

January-February Echoes 2006

Contents

Editorial

Spiritual Life

Letter to all Daughters of Charity, Mother-House, 1st January 2006
Father Gregory Gay, Superior General

Letter of 1st January 2006
Mother Evelyne Franc, Superioress General

Lent 2006
Father Gregory Gay, Superior General

7th Study document: "Formation"
Father Javier Alvarez, Director General

Outline for monthly retreat: "What contemplation means for a Daughter of Charity"
Father Javier Alvarez, Director General

Present day challenges

Poverty and immigration

Saint Vincent...and after his times: The service of the poor today
Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor

News from the Provinces

Sisters' testimonies

Province of Gijon: The "Prince of Asturias" Prize
Sister Asuncion Garcia, Daughter of Charity

Province of Madagascar: "The water tower of reconciliation"
Sister Marie-Madeleine Razafiarisoa, Daughter of Charity

Province of Nigeria: The new mission of Binde (Ghana)
Sister Bernardine Pemii, Daughter of Charity

Province of Barcelona: A Christmas that was completely different!
The community of Tortosa

The poor speak to us

Province of France- South: *“When Jesus heard these words he was astonished”* (Lk 7,9)
Sister Vincent, Daughter of Charity

Newsbriefs

Inter-Provincial Encounter (Slav Provinces)
Thanksgiving for a new beginning

History of the Company

Special bicentenary of the birth of Catherine Laboure

Saint Catherine’s passionate love of God and of the poor

1. Her life at Fain-les-Moutiers
Sister Anne Prevost, Daughter of Charity

EDITORIAL

Three anniversaries in one!

This can be said of the years, 2004, 2005 and 2006! With the Blessed Virgin, and “like the One who pondered all these things in her heart”, here is a recap of some events past and present that can nourish our daily lives as Daughters of Charity.

Year 2004: 150th anniversary of the Church’s promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

It is impossible to describe the wonder of this mystery which nourishes our prayer life and guides us in our commitments. The November-December Echoes 2004 set out to show us in a special way just how much Mary is the creature in whom God is able to give himself completely for she is the immaculate conception of our God. This truth of our faith is something to be contemplated rather than explained, it is also a reminder of God’s designs on us and an invitation to live in response to his Love. By solemnly celebrating this feast on 8th December 2004, we heard, even more insistently, the call to be *“holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence”* as St. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians. (Eph 1,4).

During this year of the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of this dogma, the revised Constitutions and Statutes came into force. On 29th November 1633, like the twelve apostles gathered in the Cenacle with Mary to continue Christ’s mission, twelve good village girls gathered round Saint Louise, in order to inflame, in their turn, the

world of the poor with the fire of charity, “*taking Mary to their abode*” as their only Mother. On 29th November 2004, all Daughters of Charity throughout the world committed themselves, with the help of Mary Immaculate, to living the new Constitutions which have been updated for our times.

Year 2005: 175th anniversary of the apparitions at rue du Bac

We cannot measure the repercussions the message of the Medal had on the proclamation of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, on 8th December 1854, in St. Peter's, Rome. Could we not say that Mary intervened personally to commit the Church to solemnly promulgate her immaculate conception as an article of faith?

During the year 2005, we prepared our hearts to celebrate the 175th anniversary by taking note of some reflections on the Message of the apparitions. On 27th November 2005 we have thanked the Lord, together, for these 175 years of asking the intercession of “*Mary conceived without sin*” and these 175 years of grateful prayers for countless graces we have received.

Year 2006: Bicentenary of the birth of St. Catherine Laboure

This year, 2006, is an opportunity for us to go back to the core message of the apparitions, handed down to us by Sister Catherine, a message she lived out to the full. In her own words, “*she knew nothing*” but out of this “nothing” God did great things. Confidante of Mary Immaculate, she is also a humble servant of the poor, after the example of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise.

Can we not see these events coming together over these three years as an appeal by Our Lady Immaculate for us to think about the witness she chose and to discover, through the life of Catherine, the path of holiness to be followed by a Daughter of Charity? As Father Laurentin said, “*The apparitions of the Medal that so rapidly came to be called “miraculous”, led us to overlook a more hidden wonder, the holiness of Catherine herself. For Catherine, as for Bernadette Soubirous, the apparitions were not a starting point, or waving a magic wand, but the wonderfully glowing sanctity which was already deeply rooted since the days of their childhood. If she attains the heights of Tabor it is to come down from the mountain and find the Cross.*”

In her letter of 1st January 2006, Mother Evelyne writes: “*Saint Catherine knew how to unite her prayer life, marked by an exceptional devotion to Mary, with her community life for the mission, that is, the service of Christ in persons who are poor. I hope that the 200th anniversary of her birth will be the occasion for us to discover at a deeper level, her heritage for today.*”

Throughout this year we will strive to enter into the dynamics of Catherine's life in her response to the Spirit. Saint Catherine was able, in her everyday life, to be

inventive in facing up to new needs. Can she not help us to live more in conformity with the path of love traced out for us in our Constitutions and Statutes?

This year, the Echo also has a new section on immigration, to help us to reflect on this question that many Provinces have been aware of for a long time. Today, however, this displacement of peoples is a global phenomenon that has worldwide repercussions and gives rise to new forms of poverty that are a challenge to our international Company. The conferences and the testimonies will be taken from the session for Sisters working with migrants, which took place at the Motherhouse in September 2005.

FATHER G.GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

To the Daughters of Charity

Motherhouse, Paris, 1st January 2006

In the course of a year the Lord speaks to us in different ways. In fact, he has something to say to us every day. However, because we are so slow to open our hearts to God's presence in our lives, it is only at certain moments that we realise that he is speaking clearly to us and showing us His love. At the beginning of 2006, I would like to share with you, dear Sisters, five important occasions when God spoke to me, to the Church, to the world, and in a special way, to all of you as this year 2005 comes to a close.

First of all, the most important event in my life this year, was the death of my mother. The two weeks I spent with her before she died had a big effect on my life, both as a person and as a priest. I arrived from Rome to be with her on Tuesday of Holy Week: she had just come out of hospital and was in a care home. She knew perfectly well that her life was coming to an end.

I would like to speak particularly of the first whole day that I spent with her. I said the rosary and then I looked at my mother as she was sleeping. Tears came into my eyes and I began to weep. She woke up and said, "What's wrong?" I then asked God to let me speak to her from the depths of my heart at this sad time. I said to my mother, "As a priest I often have to speak to people who are dying. I have learnt to listen to them and bring them God's comfort and love. The time has come for me as a priest and as a son, to face this moment in the life of someone I love dearly." Then I started to cry and my mother took me into her arms and whispered, "Everything is fine. I'm fine. I am ready to go to God's house."

The saddest time was the day that I had to go back to Rome. We both knew that we would not see each other again, at least in this life. We hugged each other tightly and then I thanked her for the gift of life and for the love she had shown me. I will always be

grateful to God for giving me the grace to express from the bottom of my heart, what I felt for my mother, even though I have to admit it was not easy and I was afraid of doing it.

I also thank God for giving me the courage to let her go, the grace to be able to think of her, particularly when she was in pain, and to encourage her to go to the Father. It sometimes happens that we become very possessive and selfish in our way of loving others. God is continually asking us gently to love more deeply, to love in a selfless way and to think first about other people.

I ask God to help all of us to love, to have a special love for the poor and to love them for their sake, not for ours. In my room I have this text, "Lord, I want to love the poor and I want to love them for their sake, not for mine."

The second event I would like to share with you, one which I think has significance for the world, is the death of John Paul II. When I was at home with my mother, just after John Paul died, many commentators spoke of him as "an extraordinary man." After hearing this description a good number of times, mother looked at me and said, "What do you think about the Pope being described as "extraordinary?" Deep down I knew what she meant and we talked together quite simply: I said to her, "This is often the problem with today's world. We make ordinary people so extraordinary that it's impossible to imitate them."

Pope John Paul was an ordinary man. He will certainly be remembered for his writings about freedom, about peace and social justice. But he will be remembered particularly as the people's Pope, as the man who was able to reach out to the world and come close to people. He changed the whole face of the hierarchical Church by showing that he was accessible, not somebody above others but one of their number, someone who had profound respect for every human person. He remembered this even when a man in the crowd tried to kill him. His reaction was unique, as we all know his response was to forgive the man. He never gave up mingling with crowds of people. Even when times were most difficult and during his suffering last moments of life, he still remained "the people's Pope."

As individuals, and as members of the Vincentian Family, we can learn a lot from Pope John Paul. We are called to be ordinary people, not superior to others but alongside them, especially the poor, showing respect for all God's children. When we contemplate the saints and the blessed of our Vincentian Family we realise that we are all ordinary folk. Let us keep to this ordinariness and so be able to imitate them by being faithful in following Jesus Christ in the evangelisation of the poor.

The third significant event was the election of his successor. At the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI showed that he was a humble, simple and gentle person. He does not try to be another John Paul II. He seems to recognise the limitations of his health and his age. He lives within these limits. The time that I came closest to him was at the World Youth Congress in Cologne. He came across as a very

compassionate person, someone who knows what he wants to say and is in command of himself. May we all be like this throughout this new year of 2006, even when we have certain roles to play. One of the lessons I have learned from the election of our new Pope, is that in truth the Holy Spirit continues to be present in the Church in order to guide us, raising up for us those who are called to leadership so that our faith as members of Christ's Body may be strengthened.

We have much to learn from Pope Benedict: how to live our lives within our own limitations, how to act in accordance with these limitations, how to depend on others and be compassionate, how to be ourselves quite simply, not being afraid of what others may think of us and not being concerned about fulfilling other people's expectations.

The fourth important event, this time an event that concerns you all as Daughters of Charity, is the study of your new Constitutions. After starting to study them the challenge for you now is to interiorise them, to deepen your understanding of their message, not just what this says about you, but also the challenges it holds out: not just the things you can say "amen" to, but also the things you might have some hesitation about. May this be your challenge for 2006.

May I point out some ways of making these challenges specific. Pray constantly, Sisters. Don't just pray for the poor but also with the poor. In your local communities live out well this gift of your vow of obedience by sharing openly with others your discernment of what God wills for you all. Go on tirelessly serving the poor and do this not in a way that suits you but in a way that suits them. The witness of your prayer, your community life and your apostolic zeal will attract vocations. I am convinced of this.

The fifth important event in 2005 for you as Daughters of Charity was the recognition and great honour that the whole Company received in being awarded the Prince of Asturias Concord Prize. Glory to God for all the wonders He has worked through the Daughters of Charity all over the world and that their self-giving in the service of the poor has been recognised at international level. In their Christmas letters to me, Sisters from all over the world have said that the Prize is not only a great honour but it is also a big challenge for the whole Company of the Daughters of Charity and a call to live more deeply what we are meant to be.

It is a challenge to continually inculturate the charism in a world characterised by secularism, by rejection of religious values, by its indifference to matters of religion and faith in God. The challenge that lies ahead of you is to discern how, as a Society of Apostolic Life in the Church, we can help the world to recognise the seeds of the Word present in all human endeavours to promote justice and peace for all.

Another challenge I have discovered is to decide how we are to continue to live our mission of service of the poor. Today, many religious and lay communities are deeply committed to poor people. This may be why there are fewer young women seeking God in the service of the poor, in the Company of the Daughters of Charity, particularly in rich countries. It is not because people are less interested in serving their

needy brothers and sisters; quite the contrary, today more and more young people, religious and laity, give their attention to those in need. But in what way are we “unique?” It is not a question of competing with others who serve people who are poor. But what is it that makes us “unique?” You should glorify God and encourage one another, as the Constitutions say, particularly in working to bring relief in unjust situations and the problems facing the poor.

What are you doing with regard to this challenge? I think you must continue to have confidence in what you are. On the one hand, you have to remain faithful to your own special traditions, but on the other hand, you must know how to inculturate these traditions in such a way as to help others, particularly the poor, to know God’s love for them. Your experience will help you to love God in loving them. Drawing close to those who are poor will draw you closer to God. Saint Vincent reminds us that true religion, that experience or encounter with the living God, is found among the poor. (cf. SV XI, 200-201).

I hope that these five points (the death of my mother, the death of Pope John Paul II, the election of Pope Benedict XVI, your study of the Constitutions and the fact that you were awarded the Prince of Asturias Concord Prize) will help you in some way to strive to be more faithful to the Lord during 2006.

My dear Sisters, grasp the moment. Be creative in living out your charism. Don’t be held back by fear. Be yourselves, not somebody else. Walk very close to those who are poor. Have respect for them. Say yes to God, not only when He speaks gently to your heart and you find His words consoling, but say yes to God when He provokes (challenges) your heart. Be Sisters who live for one another in community, so that you may be better able to see and discern God’s will.. Strive continually to find new ways of living the charism, keeping always in mind your responsibility to raise up, to the glory of God, his specially chosen ones, the poor. :Live in harmony and work for peace. Dream of dying for the poor, and ask God for the grace to live for them.

May Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, of whom we celebrated last November 27th, the 175th anniversary of the apparitions to Saint Catherine Laboure, intercede for you so that her Son, Jesus Christ, may pour out on you abundant graces.

Father G. Gregory Gay, CM
Superior General

MOTHER E. FRANC, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of 1st January 2006

Dear Sisters,

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us always!

“May justice break forth into full bloom” (cf. Isaiah 45;8).

This short passage from the prophet Isaiah, which we heard during the Eucharistic liturgy on Wednesday of the third week in Advent, has stayed with me in prayer since then, and I would like to offer it today for your reflection and to illustrate my loving wishes for a happy and holy 2006.

Before saying anything else about my wishes for the Company and for each one of you, I must thank you for all the correspondence I have received since the beginning of December. Messages arrived from practically all the local communities, describing how you serve Christ directly or indirectly in people who are poor, as well as the service you give through the apostolate of prayer. All your letters also stressed the interest you are taking in the study of the Constitutions, and described the joys and the challenges of your Community experience. I am very grateful to you for what you share, as this helps me to understand your circumstances and it reminds me of memorable visits made to various places. Your letters also give testimony to your “passion for Jesus Christ that impels you to go out to those who are poor, courageously, compassionately and in ways that are creative”, to your desire to profit from the time of grace offered to us and finally, to your commitment to the Company and your interest in the lived experience of each Province.

I would now like to return to the short passage from Isaiah which I quoted at the beginning of this letter. *“May justice break forth into full bloom.”* This sentence touched me because it evokes the great Hope of the Kingdom, a new time when humankind will fully live the spirit of the Beatitudes. Is not this prophecy the best wish we could offer our world at the beginning of this XXIst century, and one that we could perhaps offer to each other? It is about a hope that men and women of today might recognise Love come into the world. It calls us to live with greater intensity our service of Christ in those who are poor, our Vincentian promotion of our brothers and sisters who are the most destitute, exploited and despised people.

As we know, this *justice that breaks forth into full bloom* is not the result of scientific progress, technology or the declaration of human rights... Is it not rather the Spirit of the Lord at work in the human heart? Have you seen buds opening up, bursting forth all at once? Only the Spirit of the Lord can create such a wonder.

The Holy Father’s message for the celebration of World Peace Day reminds us that justice is one of the conditions for peace. Pope Benedict XVI describes peace as “a harmonious coexistence of individual citizens within a society governed by justice: one in which good is also achieved, as far as this is possible, for each one of them.” (no.6).

The recent Compendium to the Social Teaching of the Church recapitulates the entire strongly worded instruction regarding the search for an integrated human development of solidarity. The analytical index presents the word “justice”, giving many stirring references that speak to our hearts as Daughters of Charity. In fact, our service of Christ in persons who are poor gives us so many opportunities to work courageously for justice, sometimes going against the mainstream, in order for a tiny bud to open. Let us read again, for example, the postscript of Saint Louise’s letter to Saint Vincent on 11th July 1652: *“Our sister serving the galley slaves came to me in tears, yesterday, because she cannot get any more bread for her poor men since she owes so much to the baker and bread is so expensive. She borrows and begs for them everywhere, with great difficulty. To add to her sorrow, the Duchess d’Aiguillon wants her to make a list of those she thinks are to be excluded.”* For us today, the words of Constitution 24e are also very clear about the commitment we must have if we are to bring about a more just world: *“While respecting the situation of the individual, they (the Daughters of Charity) take up the cause of those who are working to defend their rights. They commit themselves to work for social transformation to change the unjust structures that cause poverty.”*

When urban violence erupted in the outskirts of several cities in France at the end of October, the bishops did indeed condemn the violence and the inexcusable destruction, but they also emphasised the link between the cries of “tormented souls” and the aspiration for greater justice and equal opportunities among those born of immigrant parents. They also expressed gratitude to those communities that share in the life of these suffering towns, and the schools that accept young people with problems. The Encounter held at the Motherhouse last September for Sisters in ministry with migrants was an opportunity for excellent exchanges on this same subject which was studied in depth in its international setting. In a few days you will receive a document drawn up by those who participated in this Encounter. It suggests possible courses of action and reflection at Provincial level.

It is right to point out another positive action that we have undertaken in favour of social justice. It concerns all the projects you have sent to IPS (International Project Services) for the promotion of people who are poor. Since September 2004, more than 112 projects have been presented by 34 Provinces and 70 of them were able to receive funding.

A Vincentian glance at the year 2005 allows us to give thanks to God for all the opportunities we have been given to serve persons who are poor, to pray for them, and in their name, according to the beautiful tradition started by Marguerite Naseau, even before 1633. Let us praise the Lord for so many activities that have developed to assist the victims of the tsunami in South India, Thailand and Indonesia, and the response given to other catastrophes that struck Louisiana, Central America, the Caribbean, South America, Kashmir, and also for the relief brought to victims of violence and selfishness throughout all the continents. The Concord Award 2005, given to the Company by the Prince of Asturias Foundation, highlights in a broader sense, “the social and humanitarian work in favour of poor and neglected people..... carried out for nearly four centuries, and the work in the name of justice, peace and solidarity throughout the world.” Here again, let

us give glory to God, thanking him for having called us to follow our first Sisters, and,...let us press on ahead!

A Vincentian glance forward to the year which is beginning, urges me to confide several intentions to your prayers. We will be having various encounters at the Motherhouse: one in January for the representatives of the Vincentian Family, one in April for recently appointed Directors and the Visitatrices' Encounter in May. There will also be several formation sessions, the usual Vincentian session, and another session specifically for the Sisters of Asia. Let us pray together that all these gatherings may contribute to a better service of Christ in the person of those who are poor.

In 2006 we celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of Saint Catherine Laboure. She knew how to integrate her life of prayer which was marked by exceptional devotion to Our Lady, with her community life for the mission, that is the service of Christ in persons who are poor. I hope that the 200th anniversary of her birth will be an opportunity for us to appreciate at a deeper level what she has bequeathed to us for our own times.

I confide our new year to Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of the Company. May she teach us to live under the watchful eye of God and be attentive to his will, so as to be worthy servants!

Happy and holy 2006!

With my affectionate devotion,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

MOTHER E. FRANC, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of 2nd February 2006

Dear Sisters,

My thoughts and my prayers are united to yours on this feast day of February 2nd, World Day of the Consecrated Life. With each one of you, I give thanks to the Lord for calling us to follow him in the Company of the Daughters of Charity. This morning I had the happiness of presenting to Father Gregory our request to renew our vows. You were all very much in my thoughts during this faith-filled experience which I entered into, as I know you yourselves did, in "*an attitude of interior poverty favourable to the reception of the Spirit*", as Constitution 36b expresses it so beautifully. The young Sisters and the Seminary Sisters who support us with their prayers were in my thoughts as was each Sister who had asked to renew her vows for the first, the tenth, the sixtieth or even more times.

I shared very simply with Father Gregory our joy in belonging to the Company and our desire to be faithful in being “totally given to God in community for the service of Christ in those who are poor.” I told him of our desire to ratify this by our vows of service to those who are poor, chastity, poverty and obedience. I also mentioned our inconsistency in living out our vows.

Our Superior General granted us the grace of renewing our vows on March 25th, Feast of the Annunciation. I expressed our gratitude for this and now I invite you to prepare joyfully and fervently for our coming Renovation of the vows, in company with Mary. Later that same day, I was able to participate in the Eucharistic Celebration in Saint Peter’s Basilica. I was able to do this thanks to the Sisters at Casa Maria Immacolata, who had procured an entrance ticket for me. The Basilica was filled with thousands of monks, nuns, men and women religious, and other consecrated persons. In his homily the Pope emphasised that all of us were “an eloquent sign of the presence of God’s Kingdom in today’s world...sentinels who discover and proclaim the new life that is already present in history.” As I prayed for our Renovation I took the words of the opening prayer of the Eucharistic liturgy and made them our own: “All-powerful and eternal God, we make this humble prayer to you: as Christ your Son became man for us and was presented in the temple, may we, too, be able to come before you with purified hearts.”

As in the previous two years, I would like to present you with a few brief comments on one of the Action Lines. This time I will focus on the subject of formation. These ideas will be very general and their only purpose is to stimulate reflection about renewing our vows. Formation is a very wide-ranging topic. Numerous Church documents have been devoted to this subject and in the Company, also, we have a solid basis of materials relating to formation, particularly the Constitutions and Statutes, the Instruction on the Vows and the Guide to Initial Formation. Finally, we have in our Provinces, a Provincial Plan, a Formation Plan, and Local Community Plans, all of which lay down specific measures to be taken.

In my visits to the Provinces I notice the great effort that is being put into formation at all levels, and I truly thank God for this. In preparation for March 25th let us reflect on one particular aspect of formation – formation understood as an attitude of the heart. It is this attitude that helps us to experience even more deeply the influence of the Spirit, in accordance with our Vincentian heritage.

I will be using Constitution 49, the first article in this chapter on formation, as the main theme for this reflection: *“In Scripture, when choosing someone for a special vocation, God promises to point out the way. **Gradually, by the light of the Spirit, the path becomes clear.** The Company gives great importance to both initial and ongoing formation, in order to strengthen and energise the Sister in her vocation, to offer quality service to those who are poor, and to know and discern the signs of the times. Formation allows the woman to live her vocation as a **progressive remodelling of herself on Christ, with renewed fidelity to the Spirit and to the aim of the Company.**”*

GRADUALLY, BY THE LIGHT OF THE SPIRIT, THE PATH BECOMES CLEAR

This phrase brings to our mind the great accounts we have of the vocation of people such as Abraham, Moses, Saint Paul or Saint Catherine Laboure, and their journey in the light of the Spirit, but it is also confirmed in the life of each of us. Article 69 of the post-Synodal Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, has this to say about formation: “*At no stage of life can people feel so secure and committed that they do not need to give careful attention to ensuring perseverance in faithfulness, just as there is no age at which a person has completely achieved maturity*”. In article 70 it goes on to say, “*There is a youthfulness of spirit that lasts throughout time; it arises from the fact that at every stage of life, a person seeks and finds a new task to fulfil, a particular way of being, serving and of loving.*”

We know that formation is necessary for each one of us. If we look on it as a means of growing in fidelity, who among us would dare to say she does not need it? Seen from this perspective, formation expresses an attitude of heart which desires to respond in fidelity to those echoes of our first call which can spring up at any moment in our everyday life. The first statement in the Lines of Action on Formation could well indicate the course to follow. “*Make our own the updated Constitutions and Statutes.*”

It is perfectly clear in Constitution 28 that we make our vows “*according to the Constitutions and Statutes.*” Assimilating this book of life in the light of the Spirit will clarify our path, mobilise us, require a response and at times will even lift us out of our spiritual comfort zone. It will allow us to listen to the Lord who calls us to deepen our total gift in the practice of one or other of the vows. It *makes us free to love more, to progress even further.*

- For example, can we honestly say that our chastity is lived out as an “unconditional gift and total availability in the service of those who are poor”? (cf. C.29)
- Is our practice of poverty accompanied by an examination of how we use goods with reference to the world’s resources, our life style with reference to those whom we serve? (cf. S.16a).
- Is our obedience lived with reference to the attitude of Christ, the faithful Servant of the Father’s plan? (cf. C.31a)

Listening to the Spirit in this way will make clear what the Lord expects of us when we renew our vows in 2006, listening which is essential for interiorising what we have learned at formation sessions in the strict sense of the word.

TO OFFER QUALITY SERVICE TO THOSE WHO ARE POOR, AND TO KNOW AND DISCERN THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Let us connect this phrase from Constitution 49 which applies to our specific vow of service of those who are poor, to the third point mentioned in the Action Lines on Formation: “*Let us exercise discernment at all stages of our life.*”

People who are poor have the right to expect what is best in us. They have the right to our heart and I would refer you to the words of Pope Benedict XVI which apply, in a special way, to Daughters of Charity: *“The Christian programme- the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus – is to have “a heart that sees”. This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly.”* (Deus Caritas est, 31b).

People who are poor, our brothers and sisters who are weighed down by misery and violence, be this familial, social or political; people who are exploited and deprived of their basic human rights, all need quality service. Professional formation, in the strict sense of the term, is obviously essential for us and for those who collaborate with us. It is a question of justice. The Vincentian tradition has also instilled in us a concern for *“the development of every person in all aspects of their being”* and it encourages us to *“take up the cause of those who are poor...and work for social transformation to change the unjust structures that cause poverty.”* (cf. C.24e). Formation, in this context, is a necessary framework for our service if we are to base this on gospel, Church and Vincentian values, and relate it to the prevailing culture. In this sense, formation is at the service of the revision of works. Once again, Sisters, I recommend the useful source of reflection that is available to us in the Church’s social teaching.

Let us ask ourselves what effort we make to review before the Lord, personally and in community, the way that we serve, the way we live in solidarity with persons who are poor, and the way we are fighting against the causes of poverty. (cf. Statutes 8-12).

Discerning the signs of the times opens our hearts to the situations that surround us, allowing us to recognise the seeds of the Word already present in the world, and the Spirit that is at work. (cf. C.24c). Reflecting in common, with the Vincentian Family and with others committed to the service of the most destitute, is a source of enrichment that often provides ideas that facilitate community decision-making. How much time do we give to this?

TO LIVE OUR VOCATION AS A PROGRESSIVE MODELLING ON CHRIST, WITH RENEWED FIDELITY TO THE SPIRIT AND TO THE AIM OF THE COMPANY...

These words from C.49 express very well the message of Saint Vincent’s exhortations to the Missionaries and the Daughters of Charity. What would the Son of God do in our place? *“Another point to which you should pay particular attention is to depend greatly on the guidance of the Son of God; I mean to say that when you have to act, you should reflect like this: ‘Is this in conformity with the maxims of the Son of God? If you find that it is, say, ‘Very well, let us do it.’ If not, say, ‘I will have nothing to do with it.’ Moreover, whenever there is question of doing a good work, say to the Son of God, ‘ O Lord, if Thou wert in my place, what wouldst Thou have done? How wouldst Thou console this illness of body or mind?’”* (Coste XI, 347-348).

I link this with the fourth paragraph of the Action Line on Formation: *“Encourage Vincentian formation and reinterpret the thinking of our Founders in the*

light of our own times.” We have at our disposal many of the writings of our Founders that have been translated into various languages as well as numerous studies and well documented biographies. Do Sisters read them enough and make sufficient use of them on a personal or community level? (cf. C. 22 and S 6). For example, Constitution 21b reminds us that we must , “*when the urgent needs of their neighbour require it, know how to leave God contemplated in prayer in order to find God in persons who are poor.*” This passage is better understood when seen in parallel with one of the conferences of St. Vincent. The footnote in the Constitutions quotes the conferences of July 31st 1634 and August 30th 1656 and I would suggest, too, the conference of 30th May 1647 (Coste IX, 318-319) in which Saint Vincent shows such a fine grasp of spirituality. We might also think of Saint Louise and compare Constitution 54 and Statute 35 with Letter 181b dated 24th June 1648 (*Spiritual Writings* p.248) in connection with “*a period of time prior to Postulancy.*”

The Constitutions offer us the water we need in this XXIst century, but it is also good to refresh ourselves at the source and to do so on a regular basis. In paragraph 70 of the post-Synodal Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, the expression, “configuration to Christ” is linked in a special way to the situation of our elderly Sisters and presents this phase in their lives as “*the chance to be transformed by the Paschal experience, by being configured to the Crucified Christ who fulfils the Father’s will in all things and abandons himself into the Father’s hands, even to the surrendering of his spirit to him.*” Vincentian spirituality extends the scope of these beautiful words to all Sisters but we all take inspiration from the example that our elderly Sisters give by their trusting surrender to Christ, something we thank them for! Over the years Saint Vincent and Saint Louise allowed themselves to be progressively configured to Christ, and it is interesting to note the place given to spiritual direction and accompaniment on their spiritual journey. (cf. C.20b) Where do we stand with regard to this?

This coming March 25th we will have the joy of renewing our vows. Let us ask the Lord, through the intercession of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, to intensify, by formation of the heart, the Vincentian “colouring” of our vows so that our lives that are given to God in following Christ, may be good news for the poorest people. I confide especially to your prayers our Sisters who are living in an atmosphere of almost daily violence, those in Haiti and Congo as well as many other places.

May Saint Catherine Laboure who was so faithful in listening to the Spirit and totally given to the poor people she had the happiness to serve, be an inspiration for all of us. Let us also ask Mary, who was completely centred on the Father and a wholehearted disciple of her Son, to teach us, through her humility and openness to the Spirit, how to make our life a progressive configuration to Christ.

I told Father Gregory how much we appreciate his attentiveness to the Company and his brotherliness. I also expressed our gratitude to Father Javier for his faithful accompaniment. In your name I also send our very sincere and grateful good wishes to Father McCullen, Father Maloney, Father Quintano, Mother Duzan and Mother Elizondo.

With my affectionate devotion and the assurance of my prayers for each one of you,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

FATHER G. GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Lent 2006

Dear Sisters,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts, now and for ever!

As we begin Lent I would ask you to spend this time with Mary, a true disciple of Jesus, who can help us to enter more deeply into the mystery of God's love for us during this holy season. The Scriptures have a lot to tell us about her witness and reveal to us her role as disciple.

But we are going to concentrate on the Cross of Jesus Christ, on which he died once and for all, and we will be reflecting on Mary's role in this enormously significant and dramatic moment in her Son's life. Mary is a mother who suffers at the death of her child, a child she held in her arms when he came into the world and will now hold again when he has left this world. What deep sorrow she must have felt! What pain must have pierced her heart, the pain that Simeon spoke of "and your own soul a sword shall pierce, so that out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed." (Lk. 2:35). What does Mary do at the foot of the Cross? She is not trying to stop the execution; she is not protesting Jesus' innocence. Mary's presence there is only recorded by John in his gospel. He says she just stood there.(Jn. 19:25) Perhaps it was just a question of showing strength and courage. Maybe, just maybe, Mary was "pondering," in the biblical sense of the word.

To ponder, in the biblical sense,¹ is to hold, carry and transform tension so as not to act in the same way. Of course, Jesus, too, is our model for this kind of pondering. He took on hatred, held it, transformed it, and gave back in return love and forgiveness. To ponder, in the biblical sense, is to be like a water purifier; it takes in all kinds of impurities with the water but holds the impurities inside itself and gives back only pure water. Mary shows the path a model disciple should follow: ponder, meditate, treasure in the heart, hold and transform tensions.

¹ See the writings of Ron Rolheiser, OMI, President of the Oblates School of Theology at San Antonio, Texas. He is the founder of that community, university professor and author. His books receive great acclaim in the English-speaking world. He is a regular contributor to the *Western Catholic Reporter*, the most important religious weekly in Canada, and quoted in more than 50 newspapers throughout the world

I would like to invite you sometime during this Lenten season, to set aside time to contemplate Mary at the foot of the Cross of her Son. In your reflection, put yourself in Mary's place. What do you see as you look upon the suffering face of Jesus? What are you thinking? What are the tensions you are experiencing in your own life at this moment; tensions that you need to hold on to, that you need to carry for a while and then, with the grace of God, you need to transform?

I want to say a little more about the different words: "hold", "carry" and "transform".

-**To hold** means not to let go of immediately, to learn to accept. How difficult it is at times to accept when the thing that causes us tension can be embarrassing or uncomfortable. We tend to want to get rid of it, drop it or run away from it.

-**To carry** means to take time to work through a process of becoming reconciled with the tension. This often means being reconciled with those who provoke the tension in our lives. Reconciliation is not something that can happen immediately. It requires time. It requires patience. It requires courage. It requires understanding. It requires humility.

- **To transform** means to make new. This demands work, It demands struggle. It demands a lot of giving as well as forgiving.

As we look on Mary at the foot of the Cross, pondering on the face of her suffering Son, and as we look on her Son, where can we see his suffering face today? It should not be very difficult for us who are called to contemplate the face of Jesus in the face of the suffering poor whom we evangelise and serve, to see the faces of the poor in the face of the suffering Jesus.

- Look upon the face of the suffering Jesus and see those children who have been abandoned by their parents and who wander the streets of most major cities in today's world.

- Look at the suffering face of Jesus and see a young, teenage girl, who does not know what to do because, after ignoring her parents' advice about the people she associates with, has now to break the news to them that she is pregnant. Does she listen to the advice encouraging her to have an abortion and so relieve her distress? Or does she listen to herself and be tempted to run away, or even worse, to take her own life rather than confront her parents?

-As you contemplate the face of the suffering Jesus, see the face of thousands and thousands of men, women, adolescents and young children who flee from their homeland as immigrants with the hope of finding "a better life in another world," a hope that has often been created by modern methods of advertising and marketing.

- As you look upon the suffering face of Jesus, see the thousands and thousands of refugees who flee from their homeland to avoid violence and genocide, from experiencing hatred that brothers and sisters have for their brothers and sisters.

- As you look upon the suffering face of Jesus, see these same refugee immigrants being discriminated against or rejected by their host countries because they are different, because they are dirty, because their skin is a different colour and because they cannot speak the language.

-As you look upon the face of the suffering Jesus, see the face of the thousands and thousands who die of hunger, malaria, AIDS and other diseases, and whose cries for help seem to fall on deaf ears because there are so many of these sufferers.

-As you look upon the suffering face of Jesus, see the thousands and thousands who fear for their lives in their own villages, barrios, towns, or their own homes, because young people roam the streets in gangs, with no fear of anyone or anything and no respect for human life.

- As you look on the suffering face of Jesus, see also the thousands and thousands of men and women who are imprisoned in inhuman conditions, often having to wait a long time for judicial procedures to give them justice and feeling that they never will receive justice because they are poor and “who listens to the cries of the poor?”

In his first encyclical, Benedict XVI speaks of contemplating Christ’s suffering. *“It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move..”*² I pray that your contemplation of Mary at the foot of her Son’s Cross, may be during these 40 days of Lent, a healing experience as well as a journey to the heart of the despair and pain of this world’s poor, pain that may be transformed into hope. Jesus’ own passion, death and resurrection affirm that the evils of this world are not incurable and that injustice does not have the last word. Ponder, then, on the suffering face of Christ. Take hold of the injustices in the world. Carry them in your heart and ask that God’s grace may transform them and in their place bestow in tenfold measure, justice, peace, understanding, reconciliation and love.³

Let us conclude with these thoughts on the Cross of Jesus by Saint Louise: *“we are called upon to honour this Holy Cross by all sorts of suffering, following the example of Our Lord, who teaches us this by his death on the Cross and by all the other pains and sufferings he endured during his life on earth and which are recorded in several places in the Gospel. But souls chosen by God are very particularly destined to suffer, and this is such a sweet and agreeable privilege for them that they would rather die than not suffer, since they consider loving and suffering to be one and the same thing.”*⁴

² Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 12

³ Note: I would like to thank Fr. John Sledzioa, CM. for certain ideas in this letter; ideas taken from a talk he gave to the confreres of New England, USA, on the subject of Mary and the Eucharist.

⁴ *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, A 20 (Thoughts on the Cross), p.768

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father Gregory Gay, CM;
Superior General

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

7th study document on the revised Constitutions

CHAPTER V: FORMATION
C. 49-59; St. 32-42

1. INTRODUCTION

Our Founders considered formation to be very important. We know that Saint Vincent was deeply concerned when he realised that the clergy were not able to fulfil their ministry properly. That is why he established the Tuesday Conferences (a complete programme of ongoing formation for the clergy of France) and he was also responsible for the formation of the clergy in Seminaries. Saint Vincent did not just found communities in the Church to work for the Mission and for Charity, for example the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, but he was also careful to give them the formation they needed for their mission. We have proof of this in the many conferences he gave to the Fathers and to the Sisters,

For her part, Louise de Marillac was equally concerned about formation. She regarded it as very important and she gave time to the formation of the first Sisters. Her formation plan was comprehensive: teaching them to read and to write, the rudiments of the christian faith, the sense of vocation and of service, guidance and advice about how to deal with the sick, helping the Sisters to learn how to teach others, etc. It can also be said that Saint Louise carried out genuine ongoing formation of the Sisters through her correspondence. In this way she formed and guided every aspect of their life and their service: the spiritual, human and professional aspects, their relationship with the authorities and collaborators, relationships with one another, the quality of the service they gave, etc.

Today, the Church is giving more and more importance to formation at every stage.¹ Speaking of ongoing or permanent formation, canon 661 of the current Code of Canon Law encourages all consecrated persons: *“to be diligent in continuing their*

¹ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, nos. 65-69

spiritual, doctrinal and practical formation throughout their lives. Superiors are to ensure that they have the assistance and the time to do this.” Formation is so important that the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* links the renewal of Religious Institutes to the formation received by their members.²

II- DEVELOPMENT OF POINTS MADE IN THE DOCUMENT

Chapter V opens with a quotation from Saint Vincent taken from the conference he gave to the Daughters of Charity on 29th September 1655 on the subject of the Common Rules. He does not use the word “formation” itself but there is no doubt that this is what he was referring to. He says, “*You should frequently pray to Our Lord that He may replenish those who will enter the Company, with the spirit which He desires all of you to possess, that you may, by this means, carry on the good work you have begun.*”³ In Saint Vincent’s thinking, we can already discover the two elements that give meaning to formation, something that will be developed later on in the Constitutions: personal and vocational formation, and formation for providing a good standard of service.

In line with Saint Vincent’s thinking and with the documents of the Church, article 49 of the Constitutions shows us in this chapter the importance of initial and ongoing formation. There are two reasons for ongoing formation: the first is in relation to vocation and it reminds us that our choice of a way of life has to be nourished, deepened and continually revitalised in all its aspects.

Vocation is a living force and we cannot stop life without deforming it. The second reason is functional: “*to offer quality service to those who are poor.*” (C.49) or again (and this amounts to the same thing), formation is given “*with a view to better service.*” (C.58a). Both reasons are important and they complement each other. Concentrating on one to the point of neglecting the other would be unacceptable reductionism which is far removed from the Vincentian spirit.

I. THE AIM OF FORMATION (C. 50)

Article 50 states that “*Formation at all levels has as its goal, the growth of each Sister.*” It is a matter of helping the Sister to grow in the human and spiritual sense, and in her choice of life. The starting point of every formation process will be the recognition and acceptance of the person as an individual. Formation will develop all the person’s potential in a harmonious way, helped of course by the Holy Spirit, as we read in the quotation from the article mentioned above and in the words, too, of *Vita Consecrata*.⁴ The formation of the Daughters of Charity should specifically respond to these three objectives:

“To acquire convictions that strengthen and unify her total gift of self to God”

² Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* no. 18

³ Coste X p.117, Conference of 29th September 1655 explaining the Common Rules

⁴ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 65

Both initial and ongoing formation should deal directly with the person's roots and convictions with regard to her vocation. For a Daughter of Charity, basing her life on solid convictions means acquiring a spirituality that is deeply evangelical and Vincentian. *"Only in this way will the Company be able to give prophetic witness, be salt and leaven, and be able to respond to the challenges that come from our contemporary culture. Otherwise, the counter-values that also exist in this culture (superficiality, short-term projects, materialism and individualism, hedonism....) will be like the storms that can destroy a house not built on solid foundations."*⁵

So gospel and Vincentian convictions strengthen the Daughters of Charity and prepare them to understand, live and serve in this difficult and complicated world of ours. But formation must also help to "unify" the life of a Daughter of Charity. This word did not appear in the 1983 Constitutions; it was added to the 2004 text. We think that this word "unify" covers the following reality: today, the service of those who are poor demands a lot of time and dedication. All this activity, with the worries that the service of the poor can give rise to, brings with it a risk, the danger of activism, of working at a frenetic pace which prevents Sisters from thinking about the meaning of the work being done and sometimes makes them lose sight of the significance of the poor they serve.

When the work is this absorbing it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to reflect on the work being done. This can lead to a dichotomy between action and contemplation: the latter does not embrace action, it is not the basis for action that gives meaning to the work, rather it is seen as just one more task to be done. As a result the person's inner life is divided and fragmented, something far removed from the ideal of unification desired by our Founders and of which we are so often reminded by the documents of the Company. In short, the aim of this reflection is for us to come to understand that formation can serve to reduce the gap between the twin pivotal points, action and contemplation.

"Being a servant of Christ in the poor and of the poor in Christ"

The spirituality of the Company can be summed up as "a servant spirituality." The Daughters of Charity, in giving themselves completely to God as did Mary, "Handmaid of the Lord", put their lives unconditionally in the hands of the Lord to do his will. Like the Servant Christ who abased himself to the point of taking on our human condition, they also give themselves to the service of the poor in order to bring them the corporal and spiritual care they need. They do this because they are mindful of the words of Jesus, that anything done to these little ones is done to Christ. They also look on those who are poor as their "lords and masters."

Professional formation prepares the Sisters to give "quality" service. According to article 52 of the Constitutions, this is a matter of *"justice towards persons who are poor."* There is nothing original about this statement. It is taken almost word for word

⁵ F. Quintano, *The Vincentian formation of the Daughters of Charity*, "Echoes of the Company", July-August 1998

from the General Assembly of 1985.⁶ Obviously, professional formation on its own is not enough to make people servants of Christ in those who are poor. Formation in the Vincentian spirit is also necessary to enable the person to live out the theological significance of all service rendered to the poor. The 1997 General Assembly, in its final document *A New Fire*, orientated the Company in that direction stating that we have to “give a privileged place to formation at all levels in order to give quality service as Daughters of Charity.”⁷

“Living a life in common for mission”

Sisterly life in common as another fundamental aspect of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity, that has to be part of the formation programme. This, of course, is one of the aims of initial formation but it extends to ongoing formation, too. If a Daughter of Charity has to become a servant of Christ in the poor, she must also become the servant of Christ in each of the Sisters of her local community. This is the only way that will bring her to that unity of heart which is vital if community life is to become a support for mission.

Community life must, of course, be orientated to the service of those who are poor. The Constitutions and the documents of the Company are very clear on this point (cf. C.9, 32a....). But this orientation does not make community any less important. It will always be, or it always should be, the natural place where the Daughters of Charity can “recharge their batteries”. Formation, therefore, should also help the Sisters to build up community and resist the temptation to become simply “takers” in community life.

1. THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR FORMATION (C.51)

This article deals with three types of agents of formation and they complement one another. We will comment briefly on each of them.

“Formation is, before all else, the work of God living and acting in the heart of the person who is called.”

The opening statement of this article is very much to the point. Formation is God’s work. It is God, working with and through the Holy Spirit, who brings about all spiritual growth (cf. Mt 13, 31-32). To the extent that a Daughter of Charity is open to the Spirit, God will effect in her an inner transformation and gradually the virtues of her spirit will be born and will develop in her. God, himself, who is the real potter, as Jeremiah tells us, (18, 1-11), moulds the heart of a Daughter of Charity until it resembles the heart of Christ. In other words, it is God who makes the “servant of the poor” develop in the way that Saint Vincent and Saint Louise desired. He does this through the things that happen to us in life for these are the material He uses in teaching us. As we all know, Saint Vincent learned to see the hand of God in events and in people. He was

⁶ Cf. General Assembly 1985, *At the Crossroads*, p.14

⁷ Cf. General Assembly 1997, *A New Fire* page 8

certain that the Other was acting in his life. Only people who truly believe in God's formative power in their lives will be able to respond to it.

“Next, it is the work of the Sister herself, prompted by her desire for increasing fidelity to her vocation.”

Generally speaking, Provincial Formation Plans are excellent. But the main thing is to implement them. This requires a determined effort on the part of each Sister for each and every Sister is responsible for her own formation. I think it is very important that we realise this, a conviction that after God, the effort made by each Sister will be the best guarantee of authentic and progressive formation which will lead to *“increasing fidelity to her vocation.”*

We must all become strongly convinced, if we are not so already, that we are each responsible for our personal formation: the Company and its formation plans are simply means of helping us. The Province organises different kinds of meetings on quite a regular basis but do these activities bring about any change? Have people assimilated what they heard or shared? Questions like these make us realise that at stake here is the conviction that formation has to come about through personal effort.

“The Daughter of Charity is not alone; the Company is there

The third agent of formation is the Company. It accepts new candidates, it offers a formation plan in keeping with its spirit, it has a specific place where this formation is carried out (community) and it trains people who are entrusted with formation work (the formators). The Company's collaborative role in formation may be summed up in the dual image of being “mother and teacher” at the same time. The Company is a mother who guides and a teacher who forms people to accept and welcome others.

The reference to the local community as the special place where formation takes place (cf. C.51c) is a new feature in the revised Constitutions. This seems to be a very necessary addition since each Sister in the community represents the Company. If, as we read in article 9 of the Constitutions, it is in the community that Sisters ***“continually strengthen one another with a view to mission”*** an excellent means of achieving this is through formation in community.

Another means that the Company uses in formation is the provision of formators. Article 51d of the Constitutions tells us that these should be imbued with the Vincentian spirit and that they should be experienced in community living and apostolic service of those who are poor. So it can be said that it is the Company, in the person of the formators, that accompanies the Sisters during the formation process.

This has been the practice since the earliest days of the Company. From the time that the first Daughters of Charity began to arrive, Saint Louise took responsibility for welcoming these young women and helping them to gradually acquire the spirit of servants of the poor. But Louise, too, was acting in the name of the Company. . . *“If those*

*who present themselves to enter this little company of the Charity”, it is Saint Vincent who speaks, “have a genuine vocation and the qualities needed for that, Mademoiselle Le Gras will accept them.”*⁸

Statutes 33 and 34 tell us that there are two further means that Provinces have at their disposal and these complete the whole range of formation aids offered by the Company: the Formation Plan that adapts formation to the real needs of the Province, and spiritual and Vincentian accompaniment. This latter is provided chiefly by the Priests of the Mission. But the 2004 text adds a new detail: it recognises that the Daughters of Charity, too, can give this accompaniment (cf. St.34). Obviously, the Statute is here referring to Sisters who are trained for this work.

3. ASPECTS OF FORMATION (C.52)

The opening statement of this article is very important: *“Formation is a lifelong process.”* A Daughter of Charity begins her vocation journey with a period of intense formation but this does not end when the Sister leaves the Seminary. Formation never comes to an end, it continues all through life. Mother Guillemin insisted on the need for ongoing formation: *“We must always be working at it; we can never think that one day we have finished our formation and have arrived at a level of perfection with which we can be satisfied. We must continue to move forward towards the One who alone is perfect.”*

This ongoing formation will allow the Daughters of Charity to *“respond anew to the constant calls of God”* (C.52a). There is no prepackaged response in a life that is given to God. A response that was appropriate at one particular time will not necessarily be the right response on another occasion. Also, we must always practise discernment in every situation we find ourselves in, as article 51d of the Constitutions points out. Formation will allow us to make the right response. Sister Juana Elizondo wrote, *“The new and highly complex situations that arise in the world and in the Church are a constant challenge that we cannot respond to in the spirit of our charism unless we are prepared to accept total and constant updating. Easy and, we might say, “prepackaged” responses born of routine, are no longer valid because they are soon seen to be out of date for the new situations we have to confront every day.”*⁹

Article 52 describes the different areas of formation.

Human formation

This aims at *“developing the whole person”* (C. 52b). Father Lloret regarded this aspect of formation like this: *“A Sister’s capacity to relate to others and her emotional maturity are of paramount importance in a vocation like hers, especially these days, and so, too, are a love of truth, a sense of justice, genuine compassion and balanced*

⁸ Coste VI p. 68; letter from Saint Vincent to M. Guillaume Delville, Priest of the Mission at Arras

⁹ Sister J. Elizondo, *Ongoing formation. A faithful response to the calls of our times.* Echoes of the Company June 1993.

judgment, acting in a reasonable way etc. ¹⁰ We must not think that this aspect of formation is not necessary: on the contrary, it must be constantly encouraged because if this human aspect of formation is developed it will stimulate growth in other aspects of formation, and vice versa. The healthy development of fingers on the human hand can help us to understand the relationship between the different dimensions of the human person. If one finger grows, they all grow. If we develop in one aspect of our being, we develop in the other aspects, too.

The Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, says special importance must be given to the interior freedom of consecrated persons, their affective maturity, their ability to communicate with others, especially in their own community, their serenity of spirit, their compassion for those who are suffering, their love for the truth, and a progressive correspondence between their actions and their words.”¹¹

The aim of formation is “*to form a critical judgment*” (C.52b). What does this involve? Since a critical judgment is closely connected with truth, there are two extremes that have to be avoided: either agreeing with everything or being opposed to everything. Neither of these positions reflects a searching for truth. But in addition to this, human formation will help persons to reflect and to evaluate their own conduct, and develop a critical faculty that is constructive with regard to situations and events. Someone who has a sound critical judgment that has been well formed will always seek the truth and at the same time be moved to act in an upright way and in accordance with the gospel.

The third point in the Action Line on *Formation* asks us to “*Exercise discernment at all stages of our life.*”¹² This request made by the Company which is repeated twice more in the 2003 General Assembly Document, has much in common with the “critical judgment” mentioned in the articles of the Constitutions we are discussing. In short, by using this critical judgment we will be practising discernment in the various situations that arise. The aim here would be to discover what is truly God’s will in order to conform our lives to it.

Human formation even extends to “*keeping updated on professional trends*”.(C.52b). These days, more than ever before, we are required to constantly update our professional skills. We have to be open to the many and profound changes in today’s world. This human formation is important if one is to be a true Daughter of Charity.

Spiritual formation (cf. C 52b)

A Daughter of Charity has an absolute duty to cultivate her spiritual life so that she may live in conformity with the Company’s particular form of spirituality, so that she may assimilate more and more the Word of God, so that she may gain a deeper

¹⁰ Fr. Lloret, “*Identity lived out each day in our own times.*” Echoes of the Company, Sept. 1993

¹¹ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 71

¹² General Assembly 2003, *Inter-Assembly Action Lines, 2003-2009*, p.8

understanding of what is involved in following Christ, and finally, so that she may experience great serenity in consciously allowing herself to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

An excellent and practical means of ensuring this formation, as mentioned in article 22 and Statute 6 of the Constitutions, is spiritual reading. Being serious about one's spiritual formation means carefully observing times of prayer, silence, solitude and reflection, and profiting from these at a deep level.

Apostolic formation (cf. C.52b)

The most genuine concern for apostolic work is always the fruit of a deep spiritual life. Cultivating this aspect of her vocation presupposes that the Daughter of Charity will be opening her mind and heart in a constant effort to make her actions the sign of Christ's love that urges her on. (cf. II Cor.5,14). In practice, this means updating apostolic methods and objectives in fidelity to the spirit and aims of the Vincentian charism, bearing in mind the changing circumstances of our history and the cultural context in which we live and work.

Apostolic formation also includes "*knowledge of the social teaching of the Church and its thinking with regard to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.*" (C. 52b). These three points are in full accord with the priorities that John Paul II put before the Church at the beginning of the third millennium.¹³ We can see that one of the effects of apostolic formation is to put us in touch with the Church's most recent concerns.

Specific formation (cf. C.52c)

Thanks to Vincentian formation we are able to assimilate the thinking and the spirituality of our Founders, particularly the features that characterise the spirit of the Company; humility, simplicity and charity, as well as filial devotion to Mary which has been practised since the Company's earliest days.

Formation for living in an apostolic community means that community is an essential element in the life of a Daughter of Charity. This type of formation has to be organised in such a way as to promote a balance between community living, the demands made by the service of the poor, and the needs of the world.

There is also a connection between this specific formation and formation for the practice of the evangelical counsels. The Daughter of Charity gives herself to God in poverty, chastity and obedience for the service of Christ in the poor. This Vincentian outlook must be evident in every stage of the formation process.

This article of the Constitutions ends with a statement that could be seen as a resume of all that has been said previously about the different aspects of formation: "*The Vincentian vocation directs and unifies the various dimensions of formation.*" (C.52d). In other words, the Vincentian aspect must be clearly seen in all the other dimensions of

¹³ Cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, nos. 48, 52, 55

formation so as to colour these with its particular spirit. This can only be achieved by bringing together the human and Christian values that are in accordance with the Vincentian spirit. After all, when every aspect of formation is imbued with the special spirit of the Company, nothing is lost, unity is achieved.

4. THE STAGES OF FORMATION: INITIAL FORMATION AND ONGOING FORMATION (C.53-58)

Initial formation has several stages, each one with its own specific features: Pre-Postulancy,¹⁴ Postulancy, Seminary and initial formation in mission. All these stages have their own specific objectives even though they follow a common plan. The persons responsible for this formation must respect the continuity and progression of each stage in order to facilitate the harmonious development of a vocation. The rule, par excellence, in all the formation process, is that the vocation should be helped to develop but this growth should not be forced. Moreover, it is not good to leave until the following stage of formation what could and should be assimilated at a particular point in the vocational journey. Likewise, the next stage should not be anticipated.

On the subject of candidates, let us not forget that the young women who come today are very different from those of 30 years ago. They are sensitive to different issues and have other values. For this reason, every Province must be careful to discern what is valid for accepting them and what is not. These days, more than ever before, formators must be able to gauge each candidate's level of maturity and accompany them assiduously on a personal level. (cf. C.53). Candidates should be able to find in Sisters who already belong to the Company "models of what a Sister should be" who will help them to grow in the spirit of their vocation. This is the responsibility of all the Sisters in the Company even though they are not specifically named to work as formators.

Initial formation is, of course, a task confided to particular Sisters, "*imbued with the Vincentian spirit and experienced in community living and apostolic service among persons who are poor.*" (cf. C.51d). In everyday language these are called "formators". Let us now consider carefully the important statement contained in the revised Constitutions: Sisters responsible for formation do not work on their own but in collaboration with other Sisters. So working as a team and realising the need for collaboration are indispensable factors in formation work.(cf. C.56b; 57b; St 36b). For certain areas of formation the whole community, even, is involved. For example, when a postulant is in a community to carry out her first stage of discernment she is "*assisted particularly by the Sister Servant and the local community.*" (C.54b). In the assessment report that is compiled before she enters the Seminary, there have to be "*two evaluations*"...(one of them) "*that of the Sister Servant, drawn up after sharing with the local community in which the postulant participates.*" (St.35c).

¹⁴ This stage is not treated at length in the Constitutions: it is mentioned, however, in the Guide for Initial Formation, pages 69-73. Nevertheless, we could say that this stage is suggested in St. 35 which says, "*For initial vocational discernment, a period prior to postulancy may be established.*"

During the Seminary period “*periods of apostolic experience are arranged under the responsibility of the Directress, in agreement with the Visitatrice and the local community that welcomes the Sister.*”(St.36c).

For the stage of initial formation in mission the Sister sent to a particular house “*is supported by her local community.*” (C.57b). These different situations show us that initial formation is not just the work of formators. Every Sister should have a clear sense of co-responsibility.

Ongoing formation is concerned with the whole person. In fact, it is a process that helps the person’s all round development, a process which requires and promotes a dynamic attitude to life. This process continues throughout a person’s life and it includes both intensive and occasional periods of help in times of growth, maturity and crisis.

Permanent or ongoing formation is also formation for living together. We learn to live with people God has placed us with, people who are different and who have their limitations. In particular, we learn how to live unreservedly in mutual love, to share the gifts we have received, and to strive to practise the difficult art of living an integrated life. Every life, by its very nature, is a journey towards plenitude.

Ongoing formation is not just concerned with the pastoral or apostolic side of our life, but with our heart and every aspect of life. Many problems arise when the heart becomes unfeeling and closed to relationships, when it can no longer listen to or savour the Word, when love which is transformed into gift no longer has anything to say. If faith is weakened and hope is dimmed then joy in living fades. It is then that people turn to other idols or to individualism which often takes the form of compensatory activism.

The second part of article 53 says we have to take into account diversity of countries and cultures and even the different rates at which individual people develop. Also, even though we have to be careful to preserve the unity of the Company, it is the Provinces which draw up their own Formation Plans (cf. St.33b) bearing in mind the objectives to be attained, differences in background, culture and behaviour, and the personal development of each Sister.

We will now comment on article 58 with regard to ongoing formation. We are given three guidelines:

1. It is important that we realise the need for ongoing formation.

“*The Sisters are convinced of the need for ongoing formation.*” (C.58a). Saint Vincent and Saint Louise emphasised to the first Sisters its necessity. Saint Vincent states very clearly, “*well-regulated charity begins with oneself*”¹⁵. and that “*it is only just that, whilst serving the poor, one should take care of one’s own soul. You and I are under an obligation to train the Company.*”¹⁶

¹⁵ Coste X. p. 627, Conference of 16th March 1659, on the duties of the day, art,17-23

¹⁶ Ibid

All the Superiors General have insisted on this point. We might, for example, quote these words of Father Lloret, “*Ongoing formation is necessary if we are to discern his will for us in the here and now.*”¹⁷ The Inter-Assembly document *At Jacob’s Well* takes formation as one of its priorities, stressing its importance at every level, but emphasising particularly ongoing formation: “*We know that in the face of evolving and changing issues of the world, living the way we have always lived is a lack of justice in the exercise of our service. We accept a complete and ongoing process of updating (faith, vocation, social teaching of the Church, human formation....).*”¹⁸

2. Ongoing formation has two goals.

The first of these is for the Sisters “*to understand more fully their vocation and its significance in the Church and in the world*” (C.58a). The first objective of ongoing formation is to reinforce a Sister’s convictions about her vocation so that an ever fresh response can be given to the Church and to the world. Sister Juana Elizondo wrote, “*The main reason for ongoing formation is fidelity to one’s vocation and to the charism. God never tires of calling us and he calls us in specific ways through ‘the signs of the times’.*”¹⁹ Father Lloret says, “*Ongoing formation allows the Daughters of Charity to preserve, and to develop, in a spirit of faith, their lively and full awareness of what it means to be “servants” of Jesus Christ, in simplicity, humility and charity.....it helps us to make an even greater contribution, in accordance with our charism, to building up the People of God.*”²⁰

The Constitutions set out the second objective in the following terms, “*To keep their cultural and professional knowledge up to date, always with a view to better service.*” (C. 58a). The Founders were very much convinced that the cultural and professional training of the Sisters was meant to provide a better service for the poor. “*Study how to read, not for your own particular advantage but so as to be ready to be sent to places where you can teach.*”²¹ Ongoing formation has always been important for keeping our service up to date but this is particularly true in our own times, given the speed of change in today’s world. We need to be constantly “recycling” ourselves in all our works.

3.The Sister herself is primarily responsible for her ongoing formation (cf. C.58b).

Socio-cultural conditions in our time move us to continually improve our professional skills so as to provide a better service. However, the pace of life today does not make it easy for us to give careful and regular attention to our ongoing formation. Activism often stops us finding time and space to reflect in depth on what we are doing. This can lead us to act in a routine way and run the risk of “drying up”. After giving

¹⁷ Fr. Lloret, *Ongoing Formation*, Echoes of the Company, January 1993

¹⁸ General Assembly 1991 *At Jacob’s Well*, p.14

¹⁹ Sister Juana Elizondo, *Ongoing Formation. A faithful response to the needs of today*, Echoes of the Company, June 1993.

²⁰ Fr. Lloret, *Ongoing Formation*, Echoes of the Company, January 1993

²¹ Coste IX, p.9, Conference of 31st July 1634 on the explanation of the Rule.

ourselves without reserve there comes a time when we no longer have anything to give. A firm effort is needed if we are to find the time for personal renewal through reflection, reading, study, prayer....

The Company and the local community offer us special times of formation. It is really important for us to realise the benefits of these opportunities and take advantage of them. It is quite certain that these special times of formation will help us to become more and more what we are called to be.

Article 41 of the Statutes asks the Provinces to take particular care of Sisters who, for reasons of age or health, cannot continue an active apostolate and have to live out their vocation in another way. This is a delicate situation and these Sisters will need a lot of attention and special formation. Bearing in mind the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* and article 35b of the Constitutions, it would seem that this special formation has two objectives: to help a particular Sister to live her vocation in a different way, that is to say, by prayer and the patient acceptance of her condition, and to bring to the community the wisdom and experience of a life totally given to God... But this formation should also help the community (or the Province) to make the best use of the “talents” that aged or sick Sisters can and should develop.

Article 59 of the Constitutions might be considered the high point of this whole chapter on formation. Its aim is simply to help the Sisters to live out the life they have chosen, in joy and fidelity. Looked at from another angle, this article can be seen as the best vocations apostolate for the Company and the Provinces. Both these perspectives are taken up in the 5th Action Line of the last General Assembly.

III. SOME QUESTIONS TO HELP US IN OUR PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND IN COMMUNITY SHARING (AT LOCAL COMMUNITY OR PROVINCIAL LEVEL)

*Compare the revised Constitutions with those of 1983 and look up the changes mentioned in this study document.

*Which phrases in the articles of the Constitutions discussed in this document have struck you most forcibly?

*Are you satisfied with your personal ongoing formation? What do you need to do more about?

*This might be a good occasion to evaluate community formation and community formation meetings. Is there anything that should be done differently?

*Are you convinced that *“living fully and joyfully her personal response to the Lord, strengthens the fidelity of her Sisters and contributes to fostering other vocations”* (C.59)?

IV. SUPPLEMENTARY READING FOR FURTHER STUDY OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS 7TH DOCUMENT

*To realise the importance the Founders attached to formation read the Conference of 16th March, 1659. (Coste X p.624). Saint Vincent is now a sick man and his life is drawing to a close. One of the things he most earnestly desires is that the Company should be built on solid foundations so that it will remain faithful.

* Guide to Initial Formation, *Becoming a Daughter of Charity in the third millennium, 2001*, p. 15-19; 23-26; 41-49.

*Father F. Quintano, *The Vincentian Formation of the Daughters of Charity*, Echoes of the Company, July-August 1998.

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

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Guidelines for the monthly retreat

“Seek always the face of the Lord” (Ps 105,4)

What contemplation means for a Daughter of Charity

A Daughter of Charity should be a contemplative. However, we need to be clear about what we mean by this: it is not a question of living the contemplative life which has the appropriate structures for prayer, recollection and separation from the world. In his well-known discourse of 7th December 1965, Paul VI has this to say about contemplation: *“Striving to fix our mind and our heart on God in that disposition which we call contemplation, becomes the most exalted and productive function of the spirit, something that even in our times can, and should, regulate the immense pyramid of human activities.”*

The real meaning of the word “contemplation” is to centre our mind and our heart in the depths of God, as St. Paul would say. Contemplating also means observing what is taking place within and outside of ourselves; meditating on this, examining, evaluating, thinking deeply about it, and discovering its meaning. The root meaning of the word “contemplate” is “to turn one’s gaze to the temple.” For a Vincentian, what are the boundaries of this temple? They extend, of course, far beyond the walls of churches and chapels and penetrate the very heart of the world.

Article 10 of the Constitutions states this very clearly, *“The Sisters find Christ and contemplate Him in the heart and life of those who are poor...Through faith they see Christ in those who are poor, and they see those who are poor in Christ.”* In other words, the place par excellence, for a Daughter of Charity’s contemplation, is the world, action, activity, work, service.

DIFFICULTIES IN BECOMING “CONTEMPLATIVES IN ACTION”

Our culture is full of ambiguous values such as efficiency, pragmatism, utilitarianism. It follows that these characteristic features of the culture do not lend themselves to in-depth reflection for someone who is striving to find the meaning of things. Problems of faith, which are always problems concerning what is essential, have little place in a culture where noise, image and constant activity take precedence. As well as these “external” difficulties there are the “Godless areas” of our personal life which prevent us from taking seriously God’s ineffable presence in our lives and in historical events. What we can admire in Saint Vincent and learn from him, is the solid faith that helped him to find God in life and in events.

CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR A DAUGHTER OF CHARITY TO BE A “VINCENTIAN STYLE” CONTEMPLATIVE

We would need to be able to recognise the sacramental aspect of things. We are able to do this if we know how to look beyond events, if we do not stay trapped at a superficial level of viewing facts, people and things, but use our senses to go beyond these senses. Let us remember what the Fox said to the Little Prince in A. Saint-Exupery’s famous story, *“Our eyes cannot see the essence of things, we only see properly with our heart.”* In the Gospel we find that Jesus was able to see beyond the externals. So, for example, he was able to take the lilies of the field and the birds of the air and relate these to the One who clothes and nourishes them (cf. Lk 12,25-28; Mt 6, 26-27). The man with the paralysed arm leads him to think of the Father who wants him and all people to be freed from bondage. (cf. Mt 12, 9-14; Mk 3, 1-6). His contact with poor people, sinners and the marginalised, helps to reveal a passionate God who comes to the aid of all His beloved children.(cf. Mk 2, 13-17; Mt 5, 17-26; 7, 2-17). When he hung on the Cross he experienced God in the depths of God’s silence.(cf. Mk 15, 1-47). To dispel any doubts on this subject, he did not hesitate to reproach the Pharisees for their hardness of heart and their blindness to God’s will.(cf. Mt 16,1..)

God is in the chapel and He is in the world. If I might use this expression I could go as far as to say that God is even more present in the most difficult human situations and among the most deprived people because He has said that these are His chosen ones. We Vincentians cannot fall into the trap of thinking that we must withdraw from the world if we are to be contemplatives. In saying this, I have in mind the elderly and infirm Sisters who cannot serve the poor directly. Their prayers for the poor and for the Company are of great value. On no account can these Sisters withdraw from the world. They must carry in their prayer the sad situation of so many poor people. In this way their contemplation will be prayer that is realistic. (cf. C.17). A Vincentian can no more

contemplate apart from the world than swim without water. The following modern parable can help us to understand this:

- *“Excuse me,”* said one fish to another, *“you are quite a bit older and more experienced than I am. You will surely be able to help me. Will you tell me, please, where I can find what is called the Ocean? I’ve looked everywhere but can’t find it.”* *“The Ocean,”* answered the older fish, *“is where you are right now.”*- *“This is it? But it’s only water...what I’m looking for is the Ocean,”* replied the young fish. Deeply disappointed it swam away to continue its search.

SOME SPECIFIC WAYS OF “SEEING” GOD IN LIFE

* **Contemplating oneself, thinking about oneself, praying about oneself.....as a gift from God**, that is to say, as someone born out of God’s love. When someone, during prayer, “recalls” and “realises” that they are sustained by the One who created them, they are consequently filled with joy, hope and assurance because they share the experience of Saint Paul: *“I know the One in whom I have put my trust.”* Even if they see themselves as very poor and sinful, they come to “understand” that they are children of God. From this we can draw three conclusions:

* **Contemplate, pray about one’s personal life from the aspect of fidelity.** Not because we have been faithful but because God has. God’s fidelity is more important than our fidelity. I would even say that human fidelity is based on divine faithfulness. That is why faithfulness, is above all, a gift of God. Anyone who reviews their life in even just a few cms depth will realise that God was always present; in the good times, giving us cause for joy and celebration – and in the bad times, urging us to trust Him.

****“Seeing” God in the world, in the particular work confided to you**

In different situations that we learn about from television, radio or the newspapers: situations of abuse, mistreatment, disdain and negligence, God is manifested as “no” – as rejection or condemnation. On the other hand, in situations where we find love and service offered without any self-interest, God is manifested as “yes” – as approval, encouragement, acceptance.. This is one way in which we can contemplate life and nourish our spirit through what we do. Article C.16 *“This service nourishes their contemplation and gives meaning to their community life.”*

We can be quite sure that when a Daughter of Charity does well, and in a Vincentian way, whatever work she is asked to do (we are not thinking here about the professional aspect of it), she will find God. We can be certain that this encounter will bring great benefits. That is why the article just quoted says that work done well and in the Vincentian spirit, nourishes rather than fatigues a person.

***Prayer prepares the way for contemplating life.** This is expressed very well in article 21.....times of prayer are the highlight of their day...the Daughters of Charity cannot persevere if they do not pray...they need times of silence.... During her meditations each day, the Daughter of Charity etches the image of Jesus Christ on to her

heart, her mind, and on to the retina of her eyes in order to recognise Him later in her work. It is the same face of Jesus Christ contemplated during two distinct but connected activities, prayer and service.

FOR MEDITATION AND SHARING

- Prayerful reading of Saint Vincent's conference of 18th October 1655, on the end of the Company, Coste X p.124-128.
- Do I find it difficult to "see" and "discover" God in life and in the work I do at the moment? Why? Which events, either internal or external, lead me most readily to discover God?
- Contemplating God in situations and events brings unity to one's life and prevents dichotomies which eventually wear a person out. In your life, is the fatigue you may be experiencing or the stress brought on by the different works you are engaged in, connected in any way with a failure to find opportunities for quiet reflection in order to see the deep significance of your service?

Father Javier Alvarez
Director General

FATHER G. GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Poverty and immigration

The first session for Sisters working with migrants was held at the Motherhouse from 5th to 20th September 2005. The theme for this Encounter was "*Bearers of hope in a world without frontiers.*" One of its aims was to try and understand the causes of globalisation and the effects globalisation has had on the poorest countries, the causes and consequences of migration, and ways of supporting Sisters working with migrants.

In view of the ever-increasing displacement of people, it is important for us to be well-informed about the question of migration in the context of globalisation so that we can understand the challenges that face us when we have to defend the human rights of migrants throughout the world.

The Company tries to come to the aid of immigrants and defend their rights. These people have to face not only extreme poverty because they are illegal workers but also the constant threat of being deported or deprived of their freedom.

Throughout the year we will be publishing reflections that reveal the human, economic, political and social issues that are at stake here and the questions on which the Church is called to take a stand. Before going on to discuss specific situations we are

publishing, in this issue, an article on the way we serve the poor today, letting ourselves be challenged by Saint Vincent on our responsibility with regard to poverty, in the past and in the present.

SISTER JULMA NEO

Saint Vincent de Paul.....and after his times The service of the poor today

In this presentation I would like to reflect with you on some of the essential features of our service of the poor, as described in the writings of our Founders. At the same time we will try to reinterpret these characteristics in the light of our own times. We will also note the challenges facing us and the ways in which Sisters have tried to respond to these in their work with migrants.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SERVICE OF THE POOR BOTH IN THE PAST AND IN OUR OWN TIMES.

1. We serve all types of people who are poor and make no distinctions

In their day, our Founders served a wide variety of poor people: the poor people in the country parts, girls who were illiterate, the sick, foundlings, galley slaves, beggars, refugees, victims of war, etc. They all had this in common: they had no material and spiritual help and they were, to a great extent, abandoned by the Church or the State, or by both at the same time. Like the foundlings, for example, they were marginalised and rejected by society. They were victims of the social, political and economic conditions of their time and had no redress against these.

Fidelity to our Vincentian spirit calls us to maintain this universality in our service of those who are poor. This same fidelity, however, makes us ask the question; *“What is new in this universal service of the poor today?”*

First of all, the universal character of our service today implies *“a charity without frontiers”*, *“a globalised charity”* directed to all poor people irrespective of colour, race, religion, culture, ethnic group, political affiliation, gender or age. The *“charity without frontiers”* leads us out of familiar territory where we have been serving people who are poor, taking us even beyond our dioceses or country.

Secondly, if we are to provide a universal service we have to look beyond the traditional categories of poor people we serve and seek out *new types of poor persons*, victims of globalisation who are unable to survive because of the increasingly dehumanising demands it makes.

In all his apostolic exhortations to the special synods of bishops from every continent, John Paul II constantly insisted that migrants are one of the Church’s

priorities.¹ Today, no country remains unaffected by international migration: every country either sends or accepts migrants. There are millions of migrants throughout the world and their number continues to increase every day.

2. *Vincentian service is based on a vision of faith characterised by the spirit of the gospel.*

During his lifetime, Vincent's concern was always for the poor. We know that his overwhelming passion for these people sprang from his ardent love of God which made him rush to the aid of poor people as one would rush to put out a fire. In today's theological language we would say that the poor were for him the sacrament of Christ: *"Turn the medal over and by the light of faith you will see that the Son of God who willed to be poor, is represented here in these poor persons. O my God, how good it is to look on the poor if we think of them in God."*²

It was this way of seeing things with the eyes of faith that made Saint Vincent insist that the poor be served in the spirit of the gospel; with simplicity, devotion, compassion, tenderness, respect, humility and great generosity.³

Fidelity to the Vincentian charism calls on us to show that same faith vision and the same gospel spirit in our service of the poor. At the same time we need to ask ourselves, *"Does this faith vision and this gospel spirit have anything new to say to us today?"*

The Vincentian way of seeing in the poor person the image of Christ, and the gospel spirit in which we must serve the poor, are as valid today as they were in the past. In fact, given the different circumstances in which we work today, the challenge we face in our times is the need to deepen and strengthen this faith vision and gospel spirit.

Today's society places a lot of emphasis on efficiency and productivity in all areas of work and on technical and professional expertise. Our service of the poor has not remained unaffected by this myth.

Faced with this subtle dehumanising and exploitation of poor people, our way of seeing things in faith and our gospel spirit should move us to *"humanise our techniques"* so that we can put our professional skills at the service of the poor and witness to the fact that the poor person is more important than efficiency and productivity. These days, when technology has become extremely impersonal, we are asked to always bring a *"personalised approach"* to our service of the poor..

Our work is not simply a humanitarian service, an NGO project or that of a group of professionals who have common interests. Vincentian service is a flame that springs

¹ Cf. Ecclesia in Asia, Ecclesia in Europe, Ecclesia in Oceanis, Ecclesia in the Americas, Ecclesia in Africa

² Coste XI, 32

³ Coste IX, 593; X, 679-680; Spiritual Writings, L 284b p. 320-321

from an inner fire. For us Daughters of Charity, it is our passionate love of Christ that must inspire our “passionate “ commitment to persons who are poor.

Our Sisters who work with migrants have the sad experience of seeing them exploited by the very people who claim to be helping them: travel agencies, “traffickers”, employers, government officials. The agencies and traffickers fleece them of all they possess by demanding exorbitant sums of money for helping them to gain entry into another country or to legalise their papers. Employers, in their turn, do not honour contracts they originally agreed to.

In situations like these, the work that Daughters of Charity do with migrants, a work motivated by faith and carried out in the spirit of the gospel, becomes a prophetic denunciation of these counter-values. As the revised Constitutions say, “*they denounce situations that exploit and exclude people.*”⁴ Working with immigrants calls for a strong spiritual life and great sensitivity to the presence of the Spirit in situations that are completely new and hitherto unknown to us.

3. Vincentian service is an integral service of the poor

In all his foundations Saint Vincent always insisted on this integral service, or to use the term that was current in his day, “*the corporal and spiritual service of the poor*” which signified service of the whole person.

We have to offer this same type of service today if we are to remain faithful to our Vincentian charism. However, we need to ask ourselves, “*What is new in the integral service of the poor today?*”

Firstly, in recent years there has been a big change in the way we think about people. Today we have a more holistic approach. There is also much greater sensitivity to a person’s human rights and this is particularly true with regard to those who are poor. People have their own special abilities and talents and so they are well able to take decisions about their lives and their advancement.

In our service, then, we must look on poor persons not simply as clients or the object of what we try to do for them, but rather as people who can be the agents of their own promotion. As the revised Constitutions so rightly put it, “*They (the Sisters) “are alert to ways of helping their brothers and sisters to become conscious of their own dignity and agents of their own promotion.*”⁵

Also, the integral service of the poor today requires us to analyse the root causes of poverty so that our service not only relieves the effects of poverty but militates against its underlying causes.

⁴ S.8

⁵ C.24

In our day, different branches of the Vincentian Family have opted to go even further than Saint Vincent did. They move on from remedying the effects of poverty to directing their efforts against the main causes of poverty that are rooted in unjust socio-political and economic structures: they are moving on from personal mediation to collective and prophetic action. At our last General Assembly we voted to work for social transformation and to attack the structures that cause poverty; we incorporated this commitment into our revised Constitutions.⁶

The causes of migrant marginalisation today are rooted in the same socio-economic structures that underpin globalisation. They are reinforced by cultural, religious and historical factors. Sisters working with migrants feel, and at times feel very strongly, that they are helpless against this network of oppressive structures. Heartrending stories tell of migrants who are almost driven to despair by the inhuman treatment they are subjected to but which they nevertheless survive. These reports describe the extreme measures to which human beings can descend: depriving people of food, confining them to one room, verbal and sexual harassment, refusal to pay people for overtime worked, withdrawal of passports, violence.... These are common complaints made by migrants. The malpractice of individuals or groups that exploit them, together with unjust social structures, are the causes of their marginalisation and oppression.

4. Vincentian service involves proximity to those who are poor

According to the Founders' way of thinking, those who serve people who are poor should be very close to them. That is why they insisted on sick people being visited in their homes.⁷ Vincent spoke of the service of the poor "*in their own homes*" as the distinctive characteristic of the Daughters of Charity which distinguished them from other religious who served poor persons but did so in their own establishments.⁸ He often spoke about looking the poor "*in the eye*" and he wanted the Sisters to serve them personally.

Fidelity to our Vincentian spirit requires us to keep this proximity to the poor. In view of the changed conditions pertaining today, we must ask ourselves, "*What is new today about being close to the poor?*"

First of all, we are being called to be near persons who are poor and this proximity is to be both physical and psychological. We are to see, feel, touch and react as they do and share their hopes, joys, sufferings and aspirations. This means we cannot remain enclosed in our material or psychological enclaves; we have to be sufficiently close to them to let them influence our choices. We could work with the poor and visit them often and yet remain far removed from their poverty by reason of the choices we make every day. Authentic Vincentian service is not separate from other aspects of

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Coste XII, 523-524; conference of 2nd February 1653; Saint Vincent, Letter to Sr. Carcireux, 647-648

⁸ Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 2nd February 1653, 518

people's lives. Being close to the poor also means being attentive to the signs of the times that affect their lives.

Working with migrants means that we have to be very close to them physically, psychologically and spiritually. This often involves a long period of accompaniment because in the face of such overwhelming suffering, the best thing one can do is just to be with those who are suffering. This proximity to migrants might mean we have to adopt a very different life style from that of the other Sisters in our community whose pace of work is more or less regular and predictable. There is a risk that in the beginning these circumstances may cause some difficulty but they can bring benefits for the individual Sister and for the community. A supportive local community is essential for the apostolate with migrants.

5. Vincentian charity is both affective and effective

To Vincent's way of thinking, there is both an internal and an external aspect of charity. The interior aspect is linked to our motivation, "*What use would it be to bring soup or medicines to the poor if the motive for such an action was not love?*"⁹

When charity is genuine, it gives rise to creative initiatives. Vincent himself was not always original in his enterprises but he was certainly very innovative in using existing resources and organising these in a new way so that poor people would be better served. He was gifted with an intuitive sense of recognising what was needed at a given time and he had the creativity to bring effective responses to those needs. We only need to read the history of the early days of our foundation to realise just how creative he was.

This creativity is most clearly seen in the works he founded: these were organised as "*responses*" to the appeals he discerned in various events. He regarded organisation as essential for serving poor people effectively: "*The poor suffer more from a want of organisation in relieving their distress than from a lack of charitable people to help them.*"¹⁰ We have only to read some of the instructions he gave to the Lazarists, the Daughters of Charity and the Ladies of the Hotel-Dieu to have some idea of his powers of organisation.¹¹

If we are to be faithful to Vincent's spirit today we must have affective and effective love. We are led to ask ourselves, "*What is new today about affective and effective love?*"

First of all, and this is true today more than ever before, effective love has to be creative and inventive these days in face of multiple, complex and new forms of poverty, as well as the number of poor people that increases daily. Effective love for these people requires us to invent new forms and methods of serving them. This means we cannot be content with providing works of charity or giving assistance, but we must also undertake

⁹ Conference of 19th July 1640

¹⁰ Quoted in "The Charities of Saint Vincent de Paul", Mgr R. Izard, p.28

¹¹ Cf. Abelly, L1, p.122, Instructions to the Ladies of the Hotel-Dieu

works that promote the personal welfare of people, and initiatives for justice aimed at transforming society and freeing people from oppressive social structures. Working to promote the welfare of poor people also involves moving on from the attitude of *“being the voice of the voiceless”* to that of helping the poor to let their own voices be heard so that they can speak for themselves.

In some of Vincent’s works we can already discover the “seeds” of some type of personal promotion of the poor.¹² What is very innovative in the service we offer today is the conviction that we must also attack the structures that cause poverty. This is part of a new consciousness that has been developing throughout the world over these last fifty years. Attacking structures that are the root cause of poverty means being committed to working for justice. This type of work is being carried out by the different branches of the Vincentian Family but much remains to be done.

Also, the promotion of poor people and working for justice require services that are well-organised: long-term commitments, forward planning, evaluation and revision. This presupposes that we act with a network of resources both within and outside of the Vincentian Family because the demands made by this work cannot be met by any one single group.

The Sisters who work with migrants have to be very creative because the nature of their work is so complex. It covers a wide range of commitments: pastoral, social, legal and political. This means that the Sisters are in contact not just with Church groups but also with civil groups as well as private and governmental organisations.

6. Vincentian service is carried out in collaboration with other people

Vincent, in his day, always encouraged collaboration with lay people, administrators, parish clergy, the bishops, royalty, the Ladies, municipal authorities and collaboration between the Lazarists and the Daughters of Charity.. Fidelity to this spirit challenges us to continue to collaborate as Vincent did but to go even further along this path. Given the ecclesiastical structures and the hierarchical nature of society in his day, Vincent’s efforts with regard to collaboration were truly far in advance of the work of many of his contemporaries, yet he wasn’t able to escape the limitations of the historical context in which he lived. Fidelity to the Vincentian spirit must also make us ask ourselves, *“What is new, in our times, in the area of collaboration?”*

First of all, we are being asked to widen the scope of our activities. We need to collaborate with the poor people we serve in such a way that these become partners in promoting their development. We have to collaborate with the different branches of the Vincentian Family and with people from different religious traditions - Shintoists, Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, Protestants, Orthodox Christians – and with NGOs and other civil and Church groups. As peace in the world today is so precarious it is essential

¹² Coste VIII, p.82, Rules for the Foundlings

that we collaborate with people of other faiths. When we collaborate with other groups in the Church we will be cooperating in the pastoral plan of the local Church.

Then again, there is a new spirit guiding our efforts to collaborate with others – the spirit of partnership and mutuality. The spirit of partnership takes it for granted that we will allow those who collaborate with us to share in decision making with regard to our common service, so that all who are committed to this service will feel co-responsible for it. This sort of partnership is only possible if we have respect, esteem and appreciation for those who work with us.

A genuine spirit of partnership calls for mutuality, that is, a willingness not only to give but also to receive from the people we serve and those with whom we work. This is expressed very well in our revised Constitutions, “*They are open to receiving from poor persons and to allowing themselves to be evangelised by them.*”¹³ Mutuality is a form of humility; by it we recognise our inherent limitations. We are convinced of the deep truth that in the sight of God we are all poor and need help from others.

Without collaboration, working with migrants would not be possible. It has to be more than just “a community project.” Our Sisters who work with migrants have a wide range of collaborators: Church groups, NGOs, embassies and consulates, medical and social departments, private organisations, etc. In Asia and in other places where Christians are a tiny minority, our Sisters work with individuals and with groups of people who are of different faiths or follow different religious rites. Working with migrants is a rich soil for inter-faith dialogue.

CONCLUSION

I would like to end with a poem written by a Sister from my Province and John Paul II’s dream for Europe.

People who are searching, people who are travelling

They have left their home and their native land. Their hearts are both turned to the future and held back by the past.

Carried away on the wings of hope, they dare to overcome their fears; they risk their lives to make their dreams come true. They hold on to the sure conviction that new opportunities can come their way.

So in that country so far away from their homeland, they persevere, in spite of hard toil and the lack of life’s comforts....

Because in the house they have left behind, they have a family waiting to be snatched from the claws of poverty....a dear one who is ill, children who need to go to school, or youngsters whose future is entirely dependent on the breadwinner.

¹³ C.24

They feel that they cannot come back even though their living conditions are so unjust...

So they stay, they keep silent, hiding the painful truth from their family and their friends until, perhaps, they meet hearts that listen and hands that heal, breaking the bonds that hold them fast.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, ***Ecclesia in Europe*** n° 102, Jean Paul II said:

“Peaceful coexistence and mutual sharing of resources will make it possible to build a Europe which can be the common home where everyone can be welcomed, where nobody is the object of discrimination, where all people will be treated responsibly and live together responsibly as members of one big family.”

May each of us share this dream, not only for Europe but for the whole world. We pray for all who are working with migrants and striving to make this dream come true.

Sister Julma Neo
Daughter of Charity.

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Gijon (Spain)

The Prince of Asturias Prize, An internationally famous award

The **Concord Prize** was awarded to the Company of the Daughters of Charity for its *“exceptional social and humanitarian work for the most deprived members of society, service given for nearly four centuries.....”* This was the citation made by the Prince of Asturias Foundation panel when it announced the news to the mass media in September 2005.

It is a real *“gift”* for the Company and for the poor. Being awarded this prize should make us raise our hearts in thanksgiving to God our Father, humbly thanking and praising Him for so many Daughters of Charity who have faithfully and efficiently served people over the years. They carried out this service as true and humble *“servants”*, working in silence, keeping in the background and serving out of love. *“From generation to generation”* the Church has witnessed God’s fidelity manifested in the Company. It has also observed how careful Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were to imitate this fidelity and to pray for the grace that the Company might keep faithful to its founding spirit.

This prize has given joyful and simple recognition to that great chain of charity and evangelisation which began in 1633 and has continued to our own times. On 21st October 2005, when there was question of making a film, we saw some very striking images of Daughters of Charity:

-“Looks” directed at the most unfortunate and oppressed members of society. In the Sisters’ eyes the poor found forgiveness, compassion, affection, understanding and hope.

-“Words” spreading hope, comfort, tenderness.....

- “Ears” that listened to everyone who came to them in sorrow and despair; ears that shared these people’s sufferings and troubles.

- “Hands” serving the most vulnerable members of our society: the sick, the marginalised, elderly people, women who are abused, children, young people, refugees, prisoners, those who have just been released from prison, drug addicts.....

The Daughters of Charity continue to serve, work for and educate the poorest people in society. In this way they continue to bring God’s creative love to the five continents. They have understood, and they continue to believe, that we must work and serve in the sure knowledge that we can experience globalisation as an opportunity to be grasped and as benefits we can share with our brothers and sisters.

This prize involves us all. At Oviedo we heard the heartbeat of more than 21,000 Daughters of Charity who are present, today, in 94 countries. We felt the presence, too, of all those Sisters who since 1633 have forged this “*great chain of fidelity.*” At the *Campoamor Theatre*, where the prize was awarded, we felt grateful for the work done for the poor by the Company.

Before the Prize was handed to us, we gave a power-point presentation which helped people to learn more about the Company throughout the world. Then, in the forum in which we took part with all the other participants, we listened to the testimonies given by the five Sisters who accompanied Mother Evelyne Franc and Sister Rosa Maria Miro, General Councillor for Spain.

From Asia, Sister Jaisamma Joseph brought us the voice of India when she spoke to us very simply about the work of the Daughters of Charity in Asia and their efforts to procure greater justice and peace through their humble service. Recently our Sisters in East Asia have had to face the tremendous challenges of natural catastrophes. The Sisters of Indonesia, Thailand and India have worked very hard to help the tsunami victims and people suffering from AIDS, many of these being abandoned by their families and by society in general. When people feel loved and accepted by the Sisters who care for them they change very much. We have seen a good number of them turn to God with faith and hope because of that acceptance and love. I have had the happiness of serving AIDS sufferers in India so I can speak from personal experience. We are always mindful of the

respect due to the human person in the poor and suffering people we serve. We try to give them back a sense of their personal dignity and restore their self-esteem. They are our brothers and sisters, people we must serve after the example of Saint Vincent, our Founder: *“The poor are our Lords and Masters.”* We were very moved by the way she spoke to us of discreet, generous, ardent and humble service and described the way in which this service is carried out in this continent, informing us about sustainable projects that ensure continuity for the work that the Sisters do.

Sister Christine Chinye from Nigeria revealed the spirit of the African people who yearn so much for peace and understanding. The Company’s mission in this continent calls for creativity in responding to the many forms of poverty suffered by its inhabitants. With great simplicity she said to us, *“The African continent is overflowing with beauty, charm, goodness and hope. Yet in spite of this there are basic emergencies caused by political, geographical, economic, cultural, religious, and other factors. This creates many difficulties on the social level and there is corruption, poverty and deprivation. In this situation, the Daughters of Charity are working in the areas of health care, pastoral care of young people and of families, the promotion of women, with street children and in the struggle against AIDS, hunger and famine.... She finished by saying, “Thanks to the many religious and priestly vocations we have in Africa, the outlook for the future of this continent is more optimistic. We hope that by preserving its values and with the collaboration of other peoples and global support, this Africa will be able to present a new face; its human and natural resources will be better administered and that Africa will then be able to play a part in building a better world.”*

In company with Sister Marie-Yonide Midy from Haiti, we crossed the Ocean to Latin America with all its resources, cultures and potential, but also with its lands of contrasts, where great wealth sits side by side with extreme poverty. In view of the challenges presented by this society, the Company is trying to respond to the most urgent forms of poverty. Sister’s face lit up with a smile when she spoke of the optimism she discovers in this continent, *“There are many challenges facing us but Latin America with its cultural diversity, its joy in living and the solidarity characteristic of its people, is the continent of hope. These values allow us to believe that peace and harmony are possible where there is good government. Deep in our hearts we cherish the hope of a better world where love and fraternity will prove to be stronger than intolerance, injustice, discrimination and deprivation.”*

From Japan came the smiling simplicity of Sister Xavier Imoto Yuriko. She spoke about the situation in East Asia with its religious and cultural diversity: Asia, the cradle of the great world religions: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism. An important feature of this part of Asia is the contrast between the rich and the poor. She also spoke of Asia as the continent of youth. She described the work done by the Daughters of Charity in hospitals, schools, prisons, home visiting and care of the aged but she spoke most particularly about the challenges that the Company is taking up in globalising charity and working with other organisations to promote people’s welfare.

Finally, Sister Asuncion Garcia spoke about Europe, noting the continent's past and present features. The work of the Daughters of Charity is spreading all over the continent. The Sisters are trying to respond boldly and creatively to situations of poverty and she emphasised *“the importance of working to develop a sense of universality, starting with solidarity and the struggle for justice, and the elimination of unjust structures in society.* She invited the people present to take to heart the hopes of the Church and of the Company. *“Today, the Daughters of Charity are anxious to collaborate with people of good will, in creating a Europe that can establish justice, solidarity and peace, so that where there is suffering there may also be relief, where there is poverty there will also be solidarity, where there is a yearning for justice, that justice may be practised; where there is discord there may be dialogue and harmony, where people are excluded there may be respect shown for persons and for cultures, and where there is selfishness there may be love and concern for the common good.”*

With the awarding of this Prize has come recognition of a task accomplished but at the same time, a light has been kindled and a window opened to the future. We are to be a source of life, by our words, actions, prayers, and commitment to the poorest, the most excluded and most vulnerable members of our society, in order to be the face of Christ and of the Gospel in the Church.

At Oviedo we discovered once more that we are called to *“multiply”* the prize, just as *Jesus multiplied the five loaves and the two fishes.* We were seven Sisters here, representing the Company. We thought of the many Daughters of Charity faithfully living out the “yes” they said to God, and sharing these *“five loaves and two fishes”* through their work, their sacrifices and their passion for the Poor. In accepting this prize, we feel the need to redistribute it to all those who, *“seated on the grass,”* are waiting for the Master to give them something to eat.

We were congratulated by politicians, journalists, economists, intellectuals, and the ordinary people, the young and the not so young. Deep in our hearts we heard the words of Jesus, *“I thank you, Father, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little ones,”* for little ones is what we are.

With this Prize we have been given the task of sowing the seeds of peace that facilitate encounters between people. We are being moved to continually share what we have received from God each day, with all those who come to us in simplicity asking to be listened to, comforted, guided, supported, loved..... Like the crowd of 5000 whose hunger was satisfied by the *“five loaves and two fishes”*, the Daughters of Charity are called to reveal Jesus as the only One who can satisfy the hearts of those who are poor and suffering. God wants us to truly deserve the words spoken by the Prize adjudicators when they told us, *“...this prize has been awarded for your work of promoting throughout the world, the values of justice, peace and solidarity.”*

This Prize cannot lead us into pride or vanity. On the contrary, we have to recognise before God and before other people, our frailty and our humble desire to be authentic Daughters of Charity. In his address, the Prince of Asturias showed us the way

to do this, *“Love teaches us that genuine greatness consists in abasing ourselves before the lowly.”*

Mother Evelyne spoke as follows:

“Love and faithfulness have met, justice and peace have embraced! In these words the Psalmist aptly points out the connection between justice and peace. Justice and peace are interdependent and inseparable.

Our society clearly aspires to building a world without frontiers, where there are no barriers between those who have possessions and influence, and those who are looked down on. And people today, especially young people, feel the urgent need to build a new world where there is greater solidarity because of the globalisation of love. A new world, a family of peoples who share the world’s resources in justice and solidarity. A world which in its heart of hearts needs – even if it doesn’t realise it – faith and hope: they have a hunger for God.

Living in solidarity will mean we have to be committed to going further and doing more to defend life in general; life that is often threatened by the selfishness of a few.

Living in solidarity will mean committing ourselves to doing more and working in a wider context, to find sufficient resources to improve the living conditions of those who are struggling simply to survive, who are lost in the labyrinths of marginalisation or reduced to having to leave their homeland in fragile boats, a matter of shame for our society.

Living in solidarity with others is a challenge for us Daughters of Charity who are called to continue in the world the mission of Jesus Christ, Evangeliser and liberator of the poor, and to do this according to the inspiration of our Founders, Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, friends of the lowly and the underprivileged.

We are happy and grateful to be able to give our lives to the Lord and to spend our lives in the service of our brothers and sisters. Throughout the history of the Church life has sprung up like a fountain: it can be read in the beautiful pages written in the simple language of service given to deprived people, the silent language of creative generosity. The Company of the Daughters of Charity strives to collaborate humbly in building the civilisation of love where justice and peace will reign for ever....”

When Mother Evelyne received the Prize from the hands of Prince Philip, we had the feeling that we could hear all the people we are serving say to us, go on being generous, continue to give your lives to God and to persons who are poor, don’t be afraid to create social structures so that we, the excluded and the marginalised, may be reintegrated into society.

Most of all, this Prize reminds us that each morning we receive from God another wonderful Prize; that of being His smile, His glance and His hands that witness to his Love.

Sister Asuncion Garcia
Daughter of Charity

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Madagascar

The water tower of reconciliation

God's loving designs continue to touch humanity in spite of evil, wars, hatred and catastrophes of all kinds. God never stops calling us to work with Him. God is Love and He wills the happiness and salvation of every person.

Saint Vincent, who in his day was sensitive to the signs of the times said, *"My daughters... you should be ready to go anywhere....in Madagascar our priests beg us to send them Daughters of Charity to help them to win souls...So be disposed, my daughters, to give your yourselves to Our Lord to go wherever it may please Him."* (Coste X 117, 29th September, 1655).

The Lazarists and the Daughters of Charity have been working for more than 100 years in 6 of the 20 dioceses of Madagascar, among these the diocese of Ihosy.

My arrival at Ankadilambe

In 2004 when I was studying to be a social worker, I was given a placement in one of the villages in the diocese of Ihosy: Ankadilambe (with a surface area of no more than 1 km²). Nearly all the people in the village are migrants from the east coast. Most of them are Protestants and their number has increased to nearly 1,000. When the Sisters and Priests arrived in this village in 1954 they did not get a good reception and they didn't know why.

Where the diocese of Ihosy is situated

The diocese is located in the region of Fianarantsoa where the immense steppe serves as pasture land for the oxen that are bred there. This region was abandoned during the colonial era and it remains abandoned by the present Republic. Christians represent 15% of the population. The area is inhabited by the Bara tribe, a very reserved people. These people feel that they have been forgotten by the State (Fanjakana) and by the Church (Fiangonana). Schooling has now begun but only after pressure. Most of the people work on the land or they breed oxen or zebus. Farming and cattle rearing are the

main sources of income in this region. The people here think, “If you don’t own oxen you’re nobody at all.” The present infrastructures are the Mayor’s office in the centre of the village, a Lutheran church and an officially recognised school.

How was I to build up a trusting relationship with the village people?

I spent the first days of my placement getting to know the people by visiting them in their homes, sharing ideas and holding family meetings. I discovered that civil registration had been practically non-existent for years. To remedy this situation where people had no proof of identity, a programme was set up to help the villagers gradually go through the necessary procedures with the mayor and the civil authorities. In two months, 46 birth certificates and 18 identity cards were issued. Operation “National identity card” and “Birth Certificates” was seen to be necessary because people who are not registered in their own locality lose all their rights, and their duties with regard to the State are cancelled.

Later on, we joined with other people in the village to set up an association for drawing up:

- a humanitarian project for growing rice and vegetables
- a project for supplying drinking water. After going through the necessary administrative procedures, a Protestant NGO agreed to finance this important project because the village is one of the places most infested by parasitic diseases: amoeba-transmitted infections and bilharzia.

I also learned that the village had a history of litigation with the Catholic Church. In 1950 the Catholic Mission had established an agricultural and cattle-rearing college. One day some of their oxen escaped. They were tracked down to the neighbouring village of Ankadilana. The Catholic Mission accused the villagers of theft and the matter was brought to court. After that, the few Catholics who were there turned to the Protestant (Lutheran) religion and warned their families not to trust Catholics. This explains why the villagers had been indifferent to the Catholic Church for over 50 years.

The people found my presence in the village intriguing. “Why are you staying in a village where there is no Catholic church? We didn’t ask you to come!”. I replied, “Charity should not make any distinction between people; we are for everyone.” In the beginning they ironically called me “The Protestants’ Sister.”

One day two of the village elders told me the story of the stolen oxen, something that younger generations knew nothing about. That was the breakthrough that opened the way to dialogue. Later on, the village people were listening to their radios and they heard the Angelus being said. They asked me to explain the Hail Mary. After a while, I had the opportunity to talk about the Apparitions at Lourdes and at rue du Bac, and the Miraculous Medal.

Some time after this they asked me to go with them to the Bishop to tell him this story, something he knew absolutely nothing about. They also asked him to build a small

Catholic church and a little grotto like the one at Lourdes so that this grotto could be installed over the water tower; this would represent their thirst to drink from the waters of God's heart. But if this wasn't possible they would like the grotto to be set up on the hill overlooking the village.

Two weeks before my placement ended, I had the joy of being present at the installation of the water tower in the village and seeing a statue of Our Lady enshrined half way up the hill. So Mary, Mother of Reconciliation, watches over the village of Ankadilanana where, under her watchful gaze, Catholics and Protestants drink from the same water tower.

PHOTO

When I left the village I asked the priests and the Sisters of Ihosy, 3 km away, to keep in contact with the villagers.

Siste Marie-Madeleine Razafiarisoa
Daughter of Charity

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Nigeria

The new mission at Binde (Ghana)

Binde is a village in the most northerly part of Ghana and in the diocese of Navrongo-Bolgatanga. The people there belong to the Mambrusi tribe and are surrounded by the Bimobas. The people of Bindi are very religious; most of them are traditional believers; the majority of them are Muslims while Catholics are a minority group. On 5th June 2003, four Daughters of Charity were sent there; three of us were appointed to the rural hospital, working in collaboration with the diocese, and one Sister has a teaching post and does pastoral work.

The rural hospital

The three of us who work in the hospital have found that the local people need to realise how important the hospital is and their need to have medical treatment. Their traditional belief in the witch-doctor won't allow them to come for medical treatment except as a last resort. The child mortality rate has risen because of malaria and anaemia, while the death rate for adults has increased because of snake bites. Our main aim is to make the people realise the importance of cleanliness and hygiene.

Teaching

Before starting to teach there I made a quick study of the schools situation and I found that the older generations did not think education important. They looked on it as a waste of time, time that could be put to better use. This has had an effect on education that has lasted even to the present day; most of the parents will not allow their children to go to school, except for just a few of them. When the parents were asked why they chose to send only the less clever children to school they said it was more useful for them to have the clever children looking after the animals because these could count properly whereas the children they described as “stupid” wouldn’t be able to recognise which animals belonged to their parents and they wouldn’t be able to count them.

Knowing this, I decided to make friends with the boys and girls who guarded the flocks. After spending some time getting to know them, I decided to organise some classes for them while the animals were grazing. Their numbers increased every day and their interest in going to lessons grew stronger when the groups were divided into levels ABCD. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to go on teaching them because the dry season arrived and they had to go to distant places in search of pasture for the animals because this place is semi-desert. Also, I had no means of travelling that long distance whereas they had donkeys. However, the lessons did bear fruit because eventually most of the boys and girls were able to follow courses geared to their level.

Pastoral work

The Missionaries in Africa Society (White Fathers) has been carrying out evangelisation work in the region for 25 years and has set up 54 centres of worship, all dependent on the parish of Bunkprugu. These centres have been subdivided into 4 zones with two catechists working in collaboration with the priests. Because of the distance separating these centres of worship, a distance of between 2 and 40 kms, with bad roads or even no roads at all, just paths that people can only travel along on foot, and also through lack of personnel and because of illiteracy, the people in most of these places, including Binde, have had only very elementary instruction in the faith. They are very unfamiliar with the sacraments, especially the sacrament of marriage. Four couples were married in the church. As polygamy is the most widely practised form of marriage, it really is heroic for people to opt for just one wife. These marriages, the first since the parish started, attracted many Muslims, traditionalists and Christians of other denominations. The ceremony added another dimension to the lives of these couples and to new converts to the Church. They had a cake and ate it: for the first time: this cake symbolised the importance of the event. This ceremony took place on 17th April this year. It led many persons to be converted to Christ and people still talk about it today.

Sister Bernardine Pemii
Daughter of Chariy

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

A very different sort of Christmas!

Introduction

A month ago, in Tortosa, we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the reception centre “Le Xiprer” in commemoration of all the services offered to people who crowd into the villages and towns looking for a place to live. Thanks to the “Catholic Aid” teams from the different parishes, the Church in Tortosa is able to maintain this very important social work. The Sisters work full time in the centre and are helped by a good number of volunteers.

Being close to the poor, it came as no surprise to us that God, on this Christmas night 2005, should have visited us through the “birth” of a group of people, including some children. We hope there will never be another Christmas like this one, or that there will always be Daughter of Charity to help. This is what happened.

Christmas 2005!

After Midnight Mass on December 24th, at about half-past one in the morning, a house located in the old part of the city of Tortosa collapsed...a couple with a child of two, had just left the house. Wakened and frightened by unusual noises they just had time to get out into the street. Another family with four children joined them and so did 8 Pakistani men...they all had a narrow escape.

Firemen and police arrived at the disaster scene. Where could they find accommodation for these people in the middle of the night? The hotels and hostels were all full. The Mayor, the social services advisers and the police brought this group of people to the “Catholic Aid” reception centre. If people squeezed up a bit there would be room for everyone.

The mystery of Christmas!

All these people whose lives had been saved looked on the event as a new “birth” for them. It was that for us, too!. We gave them a loving welcome and for 3 days we did all the things connected with a “birth”- we cooked meals, listened to each person and looked after them.... They became the centre of our life and we were almost completely absorbed in the task of caring for them. We couldn’t help but think of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem when they, too, were looking for shelter.

This year we experienced what happened in Bethlehem. Jesus manifested himself to us through this tragic event and asked us to open our hearts to other people.

Like Mary, who pondered all these things in her heart, Christmas had a special message for us that year because the sad event took place at night and also because of the happiness we felt at being able to help our brothers and sisters in their time of need.

The message of Christmas came across to us in a very special way during the three days we lived together. Like Mary and Joseph, we were able to welcome, not shepherds, but people reduced to poverty. We pray to the Divine Infant for these families and for all needy persons: may we always show solidarity with people in any kind of distress.

The Tortosa community

THE POOR SPEAK TO US

Province of France South

Hearing these words

Jesus was amazed" (Lk 7,9)

Isabelle, the mother of two children, Marie (11 years old) and Baptiste (8 years), discovered she had cancer. So that the children wouldn't lose a year's schooling on account of her illness and the anxiety this brought, the mother chose to tell them, right from the start, about her condition: she would have to go to hospital, the medical examinations and operations she would need to have, the chemotherapy and radium treatment she would be given, and the physical and moral consequences of these.

After several months of treatment Isabelle tried to be the complete mother. Together with her husband, she took an interest in the education of Marie and Baptiste; she didn't want her illness to change in any way the children's routine or their plans.

Marie kept a close eye on her mother's condition and tried every day to do as well as possible the things she was expected to do: do her homework, go to the activities and the groups she belonged to, visit her grandparents, play with her friends, look after her little brother, obey her parents. Baptiste didn't realise his mother's sad situation as much as his sister did and was always wanting to be with her and be the object of her affections. He would always much rather play or go out with his father on his tractor than do his homework.

One night, when the pain became unbearable, Isabelle had to go back into hospital. The father regularly brought the children to see her but Marie noticed that her mother was becoming more and more exhausted and that visits had to be cut short so that she could sleep. The father tried to hold back his tears in front of his wife and children. Marie realised that the time was coming for her mother to leave this life.

A few days later, Marie was playing with her friends when her father, who was in tears, came to look for her. She realised that her mother had died. She would go with her

father and her little brother to see her mother and pray for her. When they got back to the house Marie wept with her father and her grandparents until she saw people coming to visit them. She said to the family, “You have to be brave, you mustn’t cry in front of people.”

Some days after the funeral, Baptiste was due to take part in a swimming competition at school. He was sad and didn’t want to go. Marie said to him, “*Come on, Baptiste! Mother would have been so happy to see you in your swimsuit, joining in the competition. You have to be brave, you must go, for mother’s sake.*” Eventually he let himself be persuaded by his sister’s words and agreed to go to school and join in the competition.

Marie’s teacher suggested to her class that they should all show their affection for Marie and their support for her during this sad time, by writing her a message or drawing a picture. After thinking about it for a long time, Chantal wrote this to her: “*Marie, I feel very much for you. And you know, whenever you feel you need your mother, you should go into some quiet corner and think hard about her: she will be near you and you will hear her speak.*”

A few days afterwards, Marie saw Chantal again and said to her, “*Thank you for what you wrote. Yours was the message I liked best. And what you said is true: the other night I dreamt about mother and she said to me, ‘Marie, I am with you; if you need me you can talk to me and in the silence you’ll be able to hear me.’*”

Sister Vincent
Daughter of Charity

NEWSBRIEFS

International Meeting of the Visitatrices and Bursars from the Slav Provinces

Thanks to the initiative taken by Sister Zofia Daniscakova, General Councillor, the first meeting of Visitatrices and Provincial Bursars from the Slav Provinces (Poland, Chelmno-Poznan, Cracow, Warsaw, Slovakia and Slovenia) with Sister Rita Ferri, Treasurer General, was held in the Provincial House of Ljubljana, (Province of Slovenia) from the 6th-10th October 2005.

Sister Rita explained many things as she answered questions about the work of Bursars, particularly with regard to drawing up the Province’s accounts. Everyone present found the meeting very beneficial. What they appreciated most were the talks given by Sister Rita and the very clear guidelines she offered them about their work, as set out in the new Constitutions and in the spirit of servants of the poor. Their efforts to secure the good of the Province and of people who are poor, must always be accompanied by evangelical poverty and great trust in Providence.

When the meeting came to an end, all the Sisters taking part had the opportunity to visit several houses of the Province and see their works. During their pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Brezje they confided to Our Lady, Help of Christians, their personal mission to work for the Sisters and everyone entrusted to their care. (Sister Cveta Jost, *Echoes correspondent*).

Thanks given by the Sisters in the Archives Service (Motherhouse)

Sister Claire Herrmann and the Sisters working with her in the Archives service were very moved by the work on the “Patrimony” project carried out by the Provinces and would like to thank them for their meticulous research and the valuable content of their reports.

When the Visitatrices meet in May 2006, all the Provinces will benefit from this work and will share what the Lord has allowed us to do in giving ourselves entirely to God and to the poor people of our world.

SPECIAL BICENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF CATHERINE LABOURE

Saint Catherine, her passion for God and her passion for the poor

Introduction

The saints are “dynamos” for our Christian life. If they are not models to be imitated they are “inspirers” who can urge us on. Their example always attracts others. The message of rue du Bac would not be what it is if we couldn’t continue to gaze on the one who was its first witness. The message is rooted in the faithfulness of a living person.

When, in the light of the Gospel, we read again about the important stages in the life of Catherine, we are invited to enter into her inner life in order to relive her experiences and live, like her, obedient to God’s Spirit. Even though Catherine’s life is personal to her and therefore unique, meditating on it may move us to find in ourselves, and in those around us, the revelation of the Spirit’s action and help us to find Him both in our joys and in difficult or even painful events.

We will begin by following Catherine in her daily routine at Fain-les-Moutiers. Then we will concentrate on the difficult period of her first stay in Chatillon-sur-Seine.

Finally, we will contemplate her life as a Daughter of Charity at rue du Bac and later at Reuilly.

1. LIFE AT FAIN-LES-MOUTIERS

The setting

The background to Catherine's childhood was simple and ordinary. She was one of our "home-grown" peasant folk and if we met her in the street we probably wouldn't notice her. With its 200 inhabitants, Fain-les-Moutiers, a village in Burgundy, was even less important than Nazareth in Galilee. By choosing this young peasant girl living in an obscure village and unknown to the world, the Lord was proving yet again that it was most definitely His work and not some purely human enterprise. Saint Paul's words can well be applied to Fain-les-Moutiers: *"It was to shame the wise that God chose what is weak by human reckoning: those whom the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones God has chosen."* (1. Cor. 1,27).

THE FAMILY

The Laboure family were farmers and they were practising Catholics. In 1793 Pierre married Madeleine Gontard and they were to have 10 children who survived infancy. Madeleine, who had been a teacher, became a farmer's wife when she married Pierre. The parents had a happy life even though they had to work hard to make the farm viable. Catherine was born on 2nd May 1806 and was the 8th member of the family. Her big pale blue eyes already bespoke the purity of her heart. These same eyes would one day see the brilliance of God's radiance, a light that touches people's hearts.

Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature (Lk 2, 52).

Catherine had nine happy years with her brothers and sisters and with parents who loved each other. Catherine loved her parents and soon learned how to share things with her brothers and sisters. Their working day ended with family prayers. Catherine drew strength from this family circle; hers was a balanced character and she was psychologically well-adjusted. She was a light-hearted but sensitive little girl; strong and hardworking. Even when she was little it was obvious that she had a strong will and could even be obstinate. Her parents instilled into her important values: uprightness, respect for others and satisfaction in work well done. Contact with nature led her to spontaneously appreciate all life. She delighted in the beauty of flowers and trees. She loved the diversity of life and its vagaries. The child was sensitive to this colourful world with all its different forms of beauty. The fresh innocence of her heart gave her a particular view of the world, of people and of life: creation has been given to men by God and they are responsible for making it fruitful. She learned to concentrate on a detail and from it grasp the whole picture. This contact with nature made Catherine into a child who had a steady gaze, a down-to-earth and practical mind, and the innate good sense which was to characterise her whole life.

BEREAVEMENT

Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved....Jesus began to weep
(Jn 11, 33-35)

Time passed peacefully in the Laboure household even though life on the farm was laborious. However, in 1815 there came trials that would see Catherine buffeted by the harsh realities of life. The wonderfully enriching experience of family life was coming to an end. The mother, worn out by her labours at the farm, died at the age of forty-six. Friends and neighbours from the village hurried to the room where the dead woman was laid out. They were particularly sorry for the three youngest children: Catherine (9), Tonine (7) and Auguste (5), a delicate little boy who had been in an accident some time earlier. Catherine wept. She felt sad and bewildered. She loved her mother so much and now her mother wasn't there any more. Who was going to take her place? Catherine's eyes fell on a statue of Our Lady on top of a cupboard in the room. Thinking she was on her own, Catherine climbed up on a chair and with many tears kissed the statue saying, *"You are the one I choose to be my mother now!"*

Jesus said to the disciple: "Behold your mother." And from that hour the disciple made room for her in his house (Jn 19,27).

The scar left by her mother's sudden death did not make Catherine closed in on herself but brought her to a very close relationship with Mary who would comfort her and gradually disperse the clouds of bewilderment. At the foot of the Cross Mary, too, knew suffering. However, when her Son died she bravely remained standing there to give support to John and the other disciples. At the foot of the Cross she comforted and encouraged them. Similarly, Mary would help Catherine not to grieve but to think first of all about her father and her brothers and sisters who were also suffering this sad loss. From that day onward Catherine was more attentive to them just as she would be, later on, to all people who were suffering or bereaved. This painful situation was to become for her an occasion to grow in faith and trust. Little by little God would lift her out of the darkness of grief and help her rediscover the light of love. This experience of passing from "darkness" into "light" is something that she would experience again, in a totally spiritual way, on 18th July 1830, when she got up in the middle of the night to go and meet the Blessed Virgin who was waiting for her.

The mother's death also changed life for Marie-Louise, the eldest sister. She had to leave her boarding school at Langres to replace her mother at the farm and take charge of the household. To make things easier for Marie-Louise, the father sent Catherine and Tonine to their aunt Margaret who had a vinegar business in the village of Saint-Remy, 9 km away.

TWO YEARS OF EXILE

Father, if it is your will, let this chalice pass from me...but not my will but yours be done (Lk 22, 42)

In the autumn of that year, 1815, Catherine left her father's house and felt as though she was orphaned a second time. Aunt Margaret's house was all bustle and activity with six children aged between 10 and 18, all of them older than Catherine and Tonine. However, aunt Margaret was occupied with her business and had no time to look after the children so most of the time she had a servant looking after them. Catherine helped her a lot and once again showed a willingness to work: however, she missed her father whom she loved and admired. Her father was her model and she needed him to love and have confidence in her.

Two years went by at Saint-Remy and during this time Catherine continued to learn, with Our Lady, how to cultivate from day to day a certain inner solitude. Like a child that keeps close to its mother, she liked to say the rosary and talk to Mary about her inner life. The Mother of Jesus became her daily companion and since wherever Mary is, there, too, is the heart of God, Catherine became more attuned to listening to His voice and she wanted more and more to respond to it. Her heart and her will were already completely turned towards the Lord. She wanted to live as a true child of God and longed to meet Him in the Eucharist. She made her First Communion on 25th January 1818, in the church at Moutiers-Saint-Jean, about half a league from Fain, the parish her village was in. The date of her First Communion coincided with the anniversary of the founding of the Congregation of the Mission so was Saint Vincent perhaps giving a wink in Catherine's direction? She wouldn't have realised this because she didn't yet know him.

HER FIRST COMMUNION

As the Father has loved me, so I also love you: remain in my love (Jn 15,9)

After an absence of two years Catherine returned to the family home. Her return was a joyful occasion for two reasons: she was happy to be with her father again and she also had the happiness of receiving Jesus for the first time in Holy Communion. Both these experiences taught her how much the heart of God was burning with love for her and wanted to make her happy. Just as she did on the death of Catherine's mother, Mary helped her to forget about herself and concentrate on the family. Jesus in the Eucharist was to become the centre of her life and work. Tonine guessed her sister's secret. She observed that after her First Communion, Catherine became "*a real mystic*"

LEARNING ABOUT LIFE ON THE FARM

Marie-Louise initiated Catherine into the household tasks. She noticed that Catherine was no longer a child but a sturdy young girl who had no doubt matured through what had happened earlier. She also noted her strong spirituality which would help her to overcome herself. One day she confided to her that had it not been for their mother's death, she would have been a Daughter of Charity. Looking at Tonine, Catherine was able to say to Marie-Louise, "*The two of us will be able to manage the house.*" Thanks to Catherine's determination, Marie-Louise could now think of leaving

the family farm to follow her vocation. So, at the age of 12, Catherine became her father's closest helper. She had a high regard for him and eagerly followed his advice.

AS IN NAZARETH: WORK WELL DONE

Catherine set about taking charge of the household and she allotted tasks to each one. At that time being "a farmer's wife" was very hard work. Catherine had a lot to do; she worked steadily but unrelentingly. She showed a real flair for organisation and was able to make decisions about specific problems. Fate decreed that she should become even more hard-working, grow in endurance, and be able to overcome fatigue. In this hard life which called for much effort every day, Catherine developed equilibrium of mind and body and learnt how to overcome herself. We can imagine the monotony of those long working days and so have an idea of the great love that was already in Catherine's heart and which she patiently and courageously showed in the performance of very humble tasks.

Doesn't the setting for Fain-les-Moutiers remind us of Nazareth which was also a small place and where the people were very simple country folk? It was there that Jesus spent 30 years of his life doing nothing else but his daily duties, doing "*ordinary things extraordinarily well*", as Peguy says. Just as God poured His love into the Blessed Virgin's heart so that she could do what she had to do in the house at Nazareth, so, too, He put into Catherine's heart the strength she needed to take on the role of looking after the house. She also acted as mother of the family for Tonine and her little handicapped brother, showing them tender affection but also being firm with them. We can well imagine that, given their different temperaments, Catherine must have had some confrontations with her father and her brothers and sisters. But Catherine was able to rise above differences in temperament and she strove to do what God was asking of her within the family He had given her.

"I am with you as one who serves" (Lk 22,27)

As mistress of the household, and as servant, Catherine was the first to get up in the morning. She worked harder than anyone else and made sure nothing was lacking. Her days were marked out by housework, cooking meals, looking after the animals.... Catherine milked the cows, gave out the fodder and led the flocks to the communal drinking trough. She fed the pigs and the hens. Every week she did the sewing and the washing, kneaded the bread and heated up the big oven. She had authority over the workers who came in daily, including the men. On Thursdays she went to the market at Montbard, 15 km away. So many other things, some routine and some unexpected, like animals falling sick or plants wilting, storms, accidents, etc. made the life of this young farm woman hard and at times painful. In spite of the many things she had to do, Catherine was equal to the task and always kept a sense of proportion. As a country woman she knew how to wait for one field to ripen while she worked on another and to gather the different fruits in their own season.

Is not this the carpenter's son? ... Where did the man get all this?

We might well wonder how she was able to take on such a crushing burden. Did she have the natural strength to do this or did this strength come from God? It is true that after the empty days of her exile in Saint-Remy Catherine loved the family farm and the many tasks involved in running it. She was also generous and courageous by nature. But most of all, she had a deep inner sense of God and it was prayer that helped her to deal with excessive work and with problems.

Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to him speak (Lk 10, 40).

Every day Catherine went to the church at Fain and spent a long time there in prayer, kneeling on the cold flagstones. For her, religion was not a matter of words but of contact with a world of living, familiar people whom we think about and talk to, people who talk to us. Even if the tabernacle in the church was empty she was able to find the Lord's presence in her heart. That is why she constantly felt the need to keep coming back to this presence. It was prayer that gave meaning to everything else.

It was at this time that Jesus went out into the hills to pray (Lk 6,12)

For Sunday Mass, Catherine usually went to Moutiers-Saint-Jean and she would often go to Mass there during the week. She had such a strong desire to meet Our Lord in the Eucharist; it was He who gave her peace and strength to face the day. Nothing dampened her eagerness. Catherine would get up early, leave the house before dawn, and walk for about 3km. It took courage to set out, particularly in winter.

Mary left in haste for the hill country (Lk 1. 39)

It is good to think of Catherine walking along the road to Moutiers-Saint-Jean. She walked with a light step because she was young but she was also recollected. This long, silent walk gave her the opportunity to collect her thoughts and concentrate on God. Reading between the lines we can see in the person of this young woman so close to Mary, the silent mystery of Mary of Nazareth, about whom we are told practically nothing except her fundamental disposition of being open and ready to listen to the Word.

On the way back Catherine would prepare, in union with God, for the day ahead, so as to be able to bring His love to the people who worked on the farm, the neighbours and people in the village, and to recognise in their features His image. Her days became encounters with the life of God and the life of people. As the hours passed, Catherine would prolong her meeting with Christ by making frequent acts of the presence of God; in no way did this interfere with her daily duties. Her heart became a tabernacle to which she would go, from time to time, to talk to Him, to ask for His grace, to offer up some suffering, to thank Him. Nobody knew anything about this.

This amazingly deep spiritual life, though expressed in very simple ways, made her receptive and available. It takes a lot of time and personal effort to achieve this but from childhood, Catherine was in regular contact with God; daily contact and for long

enough periods of time for Him to gradually transform and enlighten her. For Catherine, it was no longer a question of what she herself wanted but what God wanted. Her spiritual life, her ability to listen to God, meant that she was able to look on people and events with the eyes of faith. She did not act in accordance with her natural capabilities even though these were well-developed; she acted in accordance with God's grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. She united all her different activities in one single endeavour-to serve God with love. At the age of 13 Catherine was as much a "contemplative" as she was "mistress of the household."

Did you not know that I must be busy about my Father's affairs? (Lk 2,49)

Catherine continued to grow to spiritual maturity, allowing herself to be taken over, unified and dominated by grace, and generously responding to it. At the age of 14 she took the decision to fast in secret on Wednesdays and Fridays. For her, fasting was not just a matter of religious observance but something between God and herself. This, too, was a source of energy and strength. Her sister, Tonine, noticed it and mentioned it to their father. Just as Mary and Joseph did not understand Jesus' decision to remain in the Temple when he was 12 years old, neither did Catherine's father understand what his daughter was doing. However, since it did not cause any problems with the running of the farm, he did not interfere. Yet just as Mary and Joseph had to consent that day to losing "their" Jesus who belonged to "them", so Catherine's father who was so proud of his closest helper, couldn't help but fear that one day he would lose "his" favourite daughter: her goodness and fervour caused him much concern. Catherine's decision did not signify any break in their relationship, in fact the opposite was true. Life at Fain went on as usual. Catherine threw herself energetically into the work of the farm but she was showing in her own way that she belonged to God and God alone could order her life.

The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said to him, "Joseph, do not fear to take Mary home as your wife (Mt 1.20)

Catherine knew that the fasting that God wants is "to share your bread with the hungry, to clothe the person you see to be naked, to bring deliverance to those who are oppressed." (Is 58,6). Shortly after this, Catherine confided to Tonine what she planned to do with her life: God was calling her to follow him more closely but she didn't know where or how. Then one night Catherine had a strange dream, one of those dreams that the Gospel calls a vision, something whose significance is realised only later on.

"I was in the church at Fain. I was praying. Suddenly an old priest with a black skull cap on his head, came to the altar and began to say Mass. I was struck by the way he looked at us. When Mass was over he beckoned to me. I was afraid. I backed away, mesmerised by him. Leaving the church, I went to visit someone who was sick. The old priest found me there and said to me, 'My daughter, it is good to care for the sick. You may be running away from me now, but one day you will be happy to come to me. God has designs on you. Don't forget this.'

At this point Catherine woke up. Dawn was breaking. It was only a dream but what could it mean? Catherine could not understand it. She continued to work at the farm. More and more she began to think about the future. She had her plans but she had heard it said that you had to be able at least to read and write before you could join the Sisters. So it was time to learn good French and to learn how to write and do arithmetic – on paper, not just in your head.

A TIME FOR SCHOOLING

Catherine was now eighteen. Antoinette Gontard, her mother's cousin, offered to take Catherine as a boarder and teach her in her school at Chatillon-sur-Seine. Tonine was now sixteen years old. She was strong enough to take on the work of the house. In spite of his reservations, their father agreed because he recognised that his older children had had a good education but, that following the death of their mother, the older children had not had the same opportunities. In 1824 Catherine left for Chatillon-sur-Seine to continue her education. And so began for her a period of displacement when she had to leave the countryside she knew. (To be continued).

Sister Anne Prevost

Daughter of Charity

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
 You have given the world its true light,
 Jesus, your Son – the Son of God.
 You abandoned yourself completely
 to God's call
 and thus became a wellspring
 of the goodness which flows from him.
 Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
 Teach us to know and love him,
 so that we, too, can become
 capable of true love,
 and be fountains of living water
 in the midst of a thirsting world.

God is Love,
 First Encyclical of Benedict XVI