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Dear Sisters,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ dwell in your hearts now and forever!

A Christmas story

I love to read stories and I love to tell them. When I am at home visiting my family, my nephews and nieces are always eager to hear some of the stories I invent to entertain them. I try to tell them stories that have a good moral message, taking something that might normally cause fear, and gradually changing this into a story that has a happy, peaceful ending. That is how I would like to talk about our preparation this year for Advent, by telling a story.

My story is about my first Christmas in the mountains of Panama in 1986. I will never forget that experience. It began with a celebration of the Eucharist in a one-room

building on the top of a mountain. There were no decorations, only the teacher's desk that served as an altar, and the pupils' benches which were our pews. Even though there were no decorations or flowers to express the joy of Christmas, and no lights to brighten the classroom, joy and light were always reflected on the faces of the people who took part in that Eucharist. It was a simple celebration because I could barely speak and understand Spanish. Yet I can clearly remember that I tried to communicate to these people the reason for our celebration that night: God is now among us in a special way; the Word of God, Jesus Christ, has become flesh, and we have to make that an everyday reality in our dealings with one another in our families and in our community.

After Mass I went down the mountain and headed off into the darkness, escorted by the village leader, not knowing where I was making for, guided only by the dim light of a torch. We went across streams, through brushwood, up hills and down hills, until we finally came to a little village hut. We went round the back of the house and found there a makeshift lean-to that was edged with branches; at the side there was a big table laden with food for us to share. We ate a simple meal of rice and chicken. We drank home-brewed corn-based wine and listened to traditional Panamanian music on a transistor. People chatted; they were excited and they asked me questions. They laughed at my attempts to speak and to answer their questions. After we had shared the meal together there was music and dancing. I made my way home in the dark, once again going through woods, across streams and up and down hills, in the pitch darkness and guided by the dim light of a torch. Next day I woke up and said to myself, "It's Christmas Day." That day there were no toys for the children, no exchanging presents. In one sense it was just another ordinary day except that people did not have to work. They just sat and enjoyed one another's company. After sharing breakfast with them – a bowl of rice with a precious egg on top – I rode off on my horse to the next village to celebrate the Christmas Eucharist with the people there.

In all honesty I have to say it was the best Christmas I had ever known in my life. I have had other good ones – and I hope to share them with you in the years to come – but this was the best. It spoke to me in a deep way about the real meaning of Advent, a time of joy, a time of walking in darkness and being led by the light of God's Word, a time of deepening our sense of community, a time of living with friends and neighbours in a family spirit, a time for sharing around the table, both the table of the Eucharist and the table where the best food we have is offered in all simplicity. It is a time for laughter and for questioning. It is a time to respond to questions that arise from the depths of our hearts, through the Word of God that we hear and through the experience of God crying out loudly to us in the sufferings of the poor. It is a time to celebrate, to dance, to feel free and to let ourselves go. It is a time to return home. It is a time to be quiet, a time to slow down, a time to be alone. It is even a time to be on our own, without feeling threatened by this solitude, but seeing it as time for learning to love our own self more deeply and love the God who meets us in the depths of our heart, in life's quiet moments. It is a time to listen, a time to pray.

Advent is also a time to reflect, particularly on the Word taking flesh and living among us. We sing Emmanuel: God is with us, choosing to be like us so that we might

be like him who assumed our human nature so that we might assume his divine nature. The Incarnation was a theme very dear to the heart of Saint Vincent. It is a time for rediscovering the true meaning of Christmas by looking for alternative ways of celebrating, by moving away from materialism. There is really no need for presents or for toys for the children. We already have the most precious of gifts: the Word made flesh, the gift of the Eucharist, God with us in his body and his blood. We also have the gift of one another, the gift of the music we make together and the laughter we share, the gift of nature that we contemplate. There is also the gift of darkness that blends into light, the gift of solitude that leads us to intimacy with the God who dwells in the depths of our heart. Advent is the time for preparing ourselves for the joy of celebrating God who is ever present within us.

I offer this Christmas story for your own personal reflection during this wonderful, mysterious time when God desires to speak to our hearts, to change our lives, to unite us with himself, to meet us and heal all our weakness, to help us understand what we are capable of doing, to bind us together so that we may have the courage and strength to walk forward together in the midst of darkness, as we are guided by his ever-present light.

Reflect on your own Christmas stories and share them in community. Recall the most memorable moments: the times that touched your heart, the times your soul was lifted up to praise God, the times that strengthened your desire to serve in a deeper way those who point out to us the true meaning of life. For it is among people who know what true religion is all about, our brothers and sisters, the poor, as Saint Vincent so clearly tells us, that we come to know God, to live God, to love God and to love our neighbour and ourselves.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father Gregory Gay, CM
Superior General

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

6th study document on the revised Constitutions

Chapter IV: MEMBERSHIP
(C. 38-48; St 25-31)

I. INTRODUCTION

Chapter IV of the revised Constitutions has the title, “Membership.” Under this brief heading the Company defines its membership and the conditions that have to be met by candidates who feel themselves called by God to join it. This chapter also defines the rights and obligations of the Sisters and explains some situations or circumstances in

which the members of the Company may find themselves. The Church, the Founders and all the Daughters of Charity who came after them in the course of history, strongly believed that the Company is the work of the Holy Spirit. If it continues to exist in our times it is because God wills it. On the other hand, the Company exists and works within history and its members are human beings so we need to talk about rights, obligations, conditions and a whole series of circumstances. Like the Church, the Company has a divine vocation and mission, but it is made up of human beings. So there needs to be an organisation. This chapter that we are about to present and discuss, responds to this need as does the chapter on government which we will be looking at later.

In the Constitutions of 1983, the question of formation was added to this chapter. It is good practice to separate different elements so in the present Constitutions each topic is dealt with in a separate chapter. Introducing the new chapter is a text from St. Vincent referring to God's eternal designs on the vocation of every Daughter of Charity.¹ The wording of this text is very appropriate for explaining this chapter on "Membership of the Company." If I may say so, the Daughters of Charity, more than being members with rights and obligations, are persons who have been chosen by God from all eternity to live and work for the poor as they are doing at present. After these introductory observations, the remaining contents of the document are set out within a very appropriate framework.

II. MAIN CONTENT OF THE DOCUMENT

The contents of this new chapter are less important theologically than those of earlier chapters which dealt with the broadest aspects of Vincentian spirituality.

I. WHO ARE THE MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY?

To answer that question you need to have the book of Constitutions before you: any woman who is free from any canonical impediment and is judged suitable for the service of the poor (cf. C. 38) asks to be admitted to the Seminary of the Daughters of Charity and is declared to be a member of the Company by the competent authority. In strictly sociological and institutional terms, this is a clear definition of membership of the Company and what is written down in the first article is sufficient.

So, a person's request to be a Sister, and acceptance by the community are the two elements which constitute membership of the Company. Then we have signs of this membership. These signs could change without affecting membership.

For the 1983 Constitutions, members of the Company could only be "*unmarried women or widows*" (Cf. C.3.2). In the Constitutions of 2004 a different form of words is used- "*women.....free from any canonical impediment*". By using this more open expression than that used in earlier Constitutions, the door is left open for other candidates who might be thinking of joining the Company, and at the same time it includes certain conditions for people from other religious families in the Church who would like to join. This is something that in theory at least, could happen. The only

¹ Cf. Coste IX, p.242, Conference of 13th February 1646, Love of vocation and the service of the poor.

condition is that the candidate be free from any form of canonical impediment. Evidently other conditions are necessary for entry into the Company, we are speaking here of a first and *sine qua non* requirement. Other conditions are laid down in the second paragraph of article 38 and in article 39:

a) *"to be physically and psychologically sound"*

In other words, the candidate must have sufficiently good health for living in community and serving the poor. These two aspects; community and the poor, are the two points of reference for discerning all vocations to the Company. It is easy to assess a person's physical health, not so easy to judge their psychological make-up. However, it is good for the candidate to explore this, good for the person to have this self-knowledge and good for formation. This area of study provides guarantees for the woman, avoids risks, failures that are always regrettable, or mistakes that sometimes cannot be rectified. It also provides a guarantee for the Company that the people joining it are healthy and vigorous and so promote its vitality and growth. Where candidates present grounds for uncertainty, the Church recommends using the expertise of specialists. Their opinion will be a help (only a help) in discerning a person's vocation.

b) *"motivated by a right intention"*

This expression should lead us to understand that there is a complex range of motivations closely linked to each individual's personality. Conscious motivations are easier to assess. Unconscious motivations, on the other hand, can more easily be the subject of error. For example, we might confuse humility with inferiority complexes; repentance with a morbid sense of guilt; obedience with infantile dependency; devotion to and service of the most vulnerable with a hidden desire to dominate; a zealous missionary life with activism etc. A right intention presupposes that one's motivations be purified and this is necessary if the person is to become a member of the Company. But as is the case with many other things, this purification of motives does not end on admission to the Company or during initial formation. It is something that should continue all through life.

c) *"capable of attaining the human and Christian maturity needed for community living and the service of persons who are poor."*

This capacity manifests itself in the following ways; the person has good, clear self-knowledge and accepts herself with serenity. Her reasoning is objective. She has interior freedom. With sufficient maturity, she generally accepts conditions, or the intervention of others. She is able to go beyond other human considerations and give first place to gospel values. She accepts difficulties, temptations, crises and contradictions, dealing with these in an appropriate way. Effort and work are well managed. Spiritual integrity, the interior life and the virtue of hope are deepening. Prayer becomes deeper and more realistic. The person feels at home with Vincentian spirituality. The Sister appreciates the community as a place for sharing problems, anxieties, ideals.... All these

signs are positive indications of the person's capacity for making progress in the Vincentian vocation.

Statute 26 fixes the normal age for admission to the Company as between eighteen and forty years. The Code of Canon Law gives seventeen years as the minimum age.² The Proper Law of each Congregation may lay down a higher age as the minimum, and the Constitutions of your Company do this. The Assembly raised the maximum age for entry from 35 to 40 years (cf. St. 26). In many countries the period of youth has been extended and so people delay in choosing a way of life, this must surely have contributed to the change in the relevant Constitution..

2. RIGHTS AND DUTIES

At the beginning of article 40 there is a change of wording: the term "*common law*" that was used in the 1983 Constitutions (cf. C 3,13) is now replaced by "*universal law*" (cf. C.40) and "*particular law*" is now called "*proper law*." Universal law refers to the whole body of laws drawn up by the Church and includes the Code of Canon Law. Proper Law refers to the particular laws of the Company: the Statutes, Decrees and other documents approved by the competent authorities.

The Daughter of Charity has a whole range of obligations to fulfil as an individual, as a member of society and as a Christian. But as a member of the Company she has three main duties which are set out in article 40: to observe the Constitutions, to obey lawful Superiors and to renew her vows at the appointed time. The text of the 1983 Constitutions spoke of "*obedience to the Constitutions*" (cf. C.3.13). The new Constitutions very aptly replace this expression with the words "*observe the Constitutions*." (C.40b). We normally speak of obeying persons. Laws and norms are respected, observed. Once again, the language used is more precise. The Daughters of Charity obey lawful Superiors, but we should note here the important phrase inserted in the Constitutions "*within this framework*." (C.40b) In other words, the authority of Superiors is determined by the framework of the Constitutions, which is the framework of vocation. This clearly shows us that the main objective of authority is to help the Sisters to grow in their Vincentian life. Also, no Superior can command anything that is contrary to the Constitutions or is not in line with what these indicate.

Article 42 lists the rights that each Sister enjoys as a member of the Company: she must belong to a Province and be placed in a local community. Similarly, each Sister has the right (and the duty) to participate in the government of the Company (cf. 63a) by exercising her active or passive voice, something accorded to her progressively.

- Active voice or the right to vote: from the time of their "sending on mission": the Sisters participate in consultations. In the Domestic Assemblies they can elect delegates to the Provincial Assembly and, after 5 years vocation, to the General Assembly.

² Cf. *Code of Canon Law* 643 §1, 1

- Passive voice or the right to be elected: in the Domestic Assemblies: they can be elected secretary or scrutineer. After 5 years of vocation, and having made vows for the first time or having, in the course of the year, confirmed their commitment to the Company by the renewal of their vows, the Sisters enjoy passive voice for the Provincial Assembly. After reaching ten years of vocation, and having fulfilled the conditions mentioned above, the Sisters enjoy passive vote for the General Assembly (cf. C. 42b).

Our attention is drawn to the fact that the exercise of this right is something that is conferred progressively. The same is true for the office of Sister Servant (*“in order to be appointed...the Sister must be at least ten years of vocation”* (St.64), to be Visitatrice (15 years of vocation, cf. C 73c), to be Superioress General or a General Councillor (15 years vocation , cf. C.66b; 68b.)...

Why this progression? Participating in the leadership of the Company or of a Province, holding an office that carries responsibility, all this requires maturity. Of course, age in itself does not absolutely guarantee experience, knowledge and maturity. But the Church and the Company ask us to keep this important factor in mind.

DIFFERENT SITUATIONS OR CIRCUMSTANCES

Article 43 is a new feature of the 2004 Constitutions. Before going on to consider special circumstances in which some Daughters of Charity may find themselves, this article reminds us that life in common is an essential feature of the life of a Daughter of Charity. Article 43 may be regarded as the practical conclusion to the whole chapter devoted to *“life in community for mission.”*(cf. C.32-37).

a) Change of Province

Statute 28 mentions three situations that are fairly common:

- Statute 28a: A Sister is asked to render temporary service in a Province other than her own: this is a new form of sharing resources, a new way of rendering the Company more flexible and more available to respond to the needs of the poor. The Company is very much aware of this. To remind ourselves of this we only need to look, for example, at the first point of the fourth Action Line *“The internationality of the Company.”*³ As indicated in Statute 28 it is sufficient that the Visitatrices and their respective Councils agree and that the Sister gives her consent. Then the Superioress General and her Council are informed. According to the 1983 Constitutions, it was necessary to have the approval of the Superioress General and her Council. This small change is a sign of decentralisation.

- Statute 28b: For various personal reasons a Sister can ask for a change of Province. In this case the different Visitatrices concerned must agree and if it is a matter of changing Provinces within the same country, they inform the Superioress General. If the Provinces concerned are in different countries she must give her consent beforehand.

³ Cf. General Assembly 2003, *Inter-Assemblies Action Lines 2003-2009*, p.9

This article shows us how attentive the Company is to different situations that can affect a Sister for family or personal reasons.

- Statute 28c: Transfer of a Sister to another Province. In this case it is the Visitatrices who take the initiative and they do so for important reasons. It seems only logical that the Sister should be consulted. If there is any difficulty at Provincial level the Statute provides the possibility for the Superioress General to settle the question after dialoguing with the Sister. Reasons for transfers are not given, the Statute just says “*for important reasons*”: no doubt this refers to the personal situation of the Sister concerned and not to the needs that other Provinces might have for service, because this point has already been dealt with in paragraph “a” of this Statute.

b) Living outside a house of the Company (cf. St. 29)

Community life is an essential feature of the vocation of a Daughter of Charity but the community exists for mission, that is to say, with this objective in view. In practice, all this means is that community life is flexible, it recognises that there can be exceptions. The most common exceptions are those listed in Statute 29 (4 points). If we compare this with article 3.36 of the 1983 Constitutions, we see that a fourth point has been added in the new Constitutions: “*for reasons of an apostolate exercised in the name of the Company*”(St. 29 of the 2004 Constitutions). In fact this new point can be seen as the logical conclusion reached when one has thoroughly grasped that “*The Daughters of Charity live a fraternal life in common, the better to fulfil their specific mission of service.*”⁴

c) Delay in renewing the vows (cf. C.44)

As we have noted in the chapter on “*Practice of the evangelical counsels*”, everything connected with the vows is, according to Proper Law, within the competence of the Superior General. So the wording of article 44 seems logical; it is the Superior General who authorises a delay in renewing vows. It is also the case when he imposes such a delay on a Sister. Obviously, in both situations he is in regular contact with the Sister, the Visitatrice and the Superioress General.

d) Leaving the Company and readmission (cf. C45-48; St. 30-31)

It should not be necessary to comment further on the articles of the Constitutions dealing with this matter, but we know that life does not always work out the way we would want it to. In spite of everything, it has to be said that in the Company as a whole, there are very few Sisters who leave for one reason or another. The Constitutions make a distinction between voluntary departure and dismissal (cf. C46). In each situation the process is well documented, keeping in mind, of course, whether the Sister is more than 10 years vocation or not.

⁴ Cf. General Assembly 1991, *Inter-Assembly Document “At Jacob’s Well”*, p.12

Whenever Sisters leave lawfully, *"The Company considers it a duty to assist them. This is a duty based on the principles of equity and evangelical charity."* From a juridical standpoint, the Company is under no obligation to help Sisters who leave or who are dismissed. But the Company is not a business enterprise where relationships are based just on strict terms of contract. Its dealings with people are inspired by evangelical charity. This takes the form of material aid and personal support for Sisters who leave the Company for whatever reason. It is a very human, Christian and Vincentian way of acting.

Everything regarding the readmission of a Sister is clearly set out in St. 31. Ten years of vocation is always the threshold that separates the different processes of readmission.

4. CONCLUSION: BELONGING

Studying this chapter of the Constitutions should strengthen our sense of belonging to the Company. To achieve this we must be able to see its members as persons chosen by God to live out the Vincentian Plan, and we must start with ourselves. The passage from Saint Vincent that we commented on in the introduction, gives theological depth to articles of the Constitutions which are mainly to do with community life and establishing the necessary procedures for people today who have a vocation to a Congregation like the Company.

This theological outlook also makes us see "Membership" and the structures proper to the Company, as something truly willed by God. Saint Vincent was absolutely convinced of this. He said so more than ten times during conferences to the Sisters: *"Who would ever have thought that there would be Daughters of Charity....God thought of it for you...We can say, my Daughters, that it is He who is the Author of your Company."*⁵

This was Saint Louise's thinking, too. We only need to read some of the things she wrote, for example: *"The Company is guided more by this same Divine Providence than by any other means."*⁶ *"God Himself willed the establishment of the Company and willed it in the form in which it now actually exists."*⁷ Mission, which is part of vocation, also comes from God. *"Why did God institute the Company of Charity"*, Saint Vincent asks himself, and then gives the answer, *"To honour Our Lord and to render Him service in the poor."*⁸

When a Daughter of Charity reflects prayerfully on her own life she soon discovers, with deep gratitude, that the place where she most clearly found Christ and resolved to follow him, is the Company founded by Saint Vincent. In other words, all the women and the structures that have existed from the time of the Founders until our own

⁵ Coste IX, p.113, Conference of 14th June 1643 on Explanation of the Rule

⁶ Spiritual Writings, p. 509, L. 482

⁷ Spiritual Writings, p. 786, A62

⁸ Coste X, Conference of 18th October 1655 on the End of the Company

day, have constantly tried to become instruments that can render present the Kingdom of God.

We can say that it is from the hands of the Company that the Daughters of Charity have discovered the Kingdom of God, the “hidden treasure”, the “pearl of great price” (cf. Mt. 13, 44-46). How could we fail to love and feel bonded to this Company that has helped us to make this discovery? Many Sisters often express their gratitude to the Company because they recognise how much they owe to it.

But the Company is not simply a place which gives us an identity and a sense of belonging. From the time it was founded God Himself also gave it a mission, as we saw in the words we have just quoted from Saint Vincent. This mission continues throughout history, through time and space, and it has come down to our own day. It is the Company that receives and transmits this mission to the different local communities and its members. That is why mission is something unique to the individual, it is not a generalised mission and not something that each one chooses.

This is what gives the Daughters of Charity their identity and helps to strengthen their sense of belonging. The shared vision of integral service of the poor gives the Company a self-awareness, a sensitivity, style and shared characteristics that other Institutes with different aims, do not have.

III- SOME QUESTIONS TO HELP PERSONAL REFLECTION AND COMMUNITY SHARING (AT LOCAL OR PROVINCIAL LEVEL)

- Compare the revised Constitutions with those of 1983 and find the changes that have been introduced into the articles studied in this document.

- Do you, personally, find it hard to see the members of your community or Province as persons who, like yourself, have been called by God?

-What motivations regarding your vocation need to be purified? Identify these in a concrete way – what are you going to do about them?

- What level of belonging to the Company do you notice in the Sisters of your community? What can be done to increase this sense of belonging?

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

I received many letters and good wishes for my feast day, for Christmas and New Year. Thank you for your kindness. I would have liked to answer all these individually but as that is not possible I will use this page of the Echo to thank you for your letters, your greetings and for wishing me peace and happiness at Christmas and New Year.

It is my wish, too, that the Divine Infant may bless each one of you and each of your communities. May this New Year bring you all the strength you need to serve the Poor in the way that our Founders wished.

With much affection, your brother in Saint Vincent.

Father Javier Alvarez, CM

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Outline plan for the monthly retreat

“Out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks”

“The test of a person is in his conversation. As its fruit discloses the cultivation of a tree, so a person’s speech discloses the cultivation of his mind. Do not praise anyone before he speaks, for this is the way people are tested.....The conversation of the godly is always wise but the fool changes like the moon...among thoughtful people linger on. The talk of fools is offensive.” (Si 27, 5-7; 11-13) A person, every person, has an instrument that can console, encourage, convince, persuade, teach...but unfortunately this instrument can also be used to deceive, flatter, give people complexes, destroy. This instrument is our speech. Like all things human, its power is ambiguous. Speech can be used for good but it can also be used for the basest and most despicable purposes.

An ancient Finnish legend tells us that one day God decided to give his creatures what they needed for fulfilling their mission. He sent them all to the big stores and let them choose. Humans had other tasks to do so they arrived late, when all the others had made their choice: the lynx had chosen sight, the lion asked for strength, the leopard speed, the dove gentleness...humans had to be content with whatever was left. They were sad about this but to console them God offered them speech so that they could communicate with others. This wonderful gift made the other creatures jealous so God felt obliged to intervene again: on the one hand he decided to give the other creatures a certain level of communication, and on the other hand, he allowed humans the possibility of lying.

For this retreat, I invite you to ask yourselves how you use this powerful and marvellous gift that God has given us.

A PERSON'S VOICE

There is a close link between person and voice because the timbre, intonation and modulation of the voice characterise the person. We can recognise people by their voice. Our speech tells others who we are, what we are experiencing and what we desire. There are different types of voice and different kinds of modulation:

-**The voice of tenderness** is a house whose doors are wide open to welcome anyone who wishes to take refuge there. It signifies affection, sympathy, understanding, forgiveness and esteem. Sometimes it may be critical or reproachful but this will always be motivated by love.

-**The voice of anger**, reaches the listener's ears like a sharpened sword. It is cutting. This voice may be used to defend some right but it can also be used to put others in the wrong. This is a voice that divides, that creates tensions and usually it does not solve problems.

-**The voice of weakness** which reveals fear, worry, anxiety, terror. It is a voice that is asking for support, closeness, understanding. Such was the voice of Jesus in Gethsemane.

-**The voice of dominance** which always wants to override others, like cork in a spring of water or the foam on a river, and it has to be on top at all costs.

-**The absent voice: silence.** Like speech, it is a vessel whose value is determined by what it holds. There are many sorts of silence: you have the silence of someone who lacks knowledge, the silence of cowardice, the silence of timidity, the silence of someone who is experiencing deep sorrow, the silence of resignation: there is also the silence of the person who reflects, contemplates and loves. The poet Clement Rebora said, "*The Word has silenced my words.*" What is my voice like? What is my silence like?

THE VOICE OF JESUS

- **His words had power.** Jesus did not need to be present in order to heal a sick person, his words were sufficient (cf. Mt 8,8). That evening they brought him many who were possessed by devils and he drove out the unclean spirits "*With a word he cured all that were sick*" (Mt 8, 16). Peter, too, felt the power of God present in the words of Jesus. He realised this when Jesus asked him to fish in broad daylight: "*Master, we worked hard all night long and caught nothing, but if you say so I will pay out the nets.*" (Lk 5,5).

- **His words were words of salvation.** One day Jesus returned to Nazareth. It was a Saturday, the day for worshipping in the synagogue. He went there and when the

time came to read the scriptures he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah; *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has sent me to bring Good News to the poor.”* After Jesus applied these words to himself, the evangelist tells us that the people *“were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.”* (Lk 4, 14-22). Jesus does not condemn anyone, he does not speak of vengeance, he has no plan to settle scores. At the end of the gospel, he says to the thief who is crucified with him, *“This day you will be with me in Paradise.”* (Lk 23, 43).

His words instructed people. If we look, for example, at the passage about Martha and Mary, the latter *“was sitting at the Lord’s feet, listening to his words”* (cf. Lk 10, 38-42). Jesus is not condemning activity. He just says that we should listen to his words so that our activity does not become “agitation.” The words of Jesus give enlightenment because they go right to the heart of the matter; these words are spoken in the name of God, his Father.

His words disturbed some people. Of course the words of Jesus challenge and disturb people because they call for a different way of living: they denounce sin, deceit and injustice, and they unmask hypocrisy. Some people found this light disturbing (cf. Jn 3, 20) but others were delighted by them because *“these words are truth and they are life.”* In the end Jesus is condemned because of his words, *“What need we of any further witnesses? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.”* (Lk 22, 71).

The words of the Risen Christ bring peace and hope. Jesus shatters the silence of death and proclaims to the assembled disciples the message of Easter: “Peace.” (cf. Jn 20, 19). God’s response to hatred, sin, violence, betrayal and infidelity is peace. The parting words of the Risen Jesus are a promise, *“I am with you always, yes, to the end of time.”* (Mt 28, 20).

THE VOICE OF SIMPLICITY

“As for myself, I don’t know, but God has given me such a high esteem for simplicity that I call it my Gospel. I have a particular devotion to, and a special consolation in, saying things just as they are.” (Coste IX, p.606). In our own day, Vincentian simplicity is very close to the modern term “transparency.” A true Vincentian has the virtue of simplicity:

- **When he or she speaks the truth**, even though sometimes this is difficult. We are tempted to disguise the truth when our interests are threatened or when the truth is embarrassing. Jesus, however is Truth (cf Jn 4,6) and whoever speaks the truth comes to the light (cf. Jn 3,21). When people speak the truth it helps personal relationships.

- **When they witness to the truth**, that is to say, when what they say is consistent with what they think and what they do. Our world demands that words match actions.

- **When they seek for the truth.** We are pilgrims along the path of truth, we do not own it. We only come to the truth gradually because we always need to deepen our identity, vocation and charism.

FOR PERSONAL PRAYER AND SHARING

- Read and meditate on Lk 10, 38-41, and Saint Vincent's conference to the Daughters of Charity, 24th February 1653, vol IX, p.598.
- How do I use my words and my silences in my relationships with others (the people I serve, with the Sisters)?
- How do I behave at community meetings? What should my attitude be?

Visit of Superiors

Province of Ethiopia

Visit of Mother Evelyne Franc and Sister Wivine Kisu, General Councillor

On 21st August 2005, Mother Evelyne Franc and Sister Wivine Kisu, General Councillor, arrived in **Addis-Abeba** for a visitation of the Province of Ethiopia. Over a period of six days, Mother Evelyne and Sister Wivine met the Sisters from the four houses in Addis Abeba, and those of St. Catherine's house in Jimma.

On 22nd August, which is the feast of the Assumption in Ethiopia, the visitation began with Mass in the Provincial House Chapel. Sister Aster Zewdie, Visitatrice, all the Sisters in Addis Abeba and some from outside areas, were present. In the days that followed, Mother Evelyne went to the school at Atse Tekle Ghiorgis which is for the education of the poorest children. The students on the summer course gave a warm welcome to the visitors who then learned about the urban development project which embraces many and varied activities from the building of infrastructures to domestic activities, centres for formation, organisation and management. Mother Evelyne thanked all the people taking part in this development project for the poorest of the poor.

At Saint Catherine's in **Jimma**, Mother Evelyne and Sister Wivine met the Sisters from Bonga and Jimma. Then they visited two villages where people suffering from leprosy live.

- First of all **Gingo**: visit to the nursery school, the first aid post and the centre for handicrafts such as weaving, soap and candle making... Some people cultivate small plots of land, prepare yarn from wood, or raise cattle.

- At **Tulema**, the people and the village elders welcomed Mother Evelyne and Sister Wivu with singing and dancing. In their songs they recalled past days when they

lived on tombs in the cemeteries, and they thanked God for their present circumstances which allow them to live in houses that have running water, electricity and sanitation. A new “water point” financed by St. Elizabeth’s School, was installed during the visit. All the people that the Sisters met took the opportunity to thank the Catholic Church, the Daughters of Charity and other benefactors.

PHOTO

At **Debra Zeit**, on the two final days of the visit, Mother Evelyne met the young Sisters who were making a retreat, and then the Sister Servants and the Councillors. Before returning to Paris, Mother Evelyne expressed her happiness at getting to know our Province and her gratitude for the work being done for the poor. The Sisters expressed their joy at being able to meet her and to have shared with her the reality of their lives as Daughters of Charity.

Sister Mary Mitchell
Daughter of Charity

VISIT OF SUPERIORS

Province of Japan

Visit of Mother Evelyne Franc and Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor

On 2nd October 2005 Mother Evelyne Franc and Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor, arrived at Osaka airport to visit the Province of Japan. When they arrived at the Provincial House in Kobe, 75 of the 81 Sisters belonging to the Province were there to welcome them.

After the Opening Mass celebrated by Fr. Victor Torres, Provincial Director, Mother Evelyne began the visitation by presenting a power-point montage of the Company, giving details of the current situation in each Province, its location, number of Sisters and new missions that are being started up all over the world. The seal of the Company superimposed on the globe was a striking symbol of our Sisters’ presence in each continent.

Then Mother Evelyne spoke to us about the revised Constitutions, emphasising what is written in C. 34: the Company is our first place of belonging. The current wording of the Constitution presents this conviction very strongly without, however, minimising the affection and gratitude we owe to our family. Community life is geared to the mission entrusted to us by the Community. However, we must always be on our guard not to make mission our first place of belonging, even if we have the joy and satisfaction of doing good work and establishing bonds of friendship with members of a parish or association.

Mother Evelyne stressed the importance of dialogue, of the domestic council, and of each local community participating in the government of the Company through consultations and the Community Plan. She spoke in a clear and practical way about the Constitutions, taking examples from everyday life and reminding us that they are our path to holiness and that they free us to love, in a better way, the Lord, the Sisters and the Poor.

PHOTO

During her meeting next day with the Sister Servants, Mother Evelyne encouraged them to take up their office seriously and with enthusiasm. She stressed that their work is of paramount importance for the life of the Company and for its charism. However, she pinpointed some pitfalls: confusing authority with power, being attached to the office of Sister Servant.... After the example of Jesus the Servant, the mission of the Sister Servant is to serve the community and there is no place at all for authoritarianism. Then Mother Evelyne shared her thoughts on some questions about times of silence, Communications as a means of deepening a personal relationship with each Sister, the question of poverty with regard to gifts that are made for no specified purpose and which should be a matter for consultation with the community.

After taking part in a meeting of the Provincial Council, Mother Evelyne and Sister Julma met members of two Provincial Commissions; one concerned with medium and long-term planning and the other with formation.

Afterwards, Mother Evelyne spoke in English to the young Sisters who were there for a session and she encouraged them to continue studying that language.

In spite of a crowded programme, and thanks to the organising skills of Sister Madeline Hara, Visitatrice, Mother Evelyne and Sister Julma still managed to find time to make a pilgrimage to the **Park of Peace** and to the **Memorial Museum of Hiroshima** where they saw the devastation that the atomic bomb caused in that region and its consequences over the years following World War II. They also visited **the sanctuary of Itsukushima Shinto** at Miyajima, which highlights ancient Japanese culture.

On the days that followed, Mother Evelyne and Sister Julma went to three local communities: first of all, to St. Joseph's Home at **Kamagasaki** in the region of Osaka, which takes in homeless people and where the Sisters work with the NPO organisation to find these people employment. Their overnight stop at the **Seibo** house, meant that Mother Evelyne and Sister Julma were able to see the Holy Family Centre and to learn about the history of the Japanese Province since 1933 when the first Sisters arrived from France. Then their final stop was at the **Wakayama** house, to see the Aitoku Medical Centre where the Sisters work with handicapped people and in two nursery schools at Aitoku and Ai no Sono.

Mother Evelyne and Sister Julma's presence among us left us with the same feelings that the disciples must have had in the inn at Emmaus. We are filled with fresh enthusiasm to live our lives more in line with the revised Constitutions.

Sister Sharon Tenbarg
Echoes correspondent

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Chelmno

**Third Inter-Provincial Encounter
 for Formators from the Slav Provinces**

19th- 21st August 2005

“Christ is the Rule of the Daughters of Charity. They endeavour to follow Him as Scripture reveals Him to them and as their Founders perceived Him: Adorer of the Father, Servant of His Loving Plan and Evangeliser of those who are poor.” (C.8a).

From 19th-21st August 2005, the Provincial House in Chelmno (Poland) was the venue for the third encounter of Sister Formators in the Slav Provinces (Slovakia, Slovenia, the region of Albania and the three Provinces of Poland). 21 Sisters took part and these included two General Councillors: Sister Marlene Rosa, Sister Zofia Daniscakova, the Visitatrices and Seminary Directresses, the Sisters of the Formation Commission, the Father Director and Secretary of the Province of Chelmno.

At Sister Zofia Daniscakova's request, it was Sister Marlene Rosa who presided and animated this encounter. Each day began with prayer and the Eucharist with the Provincial House community. After a few words of welcome and after explaining what the Formators hoped to achieve, Sister Marlene spoke about the challenges the Daughters of Charity have to take up today in line with the revised Constitutions. Her talks which were often illustrated with graphics, were followed by group work and sharing.

Sister Marlene reminded us, first of all, that the aim of formation is to help the young Sister to develop all aspects of her life: to have convictions rooted in faith, to have an experience of God and to become a servant of Christ in the person of the poor. At a personal level, the formator helps the young Sister to acquire genuine human and spiritual maturity. On the spiritual level, the formator helps her to deepen her knowledge of the Bible and of doctrine. She promotes a life of personal and community prayer that is also apostolic and in line with the Company and the universal Church. On the Vincentian level, formators have to emphasise the need to assimilate the Founders' thinking and, in particular, the specific spirit of the Daughters of Charity.

Then Sister Marlene addressed her remarks more directly to the Formators, reminding them of some practical points regarding their mission of accompaniment. She also brought up some practical aspects of formation relating to young Sisters, middle-aged Sisters or the elderly.

Finally, she reiterated the importance of living in the spirit of humility, simplicity and charity, in the three dimensions of the life of every Daughter of Charity; self-giving

to God, community living and the life of service. This evangelical spirit promotes a life that is integrated.

In conclusion she presented a synthesis of what a Daughter of Charity ought to be.

The Formators are very grateful to Sister Marlene for her valuable talks and personal interviews, and to Sister Zofia for organising this formation encounter.

In their free moments, the Formators visited the poor in the care home served by our Sisters from the Chelmno community. They also admired this small town which has preserved its architecture that dates back to the Middle Ages, and they went to the XIIIth Century parish church and to other places which testify to the presence of the Daughters of Charity who first arrived in Chelmno in 1694.

The evening of August 21st, before they went next day on pilgrimage to Gietrzwald, the Seminary Sisters evoked Mary's miraculous protection of the Provincial House in September 1939, at the beginning of World War II, and they reminded us of the message given by Our Lady Immaculate when she appeared at Gietrzwald (the Lourdes of Poland). It was at Gietrzwald, a small village in Warmia, that the Virgin Mary appeared for several days to some children in 1877. One of these children, Barbara Samulowska, was then 12 years old. She later became a Daughter of Charity and served the poor for 54 years as a missionary in Guatemala where she died in 1950, in the odour of sanctity. Her beatification process opened at Gietrzwald on 2nd February 2005.

PHOTO The Sisters taking part in the encounter for formators for the Slav Provinces, during their pilgrimage to Gietrzwald, the place where Our Lady appeared in 1877.

May that Servant of God who was, for some time, Directress of the Seminary, obtain for all Formators the graces they need for accompanying young Sisters on the path of their vocation.

Sister Anna Mamona
Echoes correspondent

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Austria

“Heaven opens” over Salzburg

As night fell on **15th October 2005**, more than 5000 people came from different parts of the city, representing the five points of a star, and made their way to the cathedral precinct. They carried torches or candles, and the sound of music and of church bells created a joyful and festive atmosphere.

This marked the opening of **“Heaven opens”, a Week of Action** organised by the archdiocese of Salzburg. In 150 different ways the people were able to experience, in a very concrete way, what it means “to be a Christian” in Salzburg: there were religious celebrations, Bible reading workshops, concerts of sacred music, a “café of cultures” a “market of opportunities”, public debates, street interviews conducted by young people, life on the margins of society (a discussion between homeless people and the local authorities), an evening vigil for young people in the Monastery of St. Peter, a meditative journey on the labyrinth formed by young women at the vigil under the dome of the Cathedrals, celebrations at the 14 nursery schools (including the two of ours), a day of welcome, a day for women, ecumenical dialogue, etc. Everyone could find what they were looking for.

On Monday 17th October, our community held an “Open Doors” day from 10 a.m to 5 p.m. In the entrance hall there were posters and an audio visual presentation of the life of the Daughters of Charity. Our chapel was open and this gave people the opportunity to spend some time in silent prayer before the Blessed Sacrament exposed.

Each group was accompanied by a Sister and they went first to visit our elderly Sisters. Then they moved from “The Gallery of our Ancestors” (our Founders, the first Sisters and our Superiors) to “St Vincent’s Hall” where our brothers and sisters from off the streets were having their meal in a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere. So our visitors were able to understand that **“our worship of God cannot be separated from the service we give to others”**, as our Archbishop Kothgasser so often reminds us.

In the Souvenirs Room our visitors discovered the history of what was formerly the Province of Salzburg, through slides, documents, manuscripts, pictures and other memorabilia.

In another room a Sister spoke about the Miraculous Medal, its origin and its message.

PHOTO

Visitors and Sisters enjoyed some light refreshments together and their conversations were so animated that this day became for them and for us, a “genuine sisterly encounter”. Several times we heard people remark, *“We never knew there was so much goodness here”*. This was very like what Jacob said at Bethel: *“Truly Yahweh is in this place and I never knew it.”* (Gn 28, 16).

Sister Alphonsine Schwaiger
Daughter of Charity

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

Quasi Province

Marking the 175th anniversary of the Apparitions

**In the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal,
an intensive programme of events for pilgrims
from 8th September to 8th December 2005**

Three months of Jubilee

To mark the 175th anniversary of Our Lady's Apparitions to Catherine Laboure, the Chapel team of Priests, Sisters and lay people, launched a three month Jubilee to allow a great number of pilgrims to "*come to the foot of this altar.*" Father Ponsard, the Chaplain here, explains the reasons why we decided to do this.:

"Three months to express our gratitude to Mary and to ask her to help us to grow in the love of her Son and of our neighbour. Secondly, to show in a visible and public way, that this place exists and that it is here in order to welcome everyone who is suffering or in difficulty and for them to find consolation here...finally, to tell the people of Paris who may not be familiar with this place, that Mary appeared in this city. We speak about the "Apparitions at rue du Bac" but we should be saying "the Apparitions in Paris." We wanted this Jubilee to end on December 8th, feast of the Immaculate Conception, and the Closing Mass will be celebrated on that day by Bishop Michel Santier of Lucon. The message that Mary gave on 27th November 1830, prefigures the dogma of the Immaculate Conception which would be defined by Pius IX in 1854."

"A people out of every nation"(Ap. 7,9)

If the Miraculous Medal, distributed by the thousand, was the starting point for a world wide popular devotion, we can say that 175 years later, in the very place that this devotion originated, people's fervour has not diminished. To realise this you only need to have been here on September 8th, this year 2005, as part of the crowds of people who gathered in this Chapel for the Opening Mass of the Jubilee.

"Come to the foot of this altar, " Our Lady said during her first apparition to St. Catherine. And they do come, from everywhere. "This is the extraordinary thing." Sometimes people ask where the miracles are. "There is a continuous miracle being worked in this chapel Mary calls and people respond. Pilgrims come from very far off places. Today, for example, Jum Miranda, a Filipino from Virginia (USA), has come here on pilgrimage with a group of 34 Filipinos from America. Foreign groups like the one led by Jum are here practically every day". Between 5000 and 6000 pilgrims come to rue du Bac every day. But as well as these huge numbers of people, the thing that strikes us is the variety of countries they represent and this is evident in the people, in the way they dress and in their different languages. Just as in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, each one can, in company with Mary, understand in their own language, "the marvels of God." Through this happy coming together of all the different representatives of the human race, the Chapel presents a very striking face of the Church.

“A house of prayer for all the nations” (Mk 11, 17)

New ideas for celebrations and formation, intensifying and revising our usual activities, sending out personal invitations and sensitising people through the media, are all some of the things we have launched to help parishes, individuals or groups, children and young people and “to make them aware” today, of the extraordinary message of the Blessed Virgin. They can all take advantage of the opportunities offered and have a real experience of the Church and of unity in faith.

“A single body” “members of one another” (1 Co 12, 12-25)

The welcome given by very many Sisters who, alongside the team of priests and volunteers, provide a welcome for pilgrims, tries to take its inspiration from Mary’s dispositions when she appeared to Catherine Laboure. *“Mary took the time to sit down ...we, too, must take time to listen and to respect the dignity of every person. Just as Mary needed Catherinewe all need other people. We are all affected in a special way by the faith of the pilgrims! “Everyone come,” said Mary, “everyone, without distinction.” We know that we are called to welcome everyone, without distinction.”*

“Mary, Mother of all disciples” (Jn 19, 27)

During the solemn Mass celebrated on Saturday, 26th November, feast of Our Lady of the Medal, archbishop Vingt-Trois of Paris, gave the following homily.

How many millions of people have passed through this chapel in the course of 175 years! What a weight of suffering and of hope, what steps taken to have sins forgiven, what smiles before the statue of Our Lady – all these things lie hidden in people’s hearts without anyone seeing, counting or even being aware of them. In the same way, we have come together this evening just as we are, bearing the weight of our suffering and our hope, our sins and the desire to be forgiven, our smile as we receive the gift of God’s grace. Perhaps one day we will try to understand, if this proves useful, why over several decades of the XIXth century, Our Lady appeared in so many places, particularly in France and most notably, of course, in Lourdes, La Salette and here in rue du Bac.

Why was this necessary? What did the people who went before us need to be convinced about? Did they need some extraordinary sign in order to believe that the work of salvation desired by the Father and accomplished in the Son, is a work for today’s world? It was something for their age, nearly 2 centuries ago, it is also something for our times.

How can we fail to be struck by the fact that all these apparitions were granted to persons who were humble, poor, unknown, without influence, and, humanly speaking, not able to convince others about what they had seen: in fact they did not try to do this. You know the often quoted words of Bernadette to the parish priest of Lourdes, “The Lady sent me to tell you what I saw, she did not send me to convince you.” You also

know that to the very end of her life, which lasted for many years after the apparitions, Catherine Laboure observed absolute secrecy, even to the point of refusing to answer during the process set up to recognise the apparitions. The Blessed Virgin asked her to remain silent, she kept silent.

The greatest mystery is not that this event was able, without publicity or notoriety, and without any extraordinary sign, to become known and to attract so many people over the years. What a powerful message it must have been to be able to touch people's hearts! What hope they must have had in their hearts since they were so ready to set off on pilgrimage to the places where Our Lady appeared! What hope has led you to come here this evening for this Jubilee? What do you wish to say to the Blessed Virgin in the secret of your heart? What hurts you have received from life do you wish to place in her hands? Who among your dear ones do you wish to confide to her love? What plans you are working on do you wish to bring for her intercession? That is something we will never know, but gathered together in faith, because of Our Lady's apparitions, we form the body of the Church which does not need to know why each one has come or what state they are in, it simply knows that we have come in trust and in hope.

Each and every one of you here this evening has been brought together by the Blessed Virgin to be one in the Body of Christ. She looks lovingly on you all as people to be offered with her Son, in the Eucharist. You are gathered here to receive the sign of God's tender love for us: the Blessed Virgin, conceived without sin, prays for us who have recourse to her. "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you."

What is she saying to us this evening? What she said at the marriage feast of Cana. She intercedes with her Son, she attracts his attention. Do you think that Jesus needed anyone to tug at his sleeve before he realised something was amiss? Do you think that Jesus needs someone to nudge him into realising that something is not right in your life? As if Mary, at the marriage feast of Cana needed to say to him, "Listen, you have got to do something." Let us understand why he said, "Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not yet come." Mary is not deterred by these words even though her prayer seems to be unanswered. She says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." This is Our Lady's message at Cana: faith is not dependent on signs. The real sign is that Jesus says to her "My hour has not yet come," it is not the right moment. And yet she believes.

It can happen to us, too, that we pray and pray, and feel that the moment has not come, that Jesus does not want to get involved in our affairs. It is not his hour, it is not his will, it is not the path he wants to follow. In times like this we are tempted to rush here and there, to go to a guru, a fortune-teller, to people who offer extraordinary signs and say extraordinary things, who promise us happiness tomorrow....in return for a cheque. Look at Mary in Cana: she does not turn to anyone else, she does not say, "All right, if I can't get what I want from him I will try someone else." She continues to believe in him because she knows that it is He, and He alone, who can help: "Do whatever he tells you." I understand what Mary is telling us here. We have to cling on to

him, we mustn't turn our head and look away, we have to hold fast to him. Even if we do not see anything, even if nothing happens, even if we don't understand, we have to hold on to him and say to ourselves, "I must do what he says." "Do whatever he tells you."

Are you tempted to say, "He hasn't told me anything?" Do you go to Mass on Sundays, do you have a Bible in your home? You hear Christ's words, you know what he has said, you know at least some of his words by heart: "Love one another as I have loved you". "Forgive and you will be forgiven." "Do good to those who do evil to you." "Get up and walk", "Your sins are forgiven", and many other things he said. We have to listen to these words and make them our own. "Whoever keeps my word, my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode in him." This is the path that Our Lady is pointing out to us, do whatever he tells us.

If we do all that he tells us we will notice something changing even if we do not understand it very clearly. The servants at Cana do not understand very clearly when he tells them to fill the jars with water. "Fill these jars with water", huge water jars for the ablutions. What is he going to do with all this water? They do not understand but Mary has said, "Do whatever he tells you", so they do it. And Jesus changes the water into wine: this is the first of his signs. St John tells us that after this his disciples believed in him. The servants did what he told them even though they did not understand his reason for saying it

From time to time we, too, have to do things without understanding why, simply because he asks us to do them. We don't know how he directs the world but we do know that he will never abandon us. We know that the combat between the woman and the dragon will last until the end of time. We are part of this struggle. If we wish to come out of it alive, if we wish to have wings and, like the Woman, fly into the desert, we must hold fast to Jesus, we must not deceive ourselves, we must not serve the dragon. We must be on our guard and always serve the Son of the Woman who appeared crowned with stars.

My brothers and sisters, this evening we are full of joy and gratitude for this place, for Catherine Laboure, for the visits that the Blessed Virgin made here, for her brief, discreet message, for several apparitions and for the same few phrases repeated over and over again. These are the signs, the authentic signs, by which we can recognise God's power. We are full of joy because, through Mary's apparitions, her Son's glory is made manifest and our faith aroused, nourished and strengthened. Even if our life is not always easy, when we leave here we know that we are not alone, we know that the Blessed Virgin has put our hand into the hand of Christ, and we must never let go of it. And so we pray that all this strength, grace and happiness will bear fruit in the life of each one of us. Amen.

Mary, a sign for the people of the third millennium

"The Chapel is a heart open to others and it sends us forth in faith. As we gaze on Mary we can experience extraordinary hope. We often come to the Chapel because

we are wavering, we are afraid, we are not clear about what we should do. We see alongside us a brother or a sister who restores our hope. We often ask for things that are not granted to us but we are granted things we would never have dared to ask for.”

“Have a medal made like this model,” Our Lady said to Catherine, “those who wear it with confidence will receive great graces.”

A sign is a visible reality that allows us to discover another reality we cannot see. In the Bible, signs lead, in one way or another, to the presence of God. Continuing this biblical tradition, the “sign of the Medal” is given to Catherine by Our Lady Immaculate during the apparitions. Mary continues to help us to welcome Christ the Saviour into our lives. Let us listen to this testimony given by the father of a family who came to the Chapel last week with his wife and three children:

“I was here 10 years ago after following a crowd in from the street. At that time I was an unbeliever and a very irresponsible parent. The only person I believed in was myself, and I worshipped alcohol. I did have a job but I wasted nearly half my wages because I went drinking every day. I was an alcoholic and I ill-treated my wife and my children. I want to tell you that there is something about this chapel....Someone is there, someone who is the source of all goodness. Whenever I came back later, even if I was drunk, I heard a voice inside me which I did not understand at all at that time. It seemed to me that this voice was asking me to change my ways because I was doing nothing but evil. I came in here and accepted a medal which I still have. Nobody could believe it, my wife, my children, my pals....It is with deep gratitude to Our Lady, and to Our Lord, of course, that I am here with my wife and children to give thanks for the graces received – the grace of my conversion and the grace of being a united family.”

Thank you, Mary, for Sister Catherine, that humble Daughter of Charity whose only concern was to remain in the background so that your message could be understood by everyone. Thank you for the gift of the Medal which for us is a gift and also a mission to share it with everyone. We pray that it may continue to spread all over the world and that every country will really come to discover it.

Sisters Marie-Madeleine Decelle and Antoinette Marie Hance
Chapel Team

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

Province of Hungary

Centenary of the Hungarian Province

On 7th and 8th October 2005 the Province of Hungary celebrated its centenary in ways that were simple but at the same time very moving.

7th October 2005: After lunch we went by coach to Piliscsaba, north-west of Budapest. It was here that the first Central House of the Hungarian Province was established on 7th November 1905. Today, the building, where a memorial plaque will be unveiled, is now an Agricultural College. After Vespers in common in the college auditorium which had been skilfully transformed into an oratory, after the Mayor of Piliscsaba's speech thanking the Sisters, and after a light meal together, the coach brought us back to Budapest. On the return journey which lasted about an hour, we admired the vast fields of maize, occasionally interspersed with vineyards. The countryside here is peaceful and ordinary: it doesn't have the wells, the shepherds and the flocks of sheep that are typical features of certain parts of Hungary: the scenery is beautiful in its quiet restraint.

In the evening Sister Rufina, our Visitatrice, used power-point to present the eventful and often sad history of the Province.

At the request of Countess Franciska Szechenyi, Mother Brandis (Austrian Province) sent the first Sisters from Graz in 1852 to Pinkafeld, which at that time was part of Hungary. After visiting the Province of Graz in 1860, Fr. Etienne, Superior General, also went to Hungary where the Sisters had charge of a big prison for women in Marianosztra. Speaking of the wonderful work these Sisters did for the women prisoners, Bishop Ottokar Prohaszka of Szekesfehervar (1858-1927) said, *"in this place poisoners and murdresses die in the odour of sanctity.."*

But the huge Province of Graz (comprising Austria and Hungary) was becoming increasingly difficult to administer and so the idea of forming a new Province was raised. It was Fr. Nandor Medits, a man of great piety and practical ability, and known as "God's Architect", who was given the task of preparing to set up the new Province of Hungary.

On 13th June 1905 a house became available in Piliscsaba: this was to be the first Provincial House. On 7th November 1905 the Provincial Director of Graz read the letter from Fr. Fiat, the Superior General, authorising the erection of the Province of Hungary.

Fr. Medits quickly realised that the house in Piliscsaba was not suitable for a Provincial House and he set up another one in Budapest. The first Visitatrice, Sister Cherubina Fries, was the sister of the Visitatrice of Salzburg, Sister Serafina Fries. The difficulties facing her caused Sister Cherubina to lose her nerve and so she resigned and was accepted back in Salzburg by her sister.

The new Visitatrice, Sister Maria Vilma Sebok, directed the Province with great trust in God and with great circumspection during the difficult time of World War I. Searches, expropriations and expulsions were the prelude to even more frightening events. When this government fell, the Sisters were able to resume their works and to start up new ones.

After the Trianon Peace Treaty, Hungary was reduced to one third of its previous size: one part was attached to Slovakia, another to Romania, and a third to Yugoslavia. The Hungarian Sisters in these regions were forced to leave their institutions.

In 1922 the Hungarian houses in Slovakia became part of the newly created Province of Slovakia. In 1924 the Province of Romania was erected in Transylvania, with its Provincial House in Oradea.

The Province of Hungary which was reduced in size, soon witnessed a new surge of growth but this was cruelly interrupted by the Second World War. On 30th December 1944, part of the Provincial House was severely damaged in a bombardment during which four Sisters died. Not a single room was left habitable. There were severe food shortages and many poor people sought help from the Sisters who defended them with heroic courage. After the war the Communists returned to power. During the night of 18th June 1950, all the Sisters in different parts of the country were informed that they had to leave their houses within a quarter of an hour. Thanks to the intervention of the bishops they were not deported to Siberia but sent to various camps where they lived in crowded conditions and were treated harshly. Later on, when the State no longer regarded women religious as a threat to the public, the youngest Sisters were able to look for work. They could only meet in secret; in cemeteries, sacristies etc. This marked the end of the flourishing Province which, prior to the dispersal, had about 1,400 Sisters and 90 houses. What the Sisters first thought of as an ordeal that would only last a short time, lasted in fact for 40 years!

In 1980, after the fall of this regime, some Sisters, together with several women who before the Communist era had wanted to join the Community, gathered together in two small houses on the outskirts of Budapest. After the 1991 Act of Indemnity, the soldiers who had been billeted in the Provincial House, left behind a demolished and dilapidated building. Several courageous Sisters set to work to restore the house. With the help of contributions, the house became habitable again but it was too big because all the Sisters were not able to return immediately. So until the year 2000, part of the building was occupied by the Catholic University. Hopes for the future were boosted by new vocations.

PHOTO

At the present time the Province has 4 young Sisters as well as a Sister from Poland and one from Slovakia. However, it is not possible to maintain the present works. The Province has 130 Sisters and their average age is 83 years. 93 of the Sisters are in the Provincial House and 25 live on their own. In her presentation of the Province, Sister Rufina remarked, *“I said at the beginning that the history of the Province is like a tree, and I will end by repeating this image: the small shoot became a big tree and countless poor people found comfort in its shade. Then came the storm that attacked the tree with great ferocity. Will it blossom once again? Will it become green again? We don't know, because God's plans are hidden from us. But it doesn't matter what the future holds for*

us – we are convinced that the parable of the grain of wheat will be seen in our lives, too. Where and when it will bear fruit is in God's hands. And God's hands are good hands.

8th October 2005 – At 10 a.m. a special Mass was concelebrated by Mgr. Szendi, former Bishop of Veszprem, together with the Director of Caritas in Hungary, the two Provincial Directors of Hungary and Austria, and several Vincentians.

Sister Christa Bauer, General Councillor, had brought messages from Mother Evelyne and Father Javier Alvarez, Director General, and when these had been read out, Sister Alfonsa Richartz from the Province of Cologne, reported on visits made to Budapest during the Communist regime.

In the evening we took our guests for a walk through the town. The beautiful city of Budapest has concealed a great many tragedies and it probably hides many more behind a glittering façade. The Danube, Europe's second most important river, runs through the Hungarian capital. May the Lord bring the people on its banks to a future of peace.

We pray to God, asking that our Province, this tree that has so often been battered by storms but never destroyed, may once again bear fruit.

The Sisters of Hungary

THE POOR SPEAK TO US

Central Africa

Giving of all she had to live on

In hospital at Nemba, Triphine goes into labour in the maternity unit where I work. After a severe bout of malaria she gives birth to a premature baby and suffers from acute anaemia. She has to stay in hospital for two months to regain her strength and see her baby develop.

Her family is very poor and she has left her 5 children to be looked after by her husband. He cannot see to all the household tasks and visit his wife in hospital as well. Triphine is totally dependent on other members of the family and on her friends. She never complains. However, I soon became aware of her suffering and contacted the hospital social services, asking them to help her. She was given two meals a day but had to keep some of this food for the evening.

One day I went into the hospital room that she shared with 4 other women. When two of the mothers left the room Triphine was left alone with Perusi who had just given birth. She noticed that Perusi had nothing to eat and so she was now even poorer than herself. As soon as she could, and without letting the others see, Triphine discreetly

passed her evening meal over to Perusi. When she realised I was watching her she smiled at me and said, “She is hungry, too”. I felt a great urge to embrace Triphine.

This gesture made me reflect on the way that I love people; “am I open enough to the needs of others?” Thank you, Triphine, for your generosity of heart that speaks to me about the Heart of God.

Sister Carmen Pena
Daughter of Charity

NEWSBRIEFS

Formation days for the Sister Servants of the Province of Slovakia

As part of their on-going formation, the Sister Servants of Slovakia met together in the Provincial House from **9th to 12th June**, together with two General Councillors, Sister Rosa Maria Miro Miro and Sister Zofia Daniskakova.

Their objective, over these few days, was to study the revised Constitutions and Statutes. In her talks Sister Rosa Maria drew attention to the differences between the 1983 Constitutions and those of 2004: a different arrangement of chapters, regrouping or moving various paragraphs, enriching them by including new elements and explanations, updating the wording, giving a special place to inculturation... These talks were followed by group work and after this Sister Rosa Maria answered questions put to her.

Then there was a power-point presentation of the work done by our Sisters in Siberia and additional information was given by the Sister Servant of Nizny Tagil. The Seminary Sisters presented a spiritual evening which was not without its humorous side.

At the end of these formation days all the Sisters felt very happy about the wonderful gift of their vocation and they experienced renewed fervour in following it, renewing in themselves the spirit of the Company and having a deeper desire to form genuine sisterly communities and build up unity.

Sister Anna Blehova
Echoes correspondent

NEWSBRIEFS

Inauguration of the Venezuelan Seminary, 25 years ago

On 3rd July 2005 we celebrated the inauguration of the Seminary of the Daughters of Charity in Venezuela. A Mass of thanksgiving was celebrated in the parish church of “Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.” This church, which is directed by the Vincentians, is the parish church for the Provincial House. The Seminary was opened on 3rd July 1980 by Sister Estela Proano, the Visitatrice at that time. The ceremony was attended by the

General Councillor for Latin America: Sister Lilia Garcia, the Directress: Sister Teresa Olza and four young Sisters.

In 1982 four other postulants came to the Seminary and one of them is the present Visitatrice, Sister Yolanda Zambrano. Later the Seminary became part of the new Provincial House. In 1984 three other Sisters entered. One of these is now the Provincial Assistant. Since then young women have entered the Seminary nearly every year.

At present the Province has 64 Sisters, 28 of them from Venezuela; there are 4 Sisters in the Seminary. The Daughters of Charity and the Vincentians collaborate in providing Vincentian formation for the Company. For more general formation the young Sisters go to the inter-Congregational Centre for Religious Studies. There are also two postulants and several aspirants.

In the course of these 25 years there has been much devoted service, many sacrifices and many anxieties. However, God has blessed us and we trust in the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, the Only Mother of the Company, and the protection of our holy Founders as we pray that we may be able to ensure that the Poor continue to be served.

Sister Isabel Sainz.
Echoes correspondent

SPECIAL 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE APPARITIONS OF 1830

27th November 2005

175th anniversary of the Manifestation
of the Miraculous Medal
in the Chapel of the Mother-House
of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul

INTRODUCTION

In the foreword to his book on the Apparitions at rue du Bac, Jean Guitton tells us that for many years he never heard these mentioned, even when he met people who could so easily give him information on the matter.

“When I was a young man, I lived from 1917-1925 in students’ accommodation, 104 rue de Vaugirard with the Marist Fathers. This may seem incredible but it is true: none of them spoke to us about the chapel in rue du Bac and I never went there. Between 1923 and 1933 I used to go several times a week to visit Fr Pouget who lived at 95 rue de Sevres. One of Fr Pouget’s confreres had even been Catherine’s confessor but I never remember Fr Pouget speaking to me about rue du Bac. At Gentilly I used to go and see Fr Crapez, a Vincentian priest who is Catherine’s biographer but he did not speak to me

about her either. My father and mother befriended the Daughters of Charity at Saint-Etienne yet I knew nothing about the Medal."

In 1973 Jean Guitton published his book which was entitled, "*Rue du Bac, going beyond superstition.*" For him, rue du Bac is a special form of prophecy, in the highest sense of the word, that is to say, Catherine's contact with the divine mystery.

1850: 150 YEARS AFTER THE APPARITIONS

The Company wishes to commemorate these events. To prepare for this celebration it sends out a questionnaire for reflection by the local communities. Fr Lloret presents a synthesis of the replies; the results are not very informative although it is evident that in all the Provinces the communities are very much aware of the message.

On the negative side, he makes the following observations:

- Theological reflection on the message has been neglected. There has often been more interest shown in the warnings to the Company than in the message itself. The medal has been distributed as a devotional aid without adequate explanation of its meaning.

The message has not always been recognised as a call to renew our lives in accordance with the gospel, a call to conversion.

The Apparitions of 1830 have often been regarded as a privilege rather than a message of love and hope addressed to the people of our times.

For several years we have not been sufficiently committed to promoting the message among children and young people.

WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR THIS?

In the Company:

People were not sufficiently well prepared culturally or theologically for passing on the message in an effective way.

Lack of conviction that God wishes, through us, to rekindle people's faith today, as in 1830.

Human respect with regard to distributing the Medal and spreading its Message.

In today's world: there is a lack of interest and this is due to:

A mistaken interpretation of the Christological dimension of faith highlighted by the Council, and the attitude of some priests and religious who cannot see the rightful place of Marian devotion.

The influence of a de-Christianised, secular and materialistic society which makes it difficult to interpret and spread the Message – a diminishing sense of the sacred – crisis of faith – people have lost the sense of sin and appreciation of the values enshrined in the Message.

Doubts about the nature of the apparitions: genuine, emotional, intellectual doubts.

On the positive side: factors that have contributed to a better understanding of the message and better ways of spreading it:

Sisters are better educated and have a deeper understanding of Marian theology. This affects their attitude to the Message.

Ongoing formation in the Company – Assemblies, conferences, encounters, articles in the Echoes of the Company, reading material,

Official recognition by the Church and promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, canonisation of Catherine Laboure, the Marian Encyclicals: *Marialis Cultus* and *Mary, Mother of the Redeemer*.

The Church's concern to evangelise and promote the poor.

The devotion that lay people have to Our Lady, something that challenges us.

IN PRACTICE

Community reflection about this gift from Heaven has led to personal or pastoral practices:

A greater fidelity to prayers to Our Lady, especially the rosary – the Angelus – and in some places, the novena to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

The rediscovery of certain basic elements of the spiritual life; conversion, prayer, availability, service.

Using the Medal as a form of apostolate and giving a brief explanation of its message when distributing it.

Several churches, chapels, hospitals and schools have been dedicated to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal or St. Catherine Laboure.

After this painstaking study, Sisters from all over the world made suggestions which can be summarised under three headings:

1. An in-depth study of :

Marian theology according to the teaching of Vatican II and the documents of the Church.

Marian spirituality in the Company, in imitation of our Founders and in accordance with what is written in the Constitutions.

The apostolate of the Medal, closely linked to Sacred Scripture and to contemporary theology and pastoral guidelines.

We should learn more about St. Catherine.

2. Revised criteria for what we should be doing:

To present the person of Mary in different terms, particularly with regard to the Divine Motherhood, the Immaculate Conception, Virginity.

To enlighten popular piety; respecting this but educating people to make it an act of faith.

Marian studies connected with the Magnificat – Mary and Christian Unity.

3. On a personal level, as Daughters of Charity:

Letting ourselves be challenged by Our Lady's warnings to the Company – the rosary, silence, wasting time, visits made without good reason – seeing all these in today's context.

Deepening our conviction that our service of Jesus Christ in the poor can only be carried out in company with Mary.

DECISIONS OF SUPERIORS

While the difficult years after the Council led to some of its decisions being called into question, changes in people's lives, in society and in religion which in a general sense were all influenced by the natural sciences, the apparitions at rue du Bac were also challenged.

The Superiors of those times decided to commission a far-reaching study and this was undertaken by specialists in Mariology. The work was entrusted to Fr. Rene Laurentin, Docteur es Lettres, Doctor in theology, professor at the Institut Catholique in Paris, Member of the International Marian Academy in Rome. He was helped by a team of Daughters of Charity and the collaboration of Dom Bernard Billet. Fr. Roche CM collaborated in writing the book "*Catherine Laboure and the Miraculous Medal*" which was published in 1976 at the time when people were celebrating the centenary of St. Catherine's death.

The year commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Apparitions produced a wealth of studies and writings that treated the event in depth:

Letter of the Superior General, dated 27th November 1979, addressed to the whole Vincentian Family and inviting everyone to celebrate in a fitting manner the 150th

anniversary of Mary's Apparitions to St. Catherine Laboure. Among other things it said: "*May this year be for each of us and for all our communities, a truly Marian year.*"

Topics to be reflected on by local communities appeared in the Echoes of May-October 1980.

An international Marian session was held in the Mother-House from 1st-20th July 1981.

There were pilgrimages to Fain-les-Moutiers and to the "Berceau" of St. Vincent de Paul.

Before the 1979-1980 General Assembly came to a close it issued a statement on the Virgin Mary and this was the prelude to the celebrations. In a certain sense it was reliving the experience of Saint Louise going to Chartres to entrust everything to Our Lady. It was also a response to the question asked by the Superior General in his letter of November 27th; "*Is everything going so well with us at present that we do not need to heed its message?*" And the letter goes on to say, "*Without Mary, I am afraid that all this work (Constitutions and Statutes) will be in vain and just a lot of wind.*"

WHAT WAS HAPPENING OFFICIALLY?

Fr. Laurentin published the two books that were the fruit of his labours: "*Life of Catherine Laboure, seer of the rue du Bac and servant of the poor- 1806-1876*" and "*Report and proofs*" The first was dedicated to John Paul II who came on pilgrimage to rue du Bac on 31st May 1980 "*to celebrate the 150th anniversary in the bright light of pure truth.*" The nihil obstat was given by Fr. Dodin and the imprimatur by Fr. Lauwerier. Provincial Superior.

9th-13th September 1980:

Fr. Laurentin's message during the 150th anniversary Vincentian Week, at the request of Fr. Jose Manuel Sanchez Mallo, Director of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal at Los Milagros (Orense). The topics asked for were as follows:

Authenticity of the Apparitions,
The Miraculous Medal and the Virgin of the Globe
What the apparitions and the Medal signify.

A second report explained the description given of the apparition of the Virgin of the Globe. What was the content of these two apparitions on which the Medal was modelled?

The third shed some light on the Miraculous Medal itself: its authenticity, function, meaning and relevance.

There was tremendous enthusiasm among the people for the Miraculous Medal. Other enthusiasts include Cardinal Aloisi Masella, and even Popes Gregory XVI, Pius IX, Leo XIII and Pius X. At the same time there was a negative undercurrent; mistrust

and scorn for the apparitions of the Miraculous Medal was based on 3 factors: theological currents, historical criticism regarding the Miraculous Medal, and a lack of pastoral support for the medals which were seen as a derisory, outmoded and superstitious form of piety.

This explains how so much came to be written about the Medal.

25 YEARS AFTER THESE CELEBRATIONS FOR THE MEDAL, WHERE DO WE STAND NOW?

Let us begin by examining what Fr. Laurentin sees as the essential features of the Medal.

On the front of the Medal: we recognise the figure of **Mary**, conceived immaculate, Mother of God and Mother of Christ. She wears a white robe, a silvery blue cloak and a veil that is the colour of dawn.

Round her head are **12 stars**, in accordance with the description that Catherine wrote for the designer Lataille. This seems to be strong evidence that the apparition was in conformity with the vision of the Woman in the Apocalypse. (ch. 12).

The inscription surrounding the Blessed Virgin: the wording is strictly regulated and admits of no variation, *“O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.”*

The serpent: according to Catherine’s notes, *“the Blessed Virgin ...was standing on a crescent and crushing the serpent’s head with her heel.”* Catherine told Sr. Dufes, *“Yes, there was a serpent; it was greenish in colour with yellow markings.”*

The moon under her feet: Catherine speaks of a crescent. Would it be confusing to depict a crescent moon and at the same time represent the earth under the Blessed Virgin’s feet? That is probably why it was decided to show a half globe under her feet.

Before we go on to discuss the rays, we should say a few words about the **globe**. Catherine mentions two globes which both represent the world; one of these is in the Virgin’s hands and the other is under her feet. Catherine emphasises only the “globe” in her hands, something which represents the world and in a special way, France.

The new element in the apparition of 27th November is the **rays**. Witnesses affirm that Fr. Aladel and Catherine both speak of them. Catherine sees these rays as coming from the hands that hold the globe, so they come not from the palm but from the back of the hand. According to Catherine, Mary is offering up this globe. The rays become longer and more numerous. They fill the picture so that Our Lady’s feet and the end of her robe can no longer be seen.

A point that Catherine insists on is that “*suddenly*” the fingers of the apparition holding the globe become covered with rings set with gems. Precious stones would normally be seen on the back of the hand, not the palm. According to Catherine, these rays become large or small, according to the importance of the graces given. Finally, there are some stones that “*give out no rays of light*”; these correspond to “*the graces people neglect to ask for.*”

Catherine explains with enthusiasm that the apparition “*led her to understand how pleasant it is to pray....how generous the Blessed Virgin is...how happy she is to grant graces to people who ask her for them.*”

If there are some divergences in Fr. Aladel’s interpretation of the Medal it is still basically in accord with Catherine’s account: the apparition of the Virgin of the Rays concerns the world and France in particular. And these rays of light symbolise graces asked for and received. As there is this agreement on essential points, any differences in interpreting the pictures or medals is only secondary.

What is clear is that in the summer of 1834 Catherine was very definite about the many rays of light that appeared over the part of the globe that represented France. In her hand-written account, she uses the word “*represent*” a term that may have geographical connotations rather than using the written word “France.”

Catherine often complained that “*Our Lady was not portrayed on the Medal exactly as she had seen her*” and yet she said, “*it has to be distributed*” and again, “*Don’t alter the Medal.*”

During St. Catherine’s last retreat (5th- 12th November 1876), when she was talking to Sr. Cosnard, Sister of Office in the Seminary, she showed how upset she was that none of the representations of the Medal available at the time portrayed Our Lady exactly as she had seen her, but just showed her with rays coming from her hands.

What caused her most anxiety was the statue of the Virgin of the Globe; “*The Blessed Virgin insists that she wants an altar built in the place where she appeared and she wishes to be represented as offering the world to the Eternal Father.*”

She seemed to know by revelation the places where the Medal was being distributed and where this practice was neglected. “*There are some Sisters in the Seminary who do not wear the Medal and nobody thinks of giving them one,*” she said to Sister Cosnard.

On several occasions between 1873 and 1876 Sister Catherine said to Sr. Cosnard, “*They don’t want to have pilgrimages to the Mother-House. Nevertheless, pilgrims will come here.*”

Finally we can say this: Fr. Aladel presents Our Lady with her hands open and pointing downwards with luminous rays of light coming from them. Sister Catherine

always said, “*she held the globe in her hands just above her waist.*” Fr. Aladel never speaks of the hands in the position that Catherine describes, and Catherine never speaks of the position of the hands as mentioned by Fr. Aladel.

The important thing here is that the Virgin of the Globe is part of the manifestation of the Miraculous Medal.

The reverse side of the Medal: at the session in Salamanca, Fr. Feuillet dwelt on the three symbols that appear on the back of the Miraculous Medal:

The lower part shows the heart of Jesus encircled by a crown of thorns, juxtaposed to the heart of Mary, pierced by a sword.

Above this is the initial letter of Mary’s name, surmounted by a cross

At the edge of the Medal there are twelve stars.

1. The reverse side of the Medal truly speaks to us about Mary’s faith journey while she was on earth, it is by faith that she conquers. Simeon’s prophecy about a sword piercing Mary’s soul, prefigures her participation in the Passion of her Son.

So what light is shed by the Miraculous Medal?

The close proximity of the two hearts, the heart of Jesus and the heart of Mary, does more than stress that devotion to Mary is intrinsically linked to worship of Christ the Redeemer. It gives added light on a more particular aspect of Simeon’s prophecy, “*and your own soul a sword shall pierce so that the secret thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.*”, these words are connected with what he said about the Messiah, “*This child is set for the fall*” so the prophecy is not exclusively related Mary.

The Miraculous Medal gives us a deeper insight into the meaning of these words by linking them to the mystery of Divine Love, the redemptive Incarnation.

The heart of Jesus, encircled by a crown of thorns, reminds us that Christ’s Passion is the wonderful manifestation of God’s loving desire to save sinful humanity. Mary’s transpierced heart placed next to the heart of Christ with its crown of thorns, opens up new horizons on many aspects of Sacred Scripture. The crowning with thorns is linked to all the main events of the Passion – from the arrest of Jesus to the scourging, insults, his being spat on and condemned to death. An essential part of the Passion is the time he spent in Gethsemane; there the heart of Christ conquered all his anguish, his fear, his terror, his wavering about his mission to freely accomplish his Father’s will.

2. The M and the Cross: this symbol can only be telling us one thing: in the work of our redemption, Mary is closely associated with Jesus the only Saviour. The horizontal bar over the first letter of Mary’s name suggests that in some way she was welded to the foot of the Cross and it seems to show that the crucified Jesus and his Mother are inseparably linked in this supreme event in the history of salvation.

In his explanations of the symbols, Fr. Feuillet highlights the role played by Mary, in dependence on Jesus, as suggested by the fact that her initial is placed at the foot of the Cross. We see the luminous rays of light that come from Mary's hands.

The prophet Malachai spoke of "*the sun of righteousness shining out with healing in its rays*" (Ml. 3,20). On the medal, the rays of the sun of justice that bring physical or spiritual healing to men and women, come from Mary's hands, so it would seem that they have to come to us through her. This is another way of saying that Jesus uses her to dispense waves of redeeming graces of salvation.

3. The Medal's twelve stars:

In three passages from the Bible, mention is made of stars whose number is of special significance.

In Gen.37,9, eleven stars bow down before Joseph – they symbolise his eleven brothers who prostrate themselves before him in Egypt.

In Apocalypse 1,20, the seven stars that John saw in the right hand of the Son of Man are the seven Churches of Asia.

In Apocalypse 12,1 the Woman clothed with the sun has a crown of twelve stars.

Since twelve stars are not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture, the twelve stars of the Miraculous Medal must relate to this mysterious Woman of the Apocalypse: "*A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman adorned with the sun, standing on the moon and with twelve stars on her head for a crown.*" (Ap 12,1).

THE MIRACULOUS MEDAL AND REVELATION

The main facts from Scripture that seem to be related to the Miraculous Medal are texts connected with the Virgin Mary. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Miraculous Medal has rendered a great service to the Christian people because it has passed down to them the essential meaning of the inspired texts: the prophecy of Simeon (Lk 2,35), Mary at the foot of the Cross (Jn 19, 25-27) and the Woman crowned with stars (Ap 12,1). When taken together, these three passages from the New Testament which seem to refer in a special way to the Miraculous Medal, are a powerful synthesis of Marian doctrine. These three texts are interconnected: the prophecy of Simeon foretells the very close union between the Messiah and his Mother during the Passion. The scene that St. John describes (19, 25-27) represents the highest point of this union and at the same time tells us what it signified for Mary; she becomes the spiritual Mother of all her Son's disciples, represented here by St. John.

The vision described in chapter 12 of the Apocalypse reiterates these truths with even greater forcefulness; Christ and his Mother are so intimately linked during his Passion, that this can only be described in the terms of the pains of childbirth, the Mother of Jesus giving birth to the Messiah.

In the Apocalypse Mary is associated with the Passion of her Son and also with his triumph, just as in the Gospels and throughout the whole New Testament, the mystery of the crucified Christ cannot be separated from the mystery of the risen and glorified Christ.

In conclusion I will quote a passage from the session at Salamanca on the relationship between Revelation and private revelations: *“God gave the world a definitive Revelation which, it is generally agreed, came to an end with the death of the last Apostle: authentic private revelation can not only add nothing substantial to this but it must, moreover, tell us something which in one way or another is genuinely part of revealed truth.”*

“We can apply these principles to the private revelation given at rue du Bac. It is evidently meant to increase the Christian people’s devotion to the Virgin Mary. It not only anticipates the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception but also foreshadows a number of apparitions made by Our Lady after that date and in accordance with the same divine plan to move Christians to turn to Mary so that she will help them to find the only Saviour.”

But in this domain Revelation has to impose limits and prevent deviations and excesses.

Sister Claire Herrmann,
Archives

Sources

Rue du Bac archives.

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“Catherine Laboure and the Miraculous Medal” – Rene Laurentin and Fr. Roche CM

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Ninth Vincentian Studies Week in Salamanca (9th-13th September 1980). – Rene Laurentin and Fr. Feuillet.

SPECIAL 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE APPARITIONS OF 1830

Mother-House

29th November 2005

Visit of his Excellency, Bishop Rode, CM

On 29th November 2005, his Excellency, Bishop Rode, member of the Congregation for Bishops, emeritus Archbishop of Ljubljana, and Prefect of the Congregation for Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life, honoured this Jubilee for the 175th anniversary of the Apparitions by celebrating the Community Mass

in the Chapel of the Mother-House. Afterwards he met the General Council, and the elderly Sisters and then visited the Archives.

This is the homily he gave at Mass:

The celebrations marking the 175th anniversary of the Apparitions at rue du Bac must have been for you, Sisters, and for very many people, unforgettable days of faith and renewed confidence in the Blessed Virgin's protection. Following on from them, and as a continuation of the festivities, we are celebrating today, the 29th November, the anniversary of the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. It is to commemorate these two events of major importance in your history that you have gathered here today round the table of the Lord.

It was on 29th November 1633 that the Company of the Daughters of Charity, servants of the sick poor, came into being. For some time, Louise de Marillac and Monsieur Vincent had been noticing that the Ladies of Charity, in spite of their goodwill, could not provide a regular service for the sick. Louise brought together in community some good village girls and they lived with her near the parish of Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet.

The aim of this new group was to honour Our Lord by the corporal and spiritual service of the poor, by looking after the sick in their own homes, by instructing village girls, serving the convicts in the galleys, caring for old people in institutions and wounded soldiers on the battlefields, and caring for foundlings. It was a completely new type of Company. Its daughters did not wear a religious habit or take solemn vows. They were united in the love of Our Lord and the desire to serve Him in the poor. Monsieur Vincent explained to them that there are two ways of showing this love: there is affective love and effective love. Affective love on its own is not enough, says this great realist who knows what he is talking about. We need both forms of love. We have to move on from affective love to effective love which is shown in works of charity and the service of the poor, undertaken with joy, courage, perseverance and love. (IX 593).

In his monthly conferences Vincent progressively defined the identity of the Daughter of Charity, stressing most particularly, the importance of the spiritual life. "*We have to cultivate the interior life and if we fail in this, we fail in everything.*" (XII, 131) The same idea keeps coming back in other forms, "*We must start by establishing the reign of God in our own lives, and then in the lives of others.*" (II, 97). The precondition for doing this is to desire to give oneself completely to God. "*We have to give ourselves to God in order to be divested of self. The essential thing is that we give ourselves.*"

The important thing is that we give ourselves. Saint Vincent keeps coming back to this basic requirement of the Christian life. It is another way of expressing those words of the gospel, "*Unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain, but if it dies it yields a rich harvest.*" (Jn 12, 24).

So that is it. Being divested of self, being willing to die in order to bear much fruit. In short, what counts in this short life of ours is that we bear fruit. The greatest misfortune would be to remain sterile and waste our life in idleness and selfishness.

What saves us in the end and justifies our existence in the world, is the noble virtue of charity, the passionate desire to make of our lives something beautiful, it is the constant striving after holiness, it is wanting to be faithful to the gospel. So our basic task is to strive, day after day, for holiness, without giving up. This is our vocation.

The great paradox of Christianity is the teaching that our lives will be successful only on condition that we deny ourselves, practise renunciation, die to self. In our own lives we have to relive the mystery of Christ's death if we are to share in his glory. It means living out with absolute authenticity, these essential words of the Gospel, *"Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.* (Lk 9, 24).

We have to have the courage to lose ourselves, to be out of our depth and to allow ourselves to be carried along by the love of God when there are so many things that can hold us back. We must overcome timidity and a certain kind of prudence that is too human. Boldness, and at times even violence, are called for: *"The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm."* (Mt. 11.12). We must not lose confidence in God but be daring enough to lose everything for Christ and the gospel.

Commenting on this passage from the gospel, Romano Guardini writes, *"There is a law which says that the man who saves his life, that is, who remains wrapped up in himself and recognises no other value except what seems to him to be immediately evident, misses what is essential. If he wishes to find the truth and in this truth find his real self, he must lose his life."* Losing one's life, giving oneself to God, is to find one's true self and live in truth. Holiness means relinquishing shadows, deceptive appearances and illusions; it means coming to the truth about oneself and about the world, it means living in truth before God.

In the light of these gospel requirements that Saint Vincent explained so clearly in the early days of your Company, let us look at the message of the Apparitions to Saint Catherine Laboure, events of which we are now celebrating the 175th anniversary. Let us begin by asking ourselves who was this young novice from Fain-les-Moutiers whom the Virgin Mary chose to be her confidante.

"It was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning, and to shame what is strong that he chose what is weak by human reckoning." (1Co 1,27). These words can certainly be applied to Saint Catherine, *"It was not for me that Our Lady appeared,"* she said. *"If she has chosen me, an ignoramus, it was so that nobody would be able to doubt her."*

It was to this humble and hidden Sister that Our Lady first appeared on 18th July 1830, the eve of the feast of Saint Vincent. *“I looked at the Blessed Virgin and was at her side at a single bound, with my hands resting on Our Lady’s knees,”* said Sister Catherine. It was *“the sweetest moment of her life.”* *“Looking very distressed,”* the Blessed Virgin speaks of the misfortunes to come, *“The whole world will be turned upside down by misfortunes of every kind. The Cross will be mocked. The throne will be toppled.”* Then came the words that make rue du Bac for ever a very special and favoured place, *“But come to the foot of this altar. There, graces will be poured out on all, great or small, who ask for them with confidence and fervour.”* These words have been etched into our collective memory and they draw crowds of people to this important place of Marian piety.

During the second vision, on 27th November 1830, Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception was manifested. From Mary’s hands come rays of wondrous brightness, *“symbol of the graces Mary obtains for people”*. And around the picture, in letters of gold, appears the inscription, *“O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.”* Then comes the command to have a medal struck according to this model. People who wear it will experience Mary’s very special protection.

So these are the facts. This is the message. Perhaps we don’t always realise its importance for the Vincentian Family and the fact that it was a Daughter of Saint Vincent who was chosen to give this message to the world. It shows very clearly the special love that the Blessed Virgin has for the double family. She says, *“I love to shower graces on the community that I love dearly.”* But she also expressed her sorrow at the tepidity, mediocrity and the “great relaxation” prevalent in both communities. Our Lady is asking us to renew our fervour and be converted to a way of life that is more in keeping with the gospel.

We have to find new spiritual energy by becoming more deeply and firmly rooted in Christ. This is necessary if the Sons and Daughters of Saint Vincent are to be a new, more active, and more devoted presence in the Church and in the world.

Bishop Franc Rode, CM

SPECIAL 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE APPARITIONS OF 1830

**Saint Catherine Laboure
humble servant of God and of the poor**

“The blessed and the Saints were people who were not continually seeking their own happiness but simply wanted to give themselves because they were inspired by the light of Christ. In this way they point out to us the path that leads to happiness.

BENEDICT XVI to the JMV
(Cologne, 20th August 2005)

Saint Catherine must be smiling to see us talking about her; if there is any person who did not lose her common sense after Our Lady's apparitions it is her: if there is anyone who wanted to remain silent about what passed between Mary and herself, it is Catherine. But the grace of God does not depend on our wishes or actions. It is granted to us in the way that God wants. The message that Catherine Laboure has passed on to us, and the invocation she has given us to ask for Mary's intercession, "*O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you*", help us...to live our daily life in poverty of spirit so that we can welcome God's gift to us.

Bishop Vingt-Trois, speaking to pilgrims in the Chapel
(Paris, 26th November 2005)

Dear Saint Catherine Laboure
thank you for teaching us how to look on people:
if we are to serve Christ in the Poor.
thank you for leading us to live as servants
in a spirit of humility, to serve the Poor in Christ.

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*With Mary Immaculate
make your life a hymn of praise*

*When true love
which is charity,
takes possession of your heart,
the Beauty of God
comes and "clothes" you
with whatever is best in you,
so that you may discover
the best in other people.*

*Your song then becomes
an act of praise.
Your words are psalms
and their harmony
reflects his Glory.*

HAPPY 2006!

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