problem are family conflicts, widowhood, the divorce or remarriage of parents: the death, disappearance or imprisonment of parents. In some regions there is also the problem of polygamy, exploitation of minors through harsh

working conditions, the attractions of city life. All these elements often result in poverty and destitution. They lead parents to neglect their duties and deprive children of their natural rights. This causes children to leave their natural or adoptive families.

Love is greater than anything else

The children have a difficult time on the streets. They suffer from anxiety, from cold and hunger, are often threatened by the police (especially during raids) and they take drugs. They hope that taking drugs will help them to forget their past and present troubles but these drugs often lead them to violence and sometimes to despair.

We want them to have some sort of social framework but we know that we need to show them a lot of love and understanding if we are to help them to become more sociable. Once a week we go and seek out the children in one or other part of the town. They are well able to distinguish between people who are trying to exploit them and those who are trying to help. Trust is gradually built up through meeting the children and showing concern for them. Then they point out other places to us and introduce us to new arrivals. We were amazed to discover their internal organisation system. They are well-defined small communities speaking a common language and having common funds to pay for medical treatment when this is needed. They have their bosses who give orders and can impose sanctions when necessary.

When the children begin to understand that we are their friends they agree to come to the Centre for training. Here they are given everything they need: meals and clothing, and they learn a trade. The aim of the Centre is to prepare these children for a better life and, wherever possible, to reintegrate them into their families. Thanks to the literacy courses offered by the Centre, some children are able to resume or to start their primary education. We follow their progress and some of them even manage to follow University courses. At the Centre other children learn dressmaking, embroidery, card making, how to put bicycles together, hairdressing, etc. Others are sent to learn masonry, plumbing, welding, accountancy...

I am always amazed to watch these young people make progress towards a life that offers them more dignity. This work demands patience and perseverance. The children are used to living a tumultuous life on the streets and adapting to the routine of life at the Centre requires a big effort on their part. Some of them become discouraged and abandon their training after a few months to go back on the streets. Most of them do persevere and the door is always left open for those who wish to return. Today the Centre has 385 children: 32 are boarders, the others go back to their natural or host families.

Florence, who is 15 years old, began a dressmaking course in spite of difficulties. After a year she made school uniforms for the pupils and her work was of an excellent standard. Today she uses the sewing machine she was given at the Centre. To teach the children the value of saving, the Centre give 5% interest a month on the money the children invest here.

Corporal and spiritual care go hand in hand

The Centre offers catechism classes for Catholic children to prepare them for the sacraments. All the children benefit from moral instruction and Bible classes, particularly at special times in the Church's year: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter... And as a Daughter of Charity, I also talk to them about our Founders and the Miraculous Medal.

Educators and children come from different religious backgrounds and some are unbelievers. But some children gradually become attracted by the Catholic religious lessons and freely join the catechumenate so that they can receive the sacraments of the Church. When this happens it is an important event in their lives. Thirteen-year old Emma called me one day and led me to one of the more remote rooms of the Centre. She closed the doors and the curtains before whispering in my ear, "*I've passed the examination and I can make my First Communion.*" She was so overcome by the news that she wanted to share it with me in a very intimate way.

At the Centre the children learn to live as a family. They are able, without too much difficulty, to solve any problems that arise, and there is great solidarity among them. They have already experienced this solidarity on the streets and it is reinforced at the Centre. They are sympathetic to the sufferings of those they regard as worse off than themselves. Once a month we give them the opportunity to do voluntary service with the Missionary Sisters of Charity who run an orphanage and a home for old people. The children are very happy to do the laundry and clean the rooms there. At Christmas and Easter they go there to lead the festivities (music, dancing) and to share out the sweets and biscuits bought with money from their solidarity fund. They are in a choir and sing at the Masses celebrated at the Centre.

This work has positive results

While the children are at the Centre we take steps to reunite them with their parents or the guardians they have introduced us to. I have to say that it is the Lord, the Master of the Impossible, who is doing this work. This is one of the Centre's aims and I see there the presence of the Lord who is helping us. This work has taught me a lot and it is a means of conversion. A spirit of faith has affected my prejudices and my fears. I have received more than I have given. It is truly a great gift. I would like to end by echoing the words of the Psalmist, "*It is good to give thanks to Yahweh, to proclaim your love at daybreak.*"(Ps. 91).

Sister Beatrice Uwizeyemariya
Daughter of Charity

THE POOR SPEAK TO US

Province of Central Africa

The commitment shown by young people

Rwanda is a country that has suffered devastating tragedies and the consequences of these are enormous. One of these consequences is the huge number of orphans there today.

In 1999, our community at Nemba, in the north of the country, brought together some young people and orphaned children whose family circumstances meant they had to be responsible for their brothers and sisters whose parents had either died or disappeared. We visited them regularly and provided medical care for families that were very poor. Once a month we all met together in the parish for moral and spiritual guidance. We were helped in this work by lay volunteers and also by the priests and catechists of the parish.

One day, one of these orphans, a 15-year old girl called Hope, came to the community. She asked to speak personally to the Sister who looks after the poor. I introduced myself and the young girl said, with great conviction, *“Sister, for a long time now you have been helping my brothers and me. I have heard that you Sisters direct associations that look after poor people. It is time for me to sort out my life. I, too, would like to work for one of these associations. Will you help me to do this? Otherwise, how long will I go on just receiving help?”*

These words touched me deeply and were a challenge for the whole community. We suggested to Hope that she should look for people of her own age and set up an association because she is too young to be working with adults. Some days later, a group of 30 young people between the ages of 14 and 20 came along, all bravely prepared to eat their bread, “in the sweat of their brow and the strength of their arms.” They suggested various activities we might start: rearing rabbits, hens and goats; cultivating the land and starting up a small business venture. They will be working in small groups but for the time being the whole group has begun by starting up tree nurseries and they hope to sell the wood during the rainy season. Every month a small amount of money is put into a common fund to provide essential help if one or other of them needs it.

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Ac. 20, 35). Let us listen to what they are saying to us: even children have something to teach us or to remind us about.

Sister Valentine Uwimana
Daughter of Charity

NEWSBRIEFS

“Prince of Asturias Concorde Prize” awarded to the Daughters of Charity on 21st October 2005, at Oviedo.

The “Prince of Asturias Foundation” whose President is the Prince of Asturias, was established in Oviedo to promote all scientific, cultural and humanist values and to recognise the work done at international level by individuals or institutions.

In this, its 25th year, the Foundation awarded 8 Prizes: the Prize for International Cooperation was awarded to Simone Weil, former President of the European Parliament, the Prize for Communications went to the major International Cultural Institutions, the Prize for human sciences to the Italian, Giovanni Sartori, that of Literature to the Brazilian, Nelida Pinon, the Prize for Scientific Research to the Portuguese Doctor, Antonio Damaso, the Prize for Arts to the dancers Maya Plisetskaya and Tamaro Rojo, the Sports Prize to the Spanish pilot, Fernando Alonso and the “Concorde” Prize to the Daughters of Charity.

This Concorde Prize which is presented to individuals or institutions whose work has contributed to fighting injustice, poverty, disease...has in the past been awarded to Medecins Sans Frontieres, King Hussein of Jordan and the Spanish branch of Caritas.

This Prize was given for “ *the exceptional social and humanitarian work for the poor and the abandoned; work that the Daughters of Charity have been doing in an exemplary way for nearly four centuries and for their work in the name of justice, peace and solidarity throughout the whole world.*” (Province of Gijon).

NEWSBRIEFS

In-depth study of the Constitutions

The Province of Slovenia experienced “a time of grace” with Sister Margaret Barrett, Assistant General, and Sister Zofia Daniscakova, General Councillor. They had come to help us to learn more about the Constitutions and were welcomed by Sister Barbara, Visitatrice.

The first day was devoted to the young Sisters and the Seminary Sisters of Slovenia and Albania. Sister Margaret spoke to them at length about God’s call. During a spontaneous sharing session each one told the story of her vocation. Sister Margaret impressed the young Sisters by her easy manner and great human warmth, as well as by her serenity.

The second day was for all the Sisters of the Province. Sister Margaret spoke about the new Constitutions. She placed particular emphasis on community life and stressed the importance of living out unity in diversity. She quoted from the Constitutions and related them to passages from the gospel. She also highlighted the need for a deep relationship with God in order to serve Him in the Poor.

On the third day Sister Margaret and Sister Zofia met the elderly Sisters from some houses. These Sisters have shown great love for God and for the Poor, in the Company. They showed great interest in the lives of our Sisters all over the world and they expressed their gratitude for this heart-warming visit.

Then Sister Margaret talked to the Sister Servants about deepening our study of the Constitutions and she placed special emphasis on the Sister Servants' specific mission in the local community. She drew their attention to the way that Jesus acted towards his apostles who were very different from one another. Like Jesus, Sister Servants have to be attentive to each one, treating them with understanding and affection and admiring the gifts that the Lord has given to each Sister. This sharing was followed by group work which was an opportunity for the Sisters to take up the subject treated that day and relating it to concrete events of everyday life. Sister Zofia helped us to draw some conclusions for the future from all this. (Province of Slovenia).

VINCENTIAN FAMILY

IInd General Assembly of the JMV
7th –13th August 2005

With our lay spirituality we share in the mission

After months of work, preparation and prayer, the international JMV team arrived in Paris on 4th August 2005. Our cases were packed full of dreams, hopes, availability for others and a desire to make this 2nd General Assembly of the JMV a time of grace for our Association.

From 7th-13th August 2005, the members of the JMV were engaged in an intensive period of reflection and discernment together with evaluation of the events of recent years and we were open to new challenges for our mission in the future.

At the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity we were welcomed with open arms. From the moment we arrived we could sense the affection that the Sisters had for all of us as well as the welcome given to us by the Blessed Virgin who held out her arms to us. We were deeply moved as we trod this "holy ground."

The aim of the General Assembly

- To evaluate the ground covered since the 1st General Assembly (Rome 2000) and so discover the challenges facing the Association five years later.
- To gain a better understanding of our JMV identity and to study two particular points: the apostolate and formation.
- To elect a new International Council.
- To study the Association's financial situation.
- To collaborate in projects connected with the Vincentian Family.

Progress of the General Assembly

On 7th August we spent the whole day welcoming 165 young people, Sisters and Priests of the Mission from 41 countries.

On 8th August there was the opening ceremony with High Mass in rue du Bac chapel. During it we were urged to make our work, reflections, living together and celebrations a faith experience that would deepen our commitment to the Association and to the service of the poor. Then Father Gregory Gay, *Director General of the JMV* and Sister Evelyne Franc, *Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity*, welcomed us all and asked us to find in this Assembly a time of renewal and grace, to come to the foot of the altar and contemplate Jesus and allow him to look on us, as Mary said to St. Catherine.

Gladys Abi-Said, our *International President*, officially opened the Assembly and she did this in a beautiful and creative way, filling the room where we were assembled with light and the colours of the rainbow to reflect the work done by the Association since the year 2000. She urged us to work, reflect, pray and share our experiences for these are essential for moving on to a new stage.

Gloria Santillan and Edurne Urdampilleta, *International Councillors*, presented a realistic view of the Association over the last five years, basing their observations on the Final Document of the 1st General Assembly. This was followed by group work during which it was decided that in the coming years the Association should concentrate on the following points: the formation of its members, self-financing and commitment to the Vincentian Family.

A large part of the programme for this Assembly was devoted to formation. Over the next three days we were able to reflect on the following subjects:

The spirituality of Marian Vincentian Youth Groups in today's world, the topic presented by Juan Bellido, *JMV member from Spain*. He emphasised the need for our lives to have meaning as we follow the example of Jesus, building up the Kingdom in the particular situation in which each of us lives. He presented in a robust way, and with deep conviction, two particular points:

- Poor people suffer rejection and we have to end this by putting forward models that promote human welfare.
- We are lay people who speak out loudly and clearly in our world.

In a simple, humorous, but deep way, he spoke of the challenges of the future: the need for training in creativity, the need to pray before we act and the need to live out our faith as members of the Church.

“Sharing the mission as JMV members” was the subject of the talk given by Sister Wivine Kisu, *General Councillor of the Daughters of Charity*, and Father Ziad Hadad, *CM, from Lebanon*. They reminded us that as members of the Church we are all called to mission and that we have our Vincentian charism of meeting God in the poor.

“**Challenges for the JMV in the Church of the third millennium**”, was the topic discussed by Jesus Romero, *member of the Sant’Egidio Community*. He reflected on how a Christian today is living in a troubled century and has to find new, audacious, creative and robust responses to new forms of poverty; responses based on the experience of living with others and a deep level of prayer; the need to promote inter-faith dialogue and to bring together the Gospel and culture.

After group work which provided a special opportunity for dialogue, the Vincentian Round Table, led by two international Councillors, considered the following two questions:

- What can the different branches of the Vincentian Family offer to the JMV?
- What do they expect from the JMV?

The different members of the panel replied to these questions simply, sincerely and in depth. The atmosphere was conducive to listening and to openness:

- Fr Gregory Gay, as *Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, expressed the Congregation’s hope that the JMV’s would give joyful, lively and fresh commitment to service and evangelisation. He asked us all to enthusiastically combine our efforts in working on common projects.
- Sister Evelyne Franc, *Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity*, expressed her hope that every member of the JMV would experience life at a deep level based on faith and the gospel dynamism of the Vincentian charism.
- Marina Costa, *International President of the AIC*, stressed the need for members to have a good formation so that they could collaborate with other NGOs on projects.
- Jesus Benitez, *National Treasurer of the AMM in Spain*, shared with everyone present his faith experience in the Association as a school of sanctity, and the happiness he felt in imitating Mary, the woman of faith and of commitment.
- David Sanz, the *Misevi delegate*, asked the JMV to learn more about his Association, particularly JMV members who were looking for a lay missionary project to support.
- Manuel Gineta, the *Superior General’s delegate for the Vincentian Family*, appealed to us to deepen our understanding of the Vincentian charism and strengthen collaboration with the Vincentian Family.

Election of the JMV International Council

Our Assembly voted in a new International Council. After the candidates were presented, and in accordance with the Assembly Directory and the International Statutes, the following members were elected:

- President: Yasmine Cajuste from Haiti
- Council Members: Dorys Castillo from Ecuador, Maria Jesus Garcia from Spain, Dense El Khoury from Lebanon, Vouhanginirina Francois de Paul from Madagascar.

This new International Council has as its mission to lead the Association until 2010 and to implement the Association's Action Lines. The Final Document, approved by the Assembly on 12th August will set out the markers for what the Association "is" and what it "does."

Since God has granted us the grace of this Assembly, we are convinced that Mary will continue to watch over the JMV. In the course of these days we have found in our plenary sessions, our group work and our celebrations, that our cultural and linguistic diversity is a valuable asset that has helped us to take part, at a deep level, in all the Eucharistic celebrations and our times of prayer.

Our commitments

We were able to note the progress we have made in recent years with regard to identity, spirituality, formation, apostolate and the expansion of the Association. We have also realised our urgent need for greater commitment in some areas:

- **The spiritual life:** we have to deepen our sacramental life, especially the Eucharist. Organise workshops so that young people can learn to pray as individuals or with others.
- **Formation:** put on more formation courses, via the internet: continue to study and distribute the document "The JMV Formation Process."
- **In service-Mission:** establish "twinning" between different countries for their mutual benefit. Stress the importance of "*ad extra*" as well as "*ad intra*" missionary communities.
- **Strengthen our sense of belonging to the Vincentian Family:** become involved in specific work and evangelisation projects.
- **Self-financing:** each member country to make an annual contribution towards the international work of coordination.
- **Presenting the message of the rue du Bac in a relevant way so that we may put it into practice better.**

We wish to give witness to the Servant Christ, following the example of Mary, Vincent de Paul and Catherine Laboure.

We would like to thank all those who have helped with the work of this Assembly: the Sisters of the Mother House, Sister Evelyne Franc, the Priests of the Congregation of the Mission and their Superior, the members of the JMV in France who, with a group of volunteers saw to the logistics of the Assembly, the translators, the young

volunteers who worked in the secretariat and in administration... everyone who helped us. “The Lord has been good to us and we are filled with joy.”

Sister Asuncion Garcia
International delegate for the JMV

SPECIAL 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1830 APPARITIONS

Apparition of 27th November 1830

The Medal of Mary Immaculate

“I thank you, Father, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and for revealing them to mere children,” said Jesus. And St. Paul declared, *“It was to shame the wise that God chose what is weak by human reckoning ; those that the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones that God has chosen, those who are nothing at all to show up those who are everything.”* (1 Cor 1. 27). Throughout the Bible we are given numerous examples of God choosing people in this way. Mary, too, was well aware that this was God’s way of acting and in the Magnificat she sang, *“The Almighty has looked with favour on his lowly servant”*.

There was nothing miraculous or secret about the 1830 apparitions, Mary simply left an enduring sign that she tried to make us familiar with. By means of her Medal, Mary wants to help us to come to that state of knowing God’s heart that is revealed to those who are pure and humble of heart.

These few pastoral guidelines are just some approaches we might take from among other possible ones; they do not claim to exhaust the meaning that Mary herself gave to the Medal. First of all we will pause to consider the almost inconceivable disproportion between the vastness of our planet and the tiny sign left us by Mary. Next we will examine this “gift from Heaven” in the light of the Scriptures. Then we will see how the sign of the Medal brings us into the spirit of the Beatitudes. Finally we will let our hearts re-echo those words, *“have a medal made after this model.”*

SO TINY A MEDAL IN SO VAST A UNIVERSE!

Humanly speaking, the challenges offered by our society are so immense and so complex that we might be led to discouragement and to despair of the human race. Through the sign of the Medal, a sign given during a period of history marked by tremendous upheavals, Mary wishes to remind us that no matter what circumstances we are living through, God is always with us: He is present at the heart of the world in order to transfigure it. He is ever the master of history. He puts into our hands seeds that never cease to make the earth fruitful and more habitable.

The Church's social teaching does not provide a universal formula for improving human relationships and transforming the world but it invites every person to come into contact with the heart of the Triune God, the eternal model of a life of communion. Jesus came to offer and to share his Person and his Life, to offer and share this with every one of the billions of people on this earth so that they could allow themselves to be transformed by Him.

When Sister Catherine contemplated Mary during the apparition of 27th November, she also contemplated a humanity illumined by grace

“Mary, made fruitful by the Holy Spirit, conceived Jesus the Saviour.” The good news of this Apparition is that it tells us once more that humanity is not reduced to misery or to pride as it might seem to be, but it is endowed with a hidden treasure, the very life of the Spirit. In a quiet and discreet way, the Medal reminds us that God has the true measure of humankind. God alone is able to fully reveal man to himself.

A SIGN FROM HEAVEN TO BE STUDIED IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPELS

Let us begin by recalling the Gospel account of the marriage feast of Cana so that the message of the Medal may be proclaimed in the light of this text.

In St John's gospel, it was at Cana that Jesus gave the first sign that “*manifested his glory.*” And at the heart of this account the evangelist places “*the mother of Jesus.*” Our attention is drawn first of all to her and to her reactions to the situation and then to the way that Jesus reacted. The miracle that manifested Christ's glory was mediated by his mother.

In this gospel episode, it is Mary who sees the over-all situation and then the details of what is happening. She can tell at a glance that something essential is lacking. Her gift of contemplation allows her to discover what is missing and to get to the heart of the problem, not in order to accuse people of negligence or to make recriminations, but to lovingly suffer with them in their embarrassment. She did not stop at simply noticing what was wrong. Her attentive and discreet availability to others made her turn to Jesus and say simply, “*They have no wine.*” She was the only person to tell him this. In spite of the mysterious and disconcerting reply given by Jesus, Mary brought people into a relationship with her Son: “*Do whatever he tells you.*”

When Jesus does intervene, he not only gives good wine but he gives it in abundance. This abundance characterises both the quantity and the quality of the wine: it is even better than the wine served earlier! Does not this evoke divine generosity, the fulness of life given by Jesus? God gives without measure: “*Graces will be given in abundance to all who wear it (the medal) with confidence*”, Mary will later say to Sister Catherine.

St John ends his account with the words, *“This was the first sign given by Jesus. He manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him.”* Unlike many accounts of miracles where we are told that the crowds were ecstatic, it is as if in this case nobody saw anything happen. There was only the small group of disciples who began to believe in him. Is not the real miracle manifesting the glory of Jesus, the transformation worked in *the disciples who now began to believe?*

The sign of Cana and the sign of Calvary

When St John tells us that Cana is *“the first sign”*, isn't this because this marriage feast points to another espousal, the one that Christ will seal with humanity in his blood on the Cross?

“Now on the third day there was a wedding at Cana” ... Cana marks the beginning of the signs where *“He manifests his glory.”* but it also announces the unique and definitive *“third day”* of Easter. Indeed, if Cana is the beginning then the Passion is the culmination: *“He loved them to the end.”* The Way of the Cross leads to the beginning of the Church. The Church will be born from the Cross; the *“disciples”* become the Church for the first time and are filled with the wine of the Spirit.

In John's gospel, Cana and Calvary are the only two places where Mary is spoken of as *“the mother of Jesus.”* Apart from these instances this fact is not mentioned. There are close links between Cana and Calvary. On both occasions Mary is called *“the mother of Jesus.”* At Cana she awaits the wine of the Kingdom and Jesus provides a sign of this. On the Cross, when the sign becomes a reality, the mother of Jesus is made *“mother of all disciples”*, she becomes mother of the Church.

The sign of the Medal

Why did Mary leave us a sign? What is it a sign of? The visible thing that the *“mother of every disciple”* gives us, is surely meant to lead us to things unseen. Just as Mary prepared the servants at the Cana marriage feast to listen to the Word of Jesus, she continues in our own day to give us a sign that will help us to make progress along the path of faith and trust so that we can become true *“disciples of Jesus.”*

When the words of the short prayer *“O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you”* come to our lips, we are asking Mary to pray for us that we may increasingly become *“disciples who believe in Him.”* As at Cana, Mary makes known what it means to be a believer: we have to do all that God tells us and practise unreserved availability.

The first disciple to believe

Mary has a special place in the symbolism of the Medal, just as she had at Cana. The Medal leads us to contemplate God through the person of Mary. She is not at God's side but in front of Him; not in order to hide Him but to make Him appear in a light that

is human, feminine and maternal. Leonardo Buff says that *“In Mary we see the feminine face of God.”*

As we look at the Medal we catch a glimpse of Mary’s loving gaze on the whole Church and on the world. She understands the unspoken sufferings of our world and she prays for us and in our name: *“They have no wine.”* We can also contemplate Mary the Servant in her relationship with God and with humankind. When she says to the servants, *“Do whatever he tells you,”* are not her words echoing those of Pharaoh during the famine in Egypt: *“Go to Joseph and do what he tells you. There was famine all over the world. Joseph opened all the granaries.”* (Gn. 41, 55-56). Mary is the Mediatrix through whom God’s power is manifested on earth for the whole human race. She helps us to let ourselves be inundated with God’s light. The symbol of the rays of light pouring in abundance from the hands of Mary, must be expressing the “good wine” that Jesus wants us to have, the pouring out of the Spirit’s gifts of humility, simplicity and charity.

Mary, our teacher of the spiritual life

In Mary we find one of the secrets of our life as servants of the Poor. She teaches us to contemplate Christ in the service we offer them. As at Cana, she obtains for us:

- The grace of **prayer** so that our hearts can meditate on the Word of God and all the events of our lives become centred in its light, praising Him for his wonders.
- The grace of **attentiveness** to the cries of the poor, an understanding of what affects them and an awareness of their circumstances.
- The grace of **humility** that will help us to recognise not only our own shortcomings that prevent us from giving the “good wine”, but to recognise, too, the giftedness of others whose support we need.
- The grace of **faith** that has complete trust in Christ.
- The grace of **a spirit of service**, seeking only to do God’s will.
- The grace of **charity**, that we may collaborate with others.

THE MEDAL OF MARY IMMACULATE, A SIGN THAT LEADS US INTO THE SPIRIT OF THE BEATITUDES.

In the gospels, Mary says very few words but she gives us the Word, Jesus. Her one desire is to lead us to the core message of the Gospel. If, as lovers of the Word, we look at the Medal, we can see the same thing happening here. Through its rich symbolism, the Medal urges us to contemplate the mystery of God’s love for humankind. We are invited to receive the Medal as the shepherds received the news of Christ’s birth. In the presence of the infant Jesus they did not shrug their shoulders, they did not debate what was happening, but opened their hearts to Him.

As we pause to consider some of the features of the Medal, we can enter into the spirit of the Beatitudes which speaks to us, among other things, of God’s humility, of abandoning oneself to Providence, and of the spirit of contemplation.

Happy the poor in spirit, theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven! (Mt. 5, 3)

When we are sometimes tempted to call on a powerful and triumphant God, Mary asks us, through this simple medal, to be converted to God's humility. God became man in order to remain with us: one day He would become the Crucified One, His heart transpierced in order to give us life. Jesus turned upside down our understanding of human greatness. God incarnate accepted death on a Cross and so revealed the true meaning of greatness and power. The glory of the Resurrection has nothing in common with our sensational ideas of glory.

The Medal shows us how God acts when He comes among us. He always uses lowly and unexpected things: a stable, the donkey He rides on, a cross for slaves.... To understand everything that the message of the Medal implies, we have to shed our self-sufficiency and be clothed with the spirit of humility. In our own days, too, God continues to reveal himself in weakness, poverty and self-effacement. We are asked to learn how to decode God's signs. As Cardinal Newman said, "*When Jesus came into the world he did not cause a stir, did not make a clamour, did not make his voice heard...The same is true today: he speaks in a low voice, his signs are unobtrusive....*"

Happy those who trust, they will be saved

"*Graces will be poured out on all who wear it (the medal) with confidence.*" In these few words Mary commits herself to awakening, stimulating or increasing our trust in God. So the Medal will only achieve its true objective when it inspires confidence in a person's heart.

In the face of our fear of other people, a fear that can overwhelm us and undermine our relationships with others, God trusts us and comes to our aid: He has such confidence in us that He puts into our hands what He loves most of all, His only Son. To heal our mistrustful and fearful hearts Jesus does not come in all his power but with great tenderness. He brings us the mercy, kindness, gentleness and patience of the Father. He teaches us the trust he had in his Father. Mary is there at our side to teach us the Son's trustful relationship with his Father, and to help us to grow in confidence. With Mary we realise that it is not natural to be trusting; it is a gift to be accepted from God. "*Lord, we believe*" but "*increase our faith*" (Lk. 17,5) so that we may live in the sure knowledge that God is Providence for us.

Jesus asks Bartimeus if he believes that God in His goodness and providence can help him in his situation and when Jesus sees his trust he says, "*Go, your faith has saved you.*" (Mk 10, 52). With the same confidence as that shown by Bartimeus, we, too, ask God for the special grace of carrying out well whatever He asks us to do.

Happy the pure in heart, they shall see God (Mt 5, 8)

Better than any discourse, the two sides of the Medal are a luminous sign that bring us into the mystery that is Mary. We have to "*turn the medal over*" in order to

understand the hidden depths of the heart of Mary Immaculate, united to the heart of Jesus.

By means of these symbols, is not Mary giving us in an indirect way, the same message, the mystery of every person created in the image of God? Human dignity is a wonderful gift that flows from God looking in love on Jesus and on each one of us. But for this gift to be fully effective, it has to be freely accepted by people. In other words, Mary is reminding us of the importance of asking God for a contemplative disposition so that we, too, may “*turn the medal over.*” In fact it is only the eyes of faith that will allow us to go beyond appearances and discover God’s presence in every person and their true greatness.

THE MEDAL OF MARY IMMACULATE: SOMETHING WE HAVE TO GO ON “RECEIVING” AND CONTINUE TO “HAVE MADE”

By asking for a medal to be made in her likeness, Mary wants to leave all of us a sign of her message of tenderness. Does not the mission entrusted to Sister Catherine also commit us as individuals to welcome Mary and “imprint her image” in the depths of our hearts?

By imprinting her image deep in our hearts, are we not “*making a place for her in our home*”? Again it is a work of grace: welcoming Mary every day into our lives and letting ourselves be carried along, with her, to the very limits of loving. Just as Isaiah said of God, “*I have carved you on the palm of my hand*”, God, in His turn, invites us to carve His love in our own hearts.

What happened in Mexico in 1531 is very illuminating. During one of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, a picture of Mary was imprinted on the Indian peasant’s cloak (tilma). On 12th December 1531, as Juan Diego was telling the local bishop what happened to him, the bishop saw on the peasant’s tilma, the very beautiful and tender countenance of Our Lady. Later on, ophthalmic examinations of Our Lady’s eyes as imprinted on the tilma, revealed an image of the seer reflected in the pupils of Mary’s eyes. Does not this last symbol signify in a wonderful way the place that Juan Diego had in Mary’s heart?

Each morning let us listen to Mary’s request to “*have her medal struck*” deep in our hearts so that with her we may live out our vocation as children of God. If we view the world with her eyes, hear people’s appeals with her ears and love our brothers and sisters with her heart, then “her image” will be visible in our gaze, in the quality of our listening and in the gift of our lives.

Conclusion

It was a humble Daughter of Charity who was chosen to be the instrument for propagating the Medal of Our Lady Immaculate. We do not find it strange that God should have chosen this young Sister and not some other Sister that the world might have regarded as more distinguished. Sister Catherine was pure and poor in spirit, and

sensitive to “the things of God.” Like Mary, Sister Catherine was a servant of the Lord, a servant who was ready to be of service and to do God’s will.

It would be difficult to wear the Medal and not feel moved to contemplate the purity of heart of the Blessed Virgin and of Saint Catherine, and to commit oneself to following the path of humility and true fraternity where first place is given to the lowly.

O Mary, humble Servant of the Lord,
we contemplate you in your universal mission as Mother of the Church.
Your charism is the attentive and consoling way you look on *“the world and on each person in particular.”*

O Mary, only Mother of the Company,
we thank you for looking on Sister Catherine with so much respect.
In doing this you help us to see where the truth of the Gospel lies.

O Mary Immaculate, given this title on 27th November 1830,
we thank you for the gift of the Medal.
We will never be able to completely fathom the height, the breadth and the depths of this good news and you ask us to live out its message every day of our lives.

Sister Anne Prevost
Daughter of Charity

Most Holy Trinity

I adore You, Most Holy Trinity,
one God in three Persons,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I thank You for all the graces that
in your Goodness, You have bestowed on me.
I give you my heart and all that I possess
so that henceforth I may accomplish Your holy will.

Grant me the grace, I beg of You, my God,
to spend this day without offending You
and without wronging my neighbour.

Help me to recognise my sins
and move me to contrition for
having offended You, my God who are so good.

Have mercy on us
through the merits of the Precious Blood of my Saviour.

Have mercy on all who are in a state of mortal sin
so that, having obtained mercy,
they may praise you eternally.

Prayer composed by Saint Louise de Marillac.
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