

**March April 2006**

**Contents**

**Spiritual life**

**8<sup>th</sup> Study Document: General principles and government at general level**

Father Javier Alvarez, *Director General*

**Guidelines for the monthly retreat: “Seeing, in the light of faith”**

Father Javier Alvarez, *Director General*

**Today’s challenges**

**Introduction**

**Migration within the context of globalisation**

Madame Rodriguez Pizarro

**Migration and the Vincentian charism**

Fr Giuseppe Turati, CM

**Love embraces justice (Testimony from Province of Albany, New York)**

Sr Georgia Brezler, Daughter of Charity

**News from the Provinces**

**Appointments**

Visitatrices and Provincial Directors

**Visit of Superiors**

Mother Evelyne Franc; Visit to the Province of Ireland

**Sisters’ testimonies**

Province of Curitiba: 2005! Vincentian Youth Year

Sr Bernadette Valenga, Echoes correspondent

Province of Thailand: 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Centre for caring for the descendants of lepers in Khon Kaen

Sister Norma Esperas, Daughter of Charity

Province of France North: When the young people in a problem area stand up to help other people

Sister Jacqueline Bichler, Daughter of Charity

**The poor speak to us**

Province of Southern India: Jose, who suffers from Aids, evangelised me  
Sr Jaya Mary Joseph, Daughter of Charity

**History of the Company**

**Special bicentenary of the birth of Catherine Laboure**

**Saint Catherine: her passion for God and for the poor**

**I A vocation tested and then confirmed**

**II Personalised formation**

**Sr Anne Prevost, Daughter of Charity**

**Cover**

Province of Austria: Human Rights Prize

FATHER JAVIER ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

**8<sup>TH</sup> Study document on the revised Constitutions****CHAPTER VI: GOVERNMENT****GENERAL PRINCIPLES  
AND GOVERNMENT AT GENERAL LEVEL**

**C.60-71: St. 43-52**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

In this first document on the government of the Company we are going to look at two points: general principles and government at the highest (general) level. You will notice that this chapter on government is the one that has had most changes. In fact, the time of these changes dates back to 1965, after the Second Vatican Council. Until that time, government in the Company, as in all the Congregations and in the Church itself, followed a highly vertical structure. With the revision of the Constitutions, this vertical structure began to be more flexible and to take on new elements, for example, participation. Before this time there were no Domestic or Provincial Assemblies. General Assemblies had only one objective: to elect the Superioress General and her Councillors. The 1965 Assembly was the first one to convoke the Visitatrices and Vice-Visitatrices from all over the world. This Assembly was only a consultative one but it dealt with matters concerning the life of the Company. In 1969 the Domestic and Provincial Assemblies began to function and there was more balanced representation at the General Assembly, based on the membership of each Province.

These are just a few small examples which confirm the great change that has taken place over the last 40 years with regard to the government of the Company. As we have just said, the last General Assembly also contributed to having government where there is more participation, decentralisation and co-responsibility, as we can see throughout the whole of this chapter. But having this written into the Constitutions is not enough to ensure that these changes will be adopted. Every Sister needs to make an effort to understand the meaning of these changes and accept them.

## II. MAIN POINTS OF THE DOCUMENT

### 1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNMENT (cf. C.60-63)

Our commentary on these eleven principles will be based on the guidelines given by Father Miguel Perez Flores.<sup>1</sup>

**All authority comes from God:** *“The Company of the Daughters of Charity recognises that all lawful authority in the Church comes from God.”* (C.60).

This theological statement is backed up by a quotation from the bible, the dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate in Jn 19,11. Jesus recognises Pilate’s authority but at the same time he declares that it comes to him *“from on high.”* Given this principle, we can deduce that in the Company the Superiors hold God’s place as stated, too, in *Perfectae Caritatis* n°14. So when lawful Superiors act in accordance with the Constitutions they are true mediators between God and the community. Some words of Mother Guillemin explain this very well: *“The role of the Sister Servant is truly that of mediator...Her work is a mediation between God and the soul of each Sister. The Sister Servant is a mediatrix, she ensures in some way the relationship (or at least some form of relationship) between God and each of her companions...This is the most important thing. If we do everything else yet fail in this, we have achieved nothing.”*<sup>2</sup>

Saint Vincent was firmly convinced of this and he repeated this idea on many occasions. And of course we also find it in the Constitutions. For example, the Superioress General is invited to exercise her authority in such a way as to *“manifest to all the Sisters the love the Lord has for them.”* In short, this first principle reminds us of the religious aspect of authority so that we can understand its precise meaning within the Company. There are two sides to this principle: the Superior has to be very much aware of the significance and the implications of the authority she has been given. The Sisters, in their turn, must understand the great value of the obedience they have promised to practise. Emphasising this aspect could contribute to overcoming the crisis of authority which is having an effect, at least on Europe and America.

### **An open and respectful attitude to the Sovereign Pontiff:**

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Miguel Perez Flores, *Principles of Government in the 1983 Constitutions and Statutes of the Daughters of Charity*, in VV,AA. *Identity of the Daughters of Charity in the 1983 Constitutions and Statutes*, Ed. Salamanca 1984 p.77-113

<sup>2</sup> Mother Suzanne Guillemin, *Instructions to the Sister Servants (annual retreat 1966, vol 1)* p. 77-113

*“The Company...obeys the Sovereign Pontiff in a spirit of filial respect, is attentive to his teachings, and is ready to respond to his calls.” (c.60).*

The expression “*filial respect*” is a reflection of the “*religious submission*” mentioned in *Lumen Gentium* n°25. Moreover, the attitude of the Founders is very clear on this point and is often expressed in their teaching.<sup>3</sup> The Constitutions speak of this obedience to the Pope on two levels; being attentive to his teaching and being prepared to answer any calls he makes. With regard to the Pope’s teaching, we should mention here Statute 56f: the explanation or presentation of the Church’s documents is entrusted to the Provincial Director and the Formation Commission. Availability to the calls of the Sovereign Pontiff, presented in C.1c as appeals made by the Church, are also based on the vocation of the Company which from the time of its foundation has had this sense of universality.

**Exercise of authority:** *“Superiors realise that the authority they exercise has been entrusted to them in order to accomplish the mission of the Company in the Church, to stimulate its fidelity to the charism of the Founders, and to provide for the formation and welfare of its members.” (C.61).*

Authority in itself, or for itself, cannot be justified. It exists for the community, that is to say, so that institutions and their members may attain the objectives they have set themselves. Also, authority is not entirely independent or autonomous. It is defined by the objectives of the community, the welfare of its members and the aims of the institutions within the community. In the articles that follow, we will consider the different persons entrusted with government and will be able to see that these objectives are put into specific terms, keeping in mind the special mission of each of these persons within the general framework established by the Constitutions.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that this principle of government makes mention of the formation and welfare of the members, shows a sensitive and human touch that is to be appreciated. Authority in the Company is attentive to its fixed objectives and at the same time takes an interest in the welfare of all the Sisters. There can be no doubt that this is an important factor for the quality of communities as well as for the attainment of the Company’s aim.

**Unity in diversity:** *“Superiors.....should promote and maintain unity while respecting diversity.” (C.61).*

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. IV, 148-149; 175-181; 204-210; VI, 266-270; IX, 421

<sup>4</sup> The role of the Superior General with regard to the Sisters is to “*help them to maintain their characteristic spirit and to carry out their mission in the Church.*”(C.66a). The role of the Superioress General is “*to see that unity is maintained in fidelity to the spirit of the Company and in obedience to the Superior General and the Church.*” (C.66a). The Visitatrice receives the mission to “*promote the spiritual and apostolic vitality of the Province. She strives to stimulate, in each community and in each Sister, the awareness of their own responsibility in helping the Company to be faithful to its vocation and missionary thrust.*”(C.73a). The Sister Servant, “*animates and leads the local community and maintains its unity.*” (C. 82a).

All throughout its history, the Company has been subject to two opposing forces: plurality and the tendency towards centralisation. There has always been plurality in the Company, if we think of its presence in different countries and diverse cultures together with the fact that it is made up of Sisters who show sensitivity to different issues. The Company's varied works are another sign of plurality. Alongside this we can also state that there has been a centralising force at work, particularly with regard to life style. Think, for example, of the famous *Book of Customs* or the fact that procedures in the Mother House and Provincial Houses were models that every other house had to follow to the letter. Unity was to be preserved by uniformity. The principle of government that we are discussing was drawn up, specifically, to counteract the problems caused by this uniformity.

The Constitutions provide a common framework that guarantees unity. Within this fundamental unity, the diversity or differences set out in these two chapters are legitimate and necessary: diversity in works and in life style (cf. C.61). In order to channel any legitimate diversity that may be found in the Company and which does indeed exist, each Province is allowed to draw up its own Provincial Norms and has the right to draw up its own Provincial Plan. And to have this diversity recognised at local level, each community must work out its own Community Plan. (cf. C.66c, 80, 35a, 83; St. 61, 62, 3c, 4, 6a, 60b,67).

This principle applies to Superiors in particular because they are, on the one hand, the guarantors of unity, (cf. C.66a, 73a, 82a; St.32) and, on the other hand, they have to commit themselves to new forms of service, presence and evangelisation since new situations can arise, the appeals made by poor people can change, guidelines issued by the Church can ask us to act in a different way. Of course this principle also affects every Sister with regard to participation, co-responsibility and subsidiarity, as we shall see later on. (cf. C. 30c, 31b, 87d, 91b; St. 16b, 61a).

**Authority as service:** *“Like all authority in the Church, authority in the Company is exercised as service, following the example of Christ the Servant, who so loved His own as to give His life for them.”* (C.62a).

The Church has always equated authority with service: *“Anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave.”*(Mt, 20, 26-27).<sup>5</sup> We know that it was Our Lord Himself who interpreted authority as service. It is the same in the Company. For example, the name “Sister Servant” reflects very well this idea of service. The expression, *“Like all authority in the Church”* underlines the ecclesial sense of this principle of government. We only need to think of some of the texts from the Second Vatican Council, for example, *Lumen Gentium* n°24 or *Perfectae Caritatis* n° 14.

Of course, Saint Vincent's teaching backs up all that we are saying. We could quote many passages written by him but the one we have chosen is sufficiently meaningful. In this text, Father Durand has just been named Superior. He is very young.

---

<sup>5</sup> See also other texts: Lk 22,27; Jn.13, 4-11

Saint Vincent does not hesitate to give him this advice: *“Above all else, do not be eager to appear as the Superior, the master. I do not agree with what was said to me a few days ago, that in order to exercise and maintain one’s authority, it is necessary to show others that you are the Superior. Mon Dieu! Our Lord did not speak in this fashion: His words and example taught us quite the opposite; he told us that He did not come to be served but to serve others and that whoever wanted to be master must be the servant of all.”*<sup>6</sup>

Authority interpreted as service requires such dispositions as availability, diligence, solicitude, showing concern for others, shunning privileges or personal advantage, and, above all else, imitating the example of the Good Shepherd who gave his life for his sheep, as St. John tells us in his gospel. (cf. Jn 10, 11-15)

**Holding office for a fixed term:** *“Every position of authority in the Company is considered a temporary service of specific duration.”* (C. 62a).

In the history of the Company this aspect of holding office has varied considerably: for example, in the early days the office of Sister Servant was temporary. The office of Superioress General has always been temporary. However, when Visitatrices were appointed it was not for a fixed time but depended on the decision of the Superior General. Nowadays the temporary nature of these offices is well established by the Constitutions and Statutes (cf. C.66b, 68b, 73b, 82c; St. 36b, 50a, 51, 56a, 57b, 58a). Even the office of Director General which, up to the revised Constitutions was conferred for an indefinite period, is now for a fixed term: *“The Director General is appointed for a six-year term and may be reappointed ...The total duration of these terms of office may not exceed twelve years.”* (C. 65)

Why do we have this principle of governing offices being temporary? A first reason, though not the most important one, is to allow the greatest possible number of members to have access to these positions. The work of government is hard, tiring and exhausting. Other reasons for this principle are connected with a person being ready to take on or to give up an office in the spirit of obedience. Article 31 of the Constitutions states *“Availability....enables the Company to provide the services entrusted to it.”* In connection with this word “availability”, we have to understand, too, the need for a person not to remain indefinitely in an office of governing. Article 624 of the Code of Canon Law speaks of this limited period of office but leaves it to Congregations to use their Proper Law to determine its duration.

**Responsibility for making decisions:** *“Those in authority are responsible for making decisions, after dialogue and discernment in order to know the will of God.”* (C.62b).

The Code of Canon Law establishes a general norm: Superiors, that is to say, those who are asked to make decisions, should be individual persons and not collective bodies such as a community. The Code, however, recognises that there can be exceptions

---

<sup>6</sup> Coste XI p.346, Advice to Antoine Durand appointed Superior of the Seminary at Agde (1656)

to the general norm. For example, General Assemblies are authentic decision-making bodies. On the other hand, Provincial Assemblies are not legislative.

Councils are not, properly speaking, decision-making bodies but they assist the Superiors. In certain matters these will need to know what their Council think. In other matters, however, they will need the Council's consent. (cf. St 52b and c, 60b and c). But in both cases it is the Superior who makes the decision. Present legislation recognises what is called the "collegial vote". In the Company it is only recognised in the matter of dismissing a member from the community. (cf. St. 52d). In this case the Council becomes an authentic governing body. This is established by Canon Law.<sup>7</sup>

If we carefully analyse the second part of the quotation which serves as a heading for this principle of government, we can come to the conclusion that a great change has taken place with regard to the manner of governance both in the Church and in the Company: according to what is clearly stated in *Perfectae Caritatis*, before a decision is made there should be dialogue and a common searching to know God's will. In other words, it is no longer the person in authority who is seeking God's will, but also the community or the Province working with the respective authority. This idea of seeking in common, of dialogue and discernment, often appears throughout the Constitutions (cf. C.5c, 31b, 34; St. 28d).

**Those in authority should keep close to people:** *"(Those in authority) ...should keep close to the Sisters in order to understand them, be well acquainted with their lives and, with them, be attentive to the needs of persons who are poor, as they seek ways to meet those needs with the audacity and prudence of the Founders."* (C.62b).

The reasons given why those in authority should keep close to people are important: understanding, listening, knowing about each Sister's life, listening together to the cries of the poor and seeking solutions together. If the personal aspect is important, the needs of the poor are no less so. Those in authority and the Sisters have to search together for the path they should follow. For this to happen, persons in authority must be aware of people's specific circumstances and be knowledgeable about the works. The last words of paragraph b are significant, *"with the audacity and prudence of the Founders."* It is not the first time that "audacity" has appeared in the Constitutions. Article 25a says, *"with the audacious courage of the apostles, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise sent forth their Daughters on the highways of the world."* It is interesting to see the word audacity used in relation to government. The reference to prudence does not take away from audacity, I would even say it makes audacity realistic and efficacious.

It is a general principle of government that those in authority should be close to those in their charge. This means that each person in a position of authority should, in their own particular context, act in this way as far as the circumstances of their office allow. For example, the proximity of the Superioress General cannot be the same as that of a Sister Servant. The principle speaks of proximity which often presupposes mobility and always involves availability and prompt communication. In other words, what this

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Code of Canon Law 699

principle rejects is authority that is remote from people, from communities and from the works.

**Mutual trust:** *“Mutual trust remains the basis of all relationships in government. This trust is built on respect for persons, discretion, and confidentiality.”* (c.62b).

In the past, much of Church and Community legislation was based on a certain feeling of mistrust: the great number of negative precepts, the exaggerated insistence on values such as order, regularity, the laying down of fixed times for particular duties, the Superior being seen as the “guardian”, were all signs of distrust of the consecrated person. Today, the new way of formulating legislation has moved far beyond these signs of mistrust that existed earlier. Authority now exhorts rather than imposes. This principle of mutual trust is part of a new sensitivity and without it there can be no government.

As a first result of this principle we can say that in our times legislation must not only show trust in people but it must also be realistic. We say “trust” because we take it for granted that all the members are aware of what their vocation entails, that they have mature convictions and they know their obligations. But at the same time legislation has to take into account human frailty and the need for support. All this will give the necessary realism to the legislation.

Of course, trust is not something that can be imposed; trust and loyalty have to be gained because they are not simply part of the office of those in authority. It is very significant that the Constitutions call for respect, discretion and confidentiality, because on them will depend whether there is mutual trust or a lack of it. With regard to discretion, it has to be said that this is a two-edged sword. Nobody can deny that confidentiality is often necessary but if it is used as a “method” of governing, it is completely negative. Other principles of government such as co-responsibility, participation and communication of information give people the right to know things that were formerly kept secret.

**Participation in government:** *“Every Sister has the right and the duty to participate in the government of the Company, according to the provisions indicated in the Constitutions and Statutes.”* (C. 63a).

Today, this principle of government seems only logical, given that the community is not just for Superiors but for all the members. However, this form of government has only existed in the Church for a relatively short time. It was restricted to Assemblies that were lawfully recognised. In the Company, for example, there was only the General Assembly and it was responsible for elections. Today it is quite different; we say that participation and co-responsibility are everyone’s right. The decree *Perfectae Caritatis* n° 2 asks all the members of communities to participate in adapting and revising their Constitutions. The motu proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae* indicates how this participation is to be carried out. Like all things human, this principle is also open to manipulation as the

Code of Canon Law recognises.<sup>8</sup> This principle of government is an aid to its functioning but it does not diminish the powers of those in authority or replace them.

I have sometimes heard it said that the principle of participation was very well formulated but limited in practice. To have an all-over idea of the process we have made a list of all forms of participation quoted in the present Constitutions: the Assemblies (General, Provincial and Local), the elections (Superioress General, Councillors, Visitatrice, Provincial Councillors), the consultations (Visitatrice, Provincial Councillors, Assistant Provincial, Sister Servants, Director General, Provincial Director) Plans (Provincial and local), Provincial Norms, various Commissions, personal participation in community life....

A word about “consultations”: these are dealt with in the Constitutions as a separate principle: *“Consultations\* can guide the competent authority at the time of decision making.”* Nobody can deny their importance; they are an aid to discernment for those who have to take decisions. If they are dealt with separately it is because they are simply a concrete way of participating in government.

**Subsidiarity:** *“Subsidiarity\* requires effective sharing of responsibilities. It demands collaboration and keeping one another informed, and includes the right to guidance and supervision as well as the obligation of accountability.”* (C.63b).

The term “subsidiarity” does not appear in the 1983 Constitutions but the concept is there. In the current Constitutions, however, we see both the concept and the term. Pius IX was the first to formulate this concept in 1931. In section 35 of his encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, he explains this principle in the context of civil society. Little by little, this principle came into the Church and its institutions. According to the pontifical document, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* n° 18, the meaning of the word subsidiarity can be summed up as follows: *“that Superiors at every level be given sufficient powers, so as to minimise unnecessary or too frequent recourse to higher authority.”*<sup>9</sup>

According to Father Jaime Corera, we have to consider two aspects of this principle, the positive aspect and the negative. The negative side asks those in authority not to interfere in the workings of authority at lower levels. In practice, this means that the Company, usually the Superioress General and her Council should not interfere in Provincial government whose powers are defined in the Constitutions. Those in governance at Provincial level should, in their turn, respect those who govern at local level. The Sister Servants should act in the same way with Sister companions who are responsible for a particular office. The positive aspect of the principle consists in the procuring for each level of governance the necessary means to achieve what is in their remit: sufficient number of Sisters for the different works of the house, adequate material resources.... One thing that every lower level of authority needs is the intervention of superiors at a higher level when those at a lower level are not functioning or are unable to correct by themselves any major shortcomings in the functioning of the office confided to

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, c.633

<sup>9</sup> Constitutions and Statutes 2004, Glossary

them. In this case, genuine subsidiarity demands the intervention of the Sister Servant with regard to a companion, the intervention of the Visitatrice with regard to the local community, the intervention of the Superioress General with regard to the Province. In the present Constitutions the powers of those in authority at every level are well defined. In this recent revision, more powers have been given at Provincial and local level and this has marked an important shift towards decentralisation.

What do we expect to gain from this principle of subsidiarity? In no way are we looking for independence or autonomy. On the contrary, this principle presupposes collaboration and sharing of information as stated in the Constitutions. Subsidiarity tries to create a new kind of relationship between those in authority and the Sisters. More precisely, it tries to avoid authority that “mothers” and obedience that “infantilises.” Each one has to act responsibly at her own level. We all know that this mentality which the Constitutions present cannot be acquired quickly or easily because many Sisters have a way of acting that is deeply rooted.<sup>10</sup> However, we must strive to assimilate the mentality that the new Constitutions lay before us.

## 2. GOVERNMENT AT GENERAL LEVEL

This chapter opens with a passage from a letter from Saint Louise to Saint Vincent. In it she tells him about the peace she experiences after seeing very clearly what is God’s will with regard to the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission directing the Company of the Daughters of Charity.<sup>11</sup> We know that Saint Louise was so concerned about this matter that she would rather have seen the Company come to an end rather than find it directed by anyone else. Basically, what our Foundress wanted was to ensure that the aims of the Company should be achieved. She was adamant on this point because she was certain that this was God’s will.

At the general level of government we will be looking particularly at the changes that have been introduced into the present Constitutions and how they apply to each office.

### **The Superior General** (cf. C.64; St.44)

As we have seen in the letter written by Saint Louise that we have just spoken about, the Superior General “*is recognised and accepted*” as Superior of the Company but many of his functions have now been passed to other levels of government. In specific terms, this principle figure of government now has the following functions:

The Superior General no longer presides at the General Council (either personally or through the Director General) but he participates in it (either personally or through the Director General). It is now the Superioress General or her Assistant who

---

<sup>10</sup> To develop this point I have made use of the article by Fr. Jaime Corera, *Subsidiarity and co-responsibility in governing the Company*, Echoes of the Company 2001

<sup>11</sup> Letter from St. Louise to St. Vincent, November 1647, *Spiritual Writings*, p.233

presides. In this the Company is simply recognising in juridical terms what has already been general practice.

- The right to grant a Sister of more than ten years vocations, an indult to live outside the community for a maximum period of three years has been withdrawn. It is no longer necessary for him to have this right since in certain cases, the Visitatrice, and in others the Superioress General, with their respective Councils can authorise a Sister to live somewhere other than a house of the community. (cf. C.66f; St. 29 a-b, 54a).

-In the earlier Constitutions it was the Superior General who gave them their practical interpretation. This is now the duty of the Superioress General “*in agreement with the Superior General.*” (C.66c).

- The powers to erect, divide or suppress Provinces....are now within the remit of the Superioress General and her Council (cf.St. 52c). In practice, this faculty was a little artificial because it is the Visitatrices, the Provincial Councillors and the Superioress General who will know whether these changes should be made. Once again, the legislation has been adapted to make it more realistic.

- It is no longer Superior General who nominates those who will replace the Assistant and the General Councillors, or who will confirm the appointment of the Treasurer and Secretary General, the Sister Servants and those in charge of formation. Later on we will see what is still assigned to Provincial level and what belongs to the general level of governance. Why has this change come about? For the same reason I gave in the case of erection, division and suppression of Provinces.

- With regard to the administration of the Company’s goods, “*he receives an annual account.*” (St.44). That is to say, he is merely informed. All practical matters: the authorisation to alienate goods, contract debts or decide on the maximum level of expenses authorised for Visitatrices and Sister Servants, now passes to the Superioress General and her Council. (C.66d).

To sum up, the Superior General is recognised as the highest authority in the Company. He is expected to “*guide (the Sisters), helping them to maintain their characteristic spirit and to carry out their mission in the Church.*” (C. 64b). He has sufficient scope for carrying out his mission. Also, this trend in the Constitutions assures us that the new situation keeps faith with the wishes of the Founders. As we have seen, certain powers connected with government have been passed to other levels and this has made an important contribution to decentralisation. In fact, as we said earlier, these powers were more nominal than real. In most cases the General Assembly has simply ratified by a norm, what was already being done.

With regard to his remit, we can say that the Superior General continues to be concerned with everything connected with the vows (cf. C. 64c), with convoking and presiding at the General Assembly, always with the agreement of the Superioress General and her Council, (cf. C.64a): he continues to participate in the General Council (either

personally or through the Director General), he is given an annual report on the administration of the goods of the Company (cf. C. 64e), he makes preparations for the election of the Superioress General, (cf. St.46), he appoints the Director General and the Provincial Directors (cf. St. 44), and he makes visits of the Provinces and local communities (cf. St.44) and “*he transmits to the Holy See, for confirmation, the dismissal proceedings for a Sister who has completed ten or more years of vocation.*” (St.44).

**The Director General** (cf. C.65; St. 45).

In order to understand the work of the Director General, we have to stop and think about this statement in the Constitutions: “*His principle function is to assist the Superior General and to replace him in his absence.*” (C.65). Historically, this office originated in this way. Vincent de Paul had so much to do that he couldn’t give as much time to the Company as he would have liked. So Saint Vincent asked Fr. Antoine Portail to help him. With the passing of time, this office became firmly established. Also, the Director General’s mission depends, for a large part, on the Superior General. His work with the Sisters is well summed up in the words of the Constitutions: “*He accompanies the Sisters and encourages them to be faithful in living their vocation.*” (C.65b).

Until our present Constitutions came into force, his was the only office in the Company that was not of fixed duration. It depended entirely on what the Superior General wanted. The new Constitutions have set a fixed term of office, six years with the possibility of being reappointed. In any case tenure was not to exceed twelve years. You will notice that the second part of the statement does not mention a precise time. It just says, “*he may be reappointed.*” (C.65a) This expression is not vague or careless, the wording here allows the Superior General a certain freedom of action. Statute 45 indicates two changes: In the absence of the Superior General, it is no longer the Director General who presides at the Council, but the Superioress General. He does, however, participate. He no longer authorises the contraction of debts, obligations and accepting foundations, in the absence of the Superior General, authority to do this now passes to the Superioress General. In financial and other matters, he simply expresses an opinion.

**The Superioress General** (cf. C.66; St. 46,47).

The principal mission of the Superioress General is to maintain unity in the Company and fidelity to the spirit of the Company. She has to orient the Company and guide and stimulate it so that it will continue in obedience to the Church. The Constitutions speak very forcibly about the way she is to exercise her authority: she is not to be authoritarian but she should seek the collaboration of all the Sisters. In speaking of the way she is to govern, the Constitutions use the very striking words of the exhortation *Perfectae caritatis* n° 14; the Sisters should be able to see, in the way she acts, “*the love that the Lord has for them.*” (C.66a). In this way, obedience at all levels will become easier.

We will now just look at the changes that have been brought into the present Constitutions:

- With regard to her election; the number of ballots needed to reach an absolute majority decision is cut from six to three (cf. C.66b). This change is more in line with the Code of Canon Law which suggests two.<sup>12</sup> For the fourth ballot a relative majority is sufficient. In this same article 66b, as well as referring to age and number of years vocation, a new condition has been added: for the election of the Superioress General to be valid, the Sister must have renewed her vows that year. Obviously, there is no need to comment on this addition.

- New allocation of responsibilities:

\* For the practical interpretation of the Constitutions she must strive to be in accord with the Superior General so as not to create divisions among the Sisters (cf. C.66c).

\*The Superioress General is “*responsible for the goods of the Company*” (C.66d). This means that she no longer needs the Superior General’s consent to dispose of the Company’s goods in important matters. She receives regular reports on the administration of the Company. She authorises the acquisition or alienation of goods, the acceptance of foundations, the contraction of debts and obligations within the limits set by universal law. Of course she should always take into account the advice given by her Council.

\* She designates the Visitatrices and Councillors in accordance with the method chosen by the Province (cf. C.66e). She appoints the Treasurer General, the Secretary General, the replacement for the Assistant General or a Councillor where necessary. (cf. St. 52c). All this is done with the consent of her Council and without needing to have recourse to the Superior General.

\* With her Council, she approves Provincial norms. (cf. C.66c).

\* With the consent of her Council, she may authorise a Sister to live outside a house of the Company, “*in cases that do not lie within the competence of the authority of the Visitatrice.*”(C.66f).

In the 1983 Constitutions, when the office of Superioress General was vacant, a General Assembly was convoked for new elections. In the Constitutions of 2004 we have an important change to this: when the office of Superioress General becomes vacant, the Assistant General takes over until the next Ordinary General Assembly (cf. C.66g).

### **The Assistant and the General Councillors (C. 67-68; St 48-49).**

The mission of the Assistant is to replace the Superioress General during her absence. Here we have an important change: if the office of Superioress General becomes vacant she replaces her until the next Ordinary General Assembly (cf. 67b).

The mission of the General Councillors is to assist the Superioress General in the government of the Company (cf. C.68a). These are the main changes introduced by the

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, c.119, 1<sup>o</sup>

present Constitutions. For the validity of their election a clause has been added saying they must be at least 35 years of age and 15 of vocation; they must have renewed their vows during the year. (cf. C.68b). If the office of a General Councillor becomes vacant, it is the Superioress General with her Council, not the Superior General, who appoints a new Councillor. (cf. C.68c). With regard to the election of Councillors, no fixed number of Councillors is prescribed as was the case in the 1983 Constitutions; each General Assembly will determine the number of Councillors according to the needs of the Company.(cf. St.49a). The Constitutions anticipate the method of electing the General Councillors: the Superioress General with her Council, will put forward the number of candidates and the criteria for electing them, before the Provincial Assemblies and the General Assembly.(cf. St. 49b). Finally, here is another slight change: The General Councillors participate in Council by giving “*their opinion or their consent.*”(St.49c) The 1983 Constitutions spoke of a “*consultative or deliberative voice.*” The two expressions come down to the same thing: “*giving their opinion*” means that the Superioress General listens to the opinions of the Councillors but she is not obliged to follow the opinion of the majority. However, with regard to “*consent*” opinion is expressed by vote and in this case the Superioress cannot act against the wishes of the majority.

**The Treasurer General** (cf. C.69; St. 50).

Her mission is concerned with the administration of the temporal goods of the Company, under the direction of the Superioress General and her Council. The Constitutions present us with two minor changes:

- The Treasurer General participates in the General Council, not only where strictly financial matters are concerned but also when it is a question of “*legal affairs that have economic consequences.*” (C.69b). It is useful to have the benefit of the Treasurer’s knowledge of matters connected with finance.

- Since the administration of goods, nowadays, requires highly specialised knowledge, the Constitutions ask for the Treasurer General to be “*assisted by a Finance Commission.*” (St. 50d)

**The Secretary General** (cf. C.70; St.51).

Her mission is to help the Superioress General in her administration. There is no significant change from the 1983 Constitutions.

**The General Council** (cf. C.71; St.52).

The Councillors and the Superioress General are the members of this Council. Neither the Superior General nor the Director General are part of the Council even though they participate in it. Its main function is to deal with matters that are within its competence according to Universal Law and the Proper Law and the spirit of the Company. (cf. C.71a,c).

The most important change is that the Superioress General now presides over the Council and, in her absence, it is the Assistant General who takes on this responsibility and not the Superior General or the Director General as has been the case up to now. (cf. C.71b). We have already spoken of the other changes when we discussed the different offices at this level of government.

In conclusion, we would like to draw your attention to this small change: in many places the phrase “*the Superioress General and her Council*” has been replaced by “*the Superioress General with her Council.*” You will see this, for example, in articles 66c, 67b, 68b...of the Constitutions. Why was the conjunction “and” replaced by the preposition “with”? The conjunction juxtaposes the two phrases and does not make it clear that the Council members are not on the same level as the Superioress General. It puts them both on an equal footing. So the phrase “*the Superioress General and her Council*” could give the idea of collegial and not personal government, something that is contrary to Canon Law and our Proper Law. On the other hand, the words “*the Superioress General with her Council*” tell us clearly that it is the Superioress General who governs even if she must do so with her Council. Statute 44 uses the coordinating conjunction “and” to unite the Council and the Superioress General. But in this case it is justified because the Statute wishes to emphasise that the Superior General consults the Superioress General and also the Councillors, before appointing a Director General. That is to say, we are not talking here of something that happens in Council as we did indicate in the previous cases.

### **III. SOME QUESTIONS TO HELP YOUR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND COMMUNITY SHARING ( BETWEEN COMMUNITIES OR AT PROVINCIAL LEVEL...)**

1. Compare the revised Constitutions with those of 1983. Notice the changes in the articles dealt with in this study document.

2. Which of the principles of government presented by the Constitutions do you consider to be the most important or the most necessary for exercising government in the Company today? How do the principles you have quoted affect you personally?

3 *Subsidiarity tries to create a different sort of relationship between “authority” and “obedience.”* What action can be taken by communities and Provinces to promote the implementation of this principle of government?

4. As a member of the Company what aspirations do you have regarding government at general level? How can you collaborate with general government?

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

FATHER JAVIER ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Guidelines for the monthly retreat

*“Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him.” (Mk. 10, 21).*

**Seeing, in the light of faith**

The way we look on people and events should be illuminated by Christ, the resurrected Christ. The Paschal Vigil begins with the rite of light. The image of this fire should remain imprinted on our eyes during the whole of Easter, the whole of our life. The Christian who has experienced Easter and who has known Jesus, cannot live in darkness, neither can he or she continue their life with cataracts that distort their vision. They should see things as the Master did.

How did Jesus view things? The parables show us just how attentive and sensitive he was: his calm, serene glance did not merely contemplate the birds of the sky as they built their nests: his kindly glance was that of a countryman from upper Galilee who, from his childhood days, had learnt to recognise the different plants, mint, anise, cummin: it was the straightforward glance of someone who had grown up close to nature and who had breathed in the aroma of myrrh and nard.

Sacred Scripture is familiar with many types of glances and it describes them: a kindly glance gives joy to the heart(cf. Prov 15, 30); haughty looks reflect a proud heart (cf. Ps 101,5); a caring glance for the needs of brothers and sisters (cf. Prov 22, 9). The Semites believed that in the human person there was a light that came from the heart and moved outwards via the windows of the eyes.

That is why Jesus speaks of the “lamp of the body”: *“The lamp of the body is the eye. It follows that if your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light. But if your eye is diseased, your whole body will be all darkness. If then, the light inside you is darkness, what darkness that will be!* (Mt 6,22).

**CHARACTERISTICS OF JESUS’ GLANCE**

**A glance towards heaven**

One of the differences between a human being and the rest of the animal kingdom is the nature of the human glance: only human beings lift their head to contemplate the sky. Only human beings seek in God the meaning of their existence.

Jesus had his eyes fixed on the Father. That is what we discover just by reading the Gospel: for example, before he multiplied the loaves and the fishes he raised his eyes to the Father ((cf. Mt 14, 19) Before he uttered the word “*Ephphata*” and opening the ears of the man who was deaf, he raised his eyes to heaven (cf. Mk 7,34) etc... His

glance reveals the direction in which the eyes of someone looking for nourishment for their life and words of salvation, should turn. It is only from on high that there comes the light which gives meaning to joy, sorrow, success and failure, betrayal, loneliness....and death.

### **A glance that goes right to the heart**

Jesus is a careful observer, he misses nothing that is happening around him. He sees the Pharisee who, arrogantly standing erect, thanks God that he is not as the rest of men....and the publican who beats his breast and dares not raise his eyes to heaven...(cf. Lk 18, 11-13).

He notices the people who come with their alms to the temple coffers. These are made of bronze and they are cone shaped. The rich throw their coins energetically into the coffers so that the sound will echo. He doesn't continue to look at them but gazes at a poor widow: *"I tell you truly, this poor widow has put in more than any of them."* (cf. Lk 21, 1-3). Jesus sees the secrets of people's hearts and he can distinguish between mirage and reality, between what is of genuine worth and what is rubbish.

He directs a penetrating and most merciful glance towards Zacchaeus, a man who is small of stature and despised by everyone....except by Jesus. When he comes to the place where Zacchaeus has climbed to, he looks up at him and says, *"Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today."*(Lk 19,5). This detail is very significant: Jesus' glance moves from down below to up above. The highest place belongs to the sinner, to the poor person. We who are following in the footsteps of Saint Vincent know very well that whoever goes to the assistance of people who are poor must be clothed with humility. According to the Gospel, the one who is the focus of attention is the marginalised, poor person, whose life has been one long succession of failures. Jesus, the Master and the Lord, regards himself as the poor person's servant. (cf. Lk 19, 1-10). What did the Pharisees and the righteous achieve by looking down on Zacchaeus from on high? He remained unmoved by their condemnation and derision.

## **THE EYES OF JESUS**

### **Eyes that can see**

Seeing is more than simply looking. The superficial person sees the forest but doesn't see the trees, looks at people but does not see the person. Psychologists have said that our vision is "selective": we do not see the whole picture, we only see the things and the people we want to see. Jesus, on the contrary, saw the whole picture; the lilies of the field, the grain of wheat, the women who searched her house diligently until she found the lost drachma. His gaze is never an empty one: it is always welcoming. The explanation for this is very simple; he loves everything. He has a kindly relationship with all creation.

### **Eyes that are understanding**

To understand is something more than simply to welcome: it means treating people with respect and esteem. Why did the “public sinner” dare to enter the house of a Pharisee and throw herself at the feet of the teacher from Nazareth. (cf. Lk 7, 36-50)? The hatred and scorn of the righteous had made her indifferent to everything and everybody. “*Do you see this woman?*”, Jesus said to the Pharisee who, had perhaps looked at her often but never “seen” her. The look in Jesus’ eyes makes people feel welcome.

### **Eyes that can communicate**

To look at somebody is to make contact with them. To establish contact with someone we need first of all to look into their eyes. Looking into someone’s eyes is like knocking at a door. When someone calls we can react in different ways: we may show fear, indifference, fatigue, prejudice, joy, enthusiasm... Two of John the Baptist’s disciples asked Jesus, “*Master, where do you live?*” Their eyes met his and they asked if they could go to where he lived. “*Come and see,*” he replied. The evangelist notes, “*They went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him the rest of that day.*” (Jn 1, 35-39) Two people’s lives were radically changed by an exchange of glances

According to all these things that the Gospel tells us, Jesus’ glance is directed towards the poor. Throughout the whole of Sacred Scripture we see that the same can be said of the Father. Saint Vincent’s gaze followed the same pattern (cf. F. Armellini-G. Moretti, *A portrait of Jesus*).

### **FOR PERSONAL PRAYER AND SHARING**

Meditate on these passages from the gospel: Mk 12, 41-44 and Mk 10, 46-52

How do I look on the people I have to serve and those with whom I communicate? The Sisters of my community?

What is there in my glance that does not resemble that of Jesus or of Saint Vincent?

Father Javier Alvarez, CM  
*Director General*

### TODAY’S CHALLENGES

#### **Introduction**

In this issue, the chapter on “Today’s Challenges” gives extracts from two more interventions given during the Session on migrants. The first talk is a reflection on the

phenomenon of migration within the present context of globalisation; the second goes more deeply into the subject in the light of the Vincentian charism.

Immigration is one of the most important events happening on a world scale and it has enormous consequences for the lives of millions of people. Migrants are people who have left their homes, voluntarily or under pressure, in search of a better life. The experts tell us that today their number is put at 175 million. According to a demographic forecast, this number will rise to 230 million by 2050. Latching on to this phenomenon of migration are people engaged in criminal and illegal activities and who profit from illegal emigration that the International Organisation for Migrants (OIM) is unable to control. To understand and intervene in the situations of poverty brought about by this current migratory process, we have to look at the question within the global context of socio-economic and political conditions.

In her talk, Madame Rodriguez Pizarro shares her experience as special rapporteuse at UNO for the Rights of Migrants. Within the perspective of the realities and the challenges of migration, she makes concrete suggestions for working with the Church in the Ministry to Migrants. In his talk, Father Turati, a Vincentian priest from the Province of Turin, urges us to think about this phenomenon from the point of view of our charism, so as to listen to and heed the various pleas that migrants make to us. Finally, Sister Georgia Brezler, from the Province of Albany, shares with us her experience of working, as a Daughter of Charity, with refugees, migrants and political asylum seekers.

#### MADAME RODRIGUEZ PIZARRO

### **The phenomenon of migration in the context of globalisation. Its realities and its challenges**

#### Notes taken during Madame Rodriguez's talk

I am speaking to you as the “special rapporteuse for the Rights of Migrants”, this office being part of the system for the protection and promotion of Human Rights at UNO. My work consists in looking at the means we have to take to overcome obstacles to the full and effective protection of migrants. Between 1999 and 2005, I received information from all sources concerned with the violation of migrants' human rights wherever these took place. I made recommendations for remedying these situations, I promoted the implementation of current legislation on this matter, I recommended the measures to be taken to eliminate the violation of migrants' human rights and when I considered it necessary for an inquiry to be held on the ground with regard to a specific situation, I made the necessary visits *in situ*, after first being invited by the Government of the country.

I want to make all my experience available to the Church and its different organisations. It is absolutely essential to be well informed about migration within the

context of globalisation if we are to understand the challenges now facing us, when we have to defend the rights of migrants throughout the world.

## **I. MIGRATION IN A GLOBALISED WORLD**

Migration cannot be considered outside the context of globalisation. Indeed, nearly all countries, for one reason or another, are confronted today with an invasion of migrants which affects their social, economic, political and religious life. According to statistics for the year 2003, provided by the International Organisation for Migration (OIM), 175 million people live outside their native country. Nearly 158 million of these are migrants, about 16 million are refugees and 900,000 are asylum seekers.

I have identified several reasons for this migration: natural disasters, internal conflicts, economic instability and poverty, unemployment, disintegration of the family, sexual inequality, domestic violence, social exclusion. In most cases people have freely chosen to emigrate and they do this for economic or cultural reasons.

### **Discrimination and xenophobia**

This phenomenon is rooted in excessive nationalism. The marginalisation of migrant peoples or of non-Christian believers, is found in many countries. Waves of refugees add to the floods of migrants in societies where ethnic groups and peoples of different cultures come together.

Migrants are exposed to the perils of international networks of organised crime. They don't realise the dangers lying in wait for them when they migrate illegally, and they don't know what steps to take to make sure that they will be travelling in safety.

### **The mistreatment of people and illicit trafficking in migrants**

With regard to migrants' rights, we need to mention two points in the international context: the mistreatment of people and illicit trafficking in migrants. In article 3 of the document "Protocol concerning the *mistreatment of persons*, especially women and children" it is stated that this abuse of persons covers transport, reception of people, use of threats or other forms of constraint, and withholding money. This article is complemented by the "United Nations Convention against Organised Transnational Crime."

On the other hand, article 3 of the "Protocol against *Illicit trafficking in Migrants* by Land, Sea and Air" that complements the Convention, defines trafficking as profiting materially or financially, from the illegal entry of a foreigner or non-resident to the territory of a State. This illicit movement of people across frontiers encourages increased mistreatment on an international scale.

According to information provided by OIM, about 700,000 people throughout the world are victims of this type of abuse. Women, young people and children are specially

targeted by these international networks of organised crime. It is very difficult to locate migrants who use illegal means of entry. These persons have recourse to trafficking networks in order to obtain passports or false visas and this is very risky as it exposes them to harsh violations of their human rights.

Unfortunately, there is considerable movement between countries in the functioning of organised transnational crime and those in charge of such operations take advantage of this international context with impunity.

### **Women migrants**

Women migrants make up nearly 50% of the number of people who send money back to their country of origin. In Asia, most persons working abroad are women.

The problem of violence against women migrants is serious. Those employed in domestic work are doubly marginalised because they are migrants and because they are women, and they easily find themselves in situations where they are very vulnerable and exposed to abuse both in the domestic situation and in the labour market. In many countries a great number of women are slaves in the sex industry. Many of them are minors.

### **Unaccompanied minors**

In my work I have come across three very disturbing situations concerning unaccompanied minors. First of all, *detention*, secondly *expulsion* at international frontiers, and thirdly the paradoxical situation of children of migrants who are nationals of a territory, having been born there but who do not have *the legal right to live with their parents in their country*.

Article 2 of the Convention on Children's Rights lays down that "*the States concerned should respect the rights stated in this Convention and guarantee that they will be granted to all children.*"

### **Administrative detention**

The judicial grounds for the administrative detention of migrants are often too vague and imprecise. Migrants themselves are not aware of their rights and do not benefit from the help of interpreters or lawyers. Frequently, illegal migrants who are deprived of their freedom do not receive legal aid or adequate medical, social and psychological care, either from institutions in the host countries or from their own consular representatives.

Migrants are deprived of their liberty without anyone taking into account their personal history or their condition. Victims of abusive treatment are regarded as delinquents, they are arrested or deported for offences or crimes which are the inevitable consequence of the mistreatment they have suffered. In many cases there are no specific

arrangements for the detention of children and other vulnerable groups and this means they can be detained in conditions which often infringe their basic rights and are harmful to their physical and moral wellbeing.

### **Refuge and migration**

The dividing lines between migrants and refugees becomes increasingly blurred when we face the problem of hundreds of thousands of people who arrive in the country they were heading for and apply for refugee status and this is not granted. These people are helpless and their status is irregular or very often illegal.

## **II GIVING ADDED IMPETUS TO THE MINISTRY TO MIGRANTS**

It is important that the ministry to people on the move should continue its work of helping migrants, particularly at this time when xenophobia and racism are a threat for millions of human beings.

### **FOSTERING IN THE CHURCH THE MINISTRY TO PEOPLE ON THE MOVE.**

**Ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue**, shared initiatives, pastoral visits and great solidarity between the different Churches of the world should be intensified in order to defend the rights of migrants, at national as well as regional and international level.

The large numbers of Christian migrants calls for better mutual understanding between the Catholic Church and non-Catholic Churches. The Second Vatican Council asks us to cultivate common values and to respect differences without surrendering Christian principles.

Within the Catholic Church, it is essential that we promote **awareness and recognition of human displacement**, respect for differences of all kinds; religious, cultural, social. We have to be able to see and get others to recognise differences not as deficiencies or a mark of inferiority. With regard to differences, we need to recognise the specific contribution that migrants make to the societies that accept them.

High points in this ecumenical effort could be, for example, the great liturgical festivals of the different faiths, the World Days for Peace, special days for migrants and refugees, the annual week of prayer for Christian unity.

### **ANTICIPATING IRREGULAR MIGRATION, CARING FOR MIGRANTS AND HELPING THEM TO RETURN TO THEIR OWN COUNTRY**

When you work with immigrants it is important to:

- Anticipate irregular migration. It is a matter of foreseeing the real situations and the consequences of irregular migration, and informing people of these while they are still in their own country.
- Care for migrants in countries of transit and in the countries they are making for.
- Help migrant people to return to their own land.

### **1. Anticipating irregular migration while people are still in their own country**

- Foreseeing the situation of irregular migrants and informing them of the consequences of illegal entry into a country. Giving information about documents signed by countries at regional and international level concerning the defence of human rights.
- Organising courses on human rights so that people will be able to judge and act on a situation.
- Sensitising the media. Data and images convey information that is not always correct about economic conditions in other parts of the world. When accurate and appropriate information is lacking in the countries of origin, this adds to the risk of irregular migration.

### **2. Caring for migrants in transit countries and in the countries they are making for.**

-Helping migrants who lack the necessary documentation to regularise their status as migrants, requesting the services of interpreters, legal advisers and other people who are qualified to defend them.

-Caring particularly for vulnerable groups who are open to abuse and people trafficking, as well as the different forms of discrimination that can be used against them; collaborating with other civil organisations both at local and international level.

### **3. Helping migrants to return to their own country**

- Speaking out for the migrants' right to live with their family so that the family and bonded group may not be broken up.

We can testify to events in which thousands of people, men, women and children, die in their attempt to flee from poverty, war and hunger. We are facing a situation which is repeated every day for millions of migrants who are waiting for, and who deserve, total protection of their "human rights."

FATHER GIUSEPPE TURATI, CM**Migration and the Vincentian charism**Notes taken during the conference of Father G. Turati, CM**INTRODUCTION**

Since we are limiting our reflections to the Vincentian charism, which is rightly understood to be a special gift of the Spirit for the good of the Church and the world, I think it is important to talk about a twofold level of commitment in which this charism can represent for the Church and for today's world, a valid witness: this Vincentian charism is not simply exercised as service but also, and above all else, as promoting a culture of solidarity.

Alongside solidarity, another important principle in the Church's teaching is reciprocity and the Vincentian charism has an important contribution to make to this on the practical and the cultural level. Solidarity is not something that concerns only the group or the country that welcomes others but it is also characterised by a willingness to receive from others, Its aim is not simply to assist the other person but to help both parties to grow.

First of all, we will try to show the ways in which we Vincentians can put into practice, in specific ways, the directives of the Church regarding migration. We will try to find out how, in the light of the charism, we can move from a situation of conflict to a situation of solidarity.

In another section we will look together at some of the information gained from the answers to a questionnaire sent to some Daughters of Charity who work with migrants.

**I THE VINCENTIAN CHARISM AT THE SERVICE OF SOLIDARITY**

The situations of conflict which are a feature of today's world demand, not only a revision of structures and laws but also a change of mentality. Living together with people of different race and different culture can help not just migrants but those who accept them, to grow as persons. However, it can also bring about conflict or even

regressive behaviour by rendering us indifferent to their moral and religious values. It is in this domain that our charism can serve the Church and today's world.

### **The work of educating**

The Vincentian person who commits himself or herself specifically to helping migrants is also called to share in the work of integrating them into society. It is a question of educating people and learning from them so that the values of each will be appreciated. In this way we become more human, people who are more in the image of the Blessed Trinity.

### **Educating people to have a sense of their identity, to dialogue and solidarity**

Since all people have their own history and culture; their family, racial and religious ties, educating people means helping them to grow in their understanding of their own historical and cultural identity. (cf. *Gravissimum educationis*, no. 1). Since then, education has constantly been a matter of personal relationships, listening and dialogue.

As John Paul II reminded us at Jakarta, in October 1989, dialogue can take on different forms: the dialogue of life, of action, of religious experience, of sharing with others the gift of knowing revealed truth (cf. John Paul II, *l' Osservatore Romano*, 11<sup>th</sup> October, 1989, p.6).

*"It is not just a question of dialogue through words, but also through actions: it is not just a matter of testifying to one's identity but also of manifesting this through one's life and conduct."* (Commission CEI "Justice and Peace." pastoral message of 25<sup>th</sup> March 1990, no. 32).

So it is a case of making a slow, difficult and progressive journey: (ib. no. 33). There are numerous different places where we, as Vincentians can be committed to living our charism by serving migrant people as we try to build a world where there is greater solidarity.

### ***Schools***

Schools are the ideal place for preparing young people to live in the multicultural society which is beginning to emerge today, and training them in solidarity. As they haven't a long life history or any special role in society, they are more ready than adults are to get to know their contemporaries of any race, especially if the teachers know how to accept everyone, be attentive to each one's needs and promote an atmosphere of brotherhood.(ib. n° 37).

### ***Social communication media***

New life styles are being spread throughout the world by the *mass media*. Today, we cannot regard these channels of communication, particularly the internet, as the prerogative of just a few: they unite individuals and peoples everywhere and create a new culture and a new mentality.

When the Vincentian Family web site was set up, Father Maloney encouraged us all to use this means of communication in our mission. Certainly someone like Saint Vincent would not have declined to use this channel of communication to further his apostolic aims.

### *The works of welcoming and of charity*

In this area our charism takes on a more traditional form. Through these works we collaborate with others in building a more fraternal world. All these works are also particularly good ways of training people in justice and solidarity.

## **II. SOME DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY'S EXPERIENCE OF IMMIGRATION AND THE VINCENTIAN CHARISM**

From an analysis of the replies that some Daughters of Charity made to a questionnaire about working with migrants, I draw the following conclusions:

**1.** The Sisters working on the ground or within institutions, are all conscious that migration provides a direct challenge to their charism.

**2.** This type of charism is therefore surprisingly up to date with regard to one of the most serious forms of poverty in our times: one that is caused by the burdensome problem of migration throughout the world and further exacerbated recently by the process of globalisation in which all countries, rich and poor, are involved.

**3.** The values enshrined in our charism that are highlighted in situations of migration, do not simply provide motives for making an immediate response to the basic needs of migrants, but are rather a recognition of the need to defend the rights of these people and to make them aware of their obligations so as to involve them in working to promote their own welfare.

**4.** The Daughters of Charity have many motives for being committed to working with migrants: all these considerations are related to their faith in Jesus Christ, the fact that they are firmly committed to the programme of the universal and the local Church, and of course, their vocation to serve the poor corporally and spiritually. (cf. C.8; C.28)

**5.** The most appropriate actions for dealing with the needs of migrants are the provision of immediate help (responding to the need for food and clothing). However, the Sisters have a wider outlook and so they aim to give people a sense of personal responsibility and help them to integrate into the society of the host country.

6. The skills now required for this type of work are very necessary for the Sisters. They need proper preparation and training in psychology as well as legal and ethical matters. (cf. Social teaching of the Church).

7. At institutional level, the Sisters are aware of the commitment they need to make in view of the new forms of poverty linked to migration. The international aspect of the Company is an asset when it come to dealing with this global question.

8. The Sisters bring a wide variety of resources to the work: economic, cultural, human. The Company can promote exchange of Sisters from different countries or Provinces.

9. The Company has one particular limitation that needs to be considered; it has to move beyond its internal autonomy in order to collaborate more with NGOs and Church and civil associations.

10. The most important objective is that of evangelising people from different cultures and different religions. This is the most delicate, the most difficult and also the most important task. People who are poor are to be served corporally and spiritually. The chief need of migrants is that of material help but the Daughter of Charity must also be concerned about their spiritual welfare.

Of course evangelisation has to be carried out in a spirit of humility and it is to be based on a ministry of dialogue and constant search for “seeds of the Word” that other people already possess. As well as the respect and consideration we need to have for the traditions and cultures of migrants, we are called to evangelise by Charity, and to witness to the Gospel of Love and Peace.

The question of evangelisation is at the heart of the recent Pontifical Instruction *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* (2004) in which great attention is paid to the Eastern Churches: *“In order to respond in a more appropriate way to the special needs of an ever- increasing number of migrants who are Catholic followers of eastern rites, we have to put the Latin Church and the Eastern Church on an equal footing. This is not simply to make relationships easier in view of the increased number of immigrants who follow the eastern rite, but it is also a matter of respecting the dignity of both Churches: this will allow the one Catholic Church to breathe with both lungs, so to speak, in the context of migration.”* (cf. n°. 55-56 and ff).

The question of relationships with Muslims is particularly difficult. Our duty as believers to dialogue with Muslims is strongly emphasised and repeated by the Church. John Paul II affirmed: *“We have a duty to promote a culture of dialogue....I am convinced that the growing interest that religions have in dialogue is one of the current signs of hope in this latter part of the century. So it must be continued. Greater mutual esteem and increased trust must lead to action that is even more communal and efficacious, in the name of the whole human family.”*

In view of the presence of Islam in Europe, the Church has no other option but sincere dialogue and, without any naivete or prejudice, must set everything in motion to establish this and continually work at fostering it.

### Conclusion

*“Migration is an integral part of the Church’s life, clearly expresses its universality, promotes communion within it, and influences its growth. Migration thus offers the Church an historic opportunity to prove its characteristic marks.”* (cf. Pontifical Instruction *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2004, n° 97).

Our life of charity becomes the witness of our self-giving in order to live in a way that is welcoming, that practises dialogue, solidarity, the promotion of people’s welfare, communion. All these Christian and Vincentian values will be put to the test by migrants. We have to bear in mind:

- **Difficult and negative situations:** the imbalance between nations, the causes of immigration, the tragic plight of numerous refugees and asylum seekers, the problem of women and minors who are subjected to disgraceful trafficking, the different forms of intolerance, xenophobia and racism, the great numbers of illegal immigrants, moonlighting, policies that tend to be restrictive....

- **Positive situations:** the development of a culture of welcome, the commitment made by volunteers, teaching people the concept of universality...

- **Ambivalent situations:** the question of globalisation will depend on the way we handle this phenomenon. It can bring about progress, or division and conflict.

In any case, we are called to a commitment to be the architects of history so that this will be a history of Salvation, guided by the Spirit of God, in spite of obstacles. We must show optimism and a sense of responsibility during these times of migration on a massive scale. Man is for ever on a journey, with others and among others. We are all on a journey: our heavenly home is elsewhere and each of us is constantly changing as an individual.

During this journey we have models that we can refer to. We are bearers of hope and of witness which comes from our very charism and our service of the Church and of the world. We believe that God is the Father of every person and we also believe in the presence and the action of the Holy Spirit in history: finally, we recognise in each poor person the face of Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 25, 31-46) and we see each one as a neighbour to be loved, particularly if they have suffered hurt. (cf, Lk 10, 29-37).

Father Giuseppe Turati, CM

TESTIMONY

Province of Albany, New York

**“Love embraces justice”**  
(Saint Vincent de Paul)

When I finished writing the reflections I wanted to share with you today, I realised that I had no idea for a title but I found what I was looking for in the words of Vincent which are quoted in Constitution C.24e, “..love embraces justice.” The same section goes on to say that we “...plead the cause of the underprivileged who do not have the possibility of making their legitimate demands and aspirations heard.” Is this not an accurate description of the ministry we share?

I consider it a privilege to speak to you about my work with refugees, immigrants and political asylum seekers. Although I am an attorney, I want to reassure you straight away that what I want to do is to share with you the work I have been doing for about twenty years, not to give you a legal presentation.

I began serving those who are poor as a teacher. That phase of my life was followed by almost ten years of pastoral ministry in Venezuela. When I returned to the United States, a friend of mine spoke to me about the problems and needs of refugees.

**Ministering to refugees**

In 1984 I became involved in a diocesan agency in the state of New Jersey, working for the resettlement of refugees. The Geneva Refugee Convention of 1951 defines refugees as “persons outside of their own country who are unwilling or unable to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or holding certain political views.”

Refugees are granted their status prior to coming to the United States: they enter legally and are entitled to government assistance. Before refugees arrived it was my responsibility to find them housing, furniture and clothing. After they arrived, I had to help them enrol their children in school, encourage the adults to register in English classes, assist them in finding employment, supervise their medical care and counsel them as they tried to adjust to a new way of life in a strange culture. Dealing with different cultures was a challenging but delightful experience. In the course of one day a Vietnamese man bowed to me, a Polish man kissed my hand and a Mexican embraced me. Sometimes I asked myself the question, “Which country am I in?”

Some of the refugees I served came from Afghanistan, Iran and Poland but most were Vietnamese. You will remember the boat people who fled their country after the fall of Saigon. Many lost their lives because their boats were not seaworthy. Sister Michelle Nguyen from my own Province was herself one of the boat people. Today she ministers to a diverse group of refugees in Utica, a small city in New York State, which has opened its doors and its heart to refugees, an extremely unusual situation in our country. This city recently featured in a magazine published by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

The case I remember most vividly from that era is that of a man who was captain of a South Vietnamese ship the day that Saigon fell in 1975. There were 3,500 Vietnamese on board when a United States officer ordered him to take the ship to Guam. He replied, "Not until my wife and children arrive." The officer held a gun to his head and he was forced to leave without his family. He was later granted refugee status, came to the States and applied to have his family join him. The case was taking so long that one day he asked me, "*You want my wife come see me in cemetery?*" When his family finally arrived in New York and he caught sight of them going through customs, he was so overcome that he became almost hysterical, let out a shriek and began to pound the plate glass wall that separated us from customs.

### **Legalisation**

Under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act many undocumented persons who had been living in the United States for years were able to become legal residents through what was commonly referred to as the "amnesty programme." People who had worked in the States for many years, had bought homes, paid taxes and raised their children here, had lived in constant fear of being deported and losing everything they had worked so hard to achieve. The very day they took their applications to Immigration, they were given cards which entitled them to work legally. Their lives were changed in an instant. It was exciting to be part of such a wonderful programme.

When I began working in New Jersey, my supervisor warned me not to reach out to the undocumented, something I found very difficult because they very much needed services. The amnesty changed all that as the National Bishops' Conference strongly urged all dioceses to help the undocumented apply for legalisation. Since then the bishops have constantly pleaded the cause of people without documentation. Under their leadership some twenty national Catholic organisations recently organised a national campaign for immigration reform.

Although the United States is a nation of immigrants, there is at present a strong anti-immigrant climate coupled with restrictive immigration laws. Some of this negative atmosphere among the public is due to the attacks of 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2001.

### **Ministry in the diocese of Brooklyn and my entry into Law School**

In 1998 I was moved to Brooklyn, one of the five boroughs of New York City where generations of immigrants have entered the United States and which today continues to be the home of newcomers from all over the globe. I worked as a paralegal in the Migration Office of the Diocese of Brooklyn and was accredited to represent clients before the Immigration Service. One day a Vincentian friend of mine mentioned Law School to me. At first I thought it was a crazy idea but after reflecting and praying about it, I asked permission to study. I expected my request to be refused and was surprised when it was granted. The Vincentians awarded me a scholarship to study at Saint John's University. I was fifty-three at the time, worked during the day and went to school at night for four years.

As I look back on my first year at Law School, I remember my favourite professor saying to our class, "*The practice of law is not about making money; it is the pursuit of justice.*" A very high percentage of the legal needs of marginalised people in the United States go unmet because they cannot afford the services of private attorneys. I know that I can only represent a limited number of clients but there is nothing I would rather do.

### **General immigration practice**

In my work I am called upon to process many types of immigration cases. Some foreigners come to the United States temporarily as non-immigrants, others come permanently as immigrants. I have processed many non-immigrant religious workers cases: several of our Sisters who have changed Provinces and many priests and Sisters who come to minister in the States.

When civil wars or national disasters make it extremely difficult for nationals of the affected countries to return home, our Government can allow them to remain in the States with Temporary Protected Status.

Our immigration laws are extremely complex but one of the basic principles is concern for the reunification of families. Examples of this migrant category are parents filing applications for children; wives filing for husbands; adult children filing for parents. There are also immigrant visas available for certain foreign workers. Many religious non-immigrant cases are eventually changed to immigrant ones. While these different types of cases are much less tragic than those of persons seeking political asylum, they are extremely important and over the years have formed the bulk of my work. All cases involve interviewing clients, determining eligibility, filling in numerous forms and helping clients to gather the required evidence. Many clients must also be accompanied when they have an interview at Immigration.

### **Political asylum seekers**

Although I represent clients with many different types of cases, those I have found most moving are my political asylum seekers.

Many enter the country legally with temporary visas; others enter illegally and apply for political asylum after their arrival. The basis for political asylum is the same as for refugee status but it is granted after the applicant arrives in the United States whereas refugee status is granted before the person enters the country.

The examples I am going to share with you are particularly tragic. Some of the things I will now say are very graphic but I have to speak plainly if I am going to tell you what my clients experienced. My most heart-rending cases have been those from Liberia.

One woman told me that she and her husband had worked for the government of Samuel Doe and her husband had been a professor at the National University. One night shots were fired into the bedrooms where their children were sleeping. Her husband hurriedly buried all their documents except his university ID card. A group of Charles Taylor's soldiers entered the home and were about to murder the family when a superior officer arrived and prevented this. *"This man will educate our children"*, he told them. The woman recounted how they had walked a great distance, stepping over bodies, and how she had tried to shield the toddler in her arms from seeing all these atrocities.

Another Liberian woman, also an asylum seeker, tells of being in prison with a group of women who were raped nightly by the guards. She relates that when the guards left them alone, the women would join hands and pray the twenty-third psalm over and over again. That was their lifeline. I looked at this beautiful woman in front of me and asked myself, "How is it possible for a human being to survive such atrocities?" And then she added, *"My father always said that I was the weakest member of my family. When my husband learned that I had been raped he didn't want to be with me anymore."* When I went with her to her interview for asylum, I asked for a female officer, thinking that a woman would be more understanding than a male in this situation. I realised my mistake as soon as the officer began to ask questions:

- *"How many times were you raped?"*
- *"I don't remember."*
- *"In your affidavit you wrote that you were raped at the checkpoints when you were going through the bush. At how many checkpoints were you raped?"*
- *"I don't know."*
- *How many checkpoints were there?*
- *"About ten"*.
- *"Well, were you raped at checkpoints three, seven and nine?"*
- *"I don't remember."*

I asked myself if this cold line of questioning was not just another form of rape. The only time this young female officer showed any emotion was when the woman stated that on one occasion the women had been raped by twelve-year-old boys.

A young Liberian woman had been raised by her childless uncle and aunt. Her uncle held a prestigious position in the Doe government and was therefore targeted by Charles Taylor's forces who eventually beheaded him and left his body in the street. In

order to avoid the same fate, his family could not even manifest a sign of recognition nor could they bury him. I had prepared my client for lengthy testimony but I had only asked her several questions in court when she started to sob. The judge stopped me and said, *“If we continue, we are just going to bring back a lot of bad memories. We’ll take a ten-minute break and then proceed.”* When we came back, the judge stated that he intended to approve the case but allowed the immigration attorney to interrogate my client. Surprisingly, he was uncharacteristically easy on her. The judge approved the case and I was so moved to see an immigration judge exercise such compassion that all I could think was, “Here sits a Solomon.” It was actually a religious experience for me as I caught a glimpse of what the justice of God is like.

One day, at the funeral of one of our elderly Sisters, the Gospel reading was on the Beatitudes and when I heard the words, “Blessed are the persecuted”, I realised to my surprise that I had never before connected this blessing with my asylum-seeking clients. How richly they deserve to be blessed.

I remember reading some time ago, “The world is full of suffering but it is also full of the overcoming of suffering.” I am a witness to the truth of that statement as I hear clients tell their heart-rending stories. It is difficult to get them to open up and when they do, they show little emotion. It would seem that the only way they can survive is by suppressing the memory of the horrible treatment to which they were subjected. I marvel that they do not lose hope. There are moments as I listen to these stories that I have an almost palpable sense of the presence of God. It is such a privilege to be able to accompany them in their struggle for justice and so satisfying to witness the tremendous relief of an asylum seeker when his or her case is approved.

One case that I was sure I would lose was that of a Colombian family of five adults and two children. The family had gone on an outing to the mountains and was having lunch when a group of armed guerrilla fighters appeared and asked for money. My clients refused and left immediately. Several days later they received a phone call reminding them of the money. When they refused, they were told that they would either pay the money or there would be bloodshed. They obtained visas to go to Spain but when they arrived in Florida, they asked for political asylum. The women and children were taken to a hotel and the men were detained. When they were released they came to New York and eventually found their way to my door. I explained that I would do my best but that their case was weak. The mother in this case had gone to the Ministry of Justice and had sought police protection but no protection had been provided. This was a positive factor in the case because it demonstrated that the family could not count on their government to protect them and for that reason they had to leave Colombia.

Whenever I tried to prepare them to lose the case, the mother would say, *“I have great faith in Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal (la Milagrosa) and she will help us.”* Her faith was much stronger than mine. When I was interrogating her in court, she was so nervous that her knees were actually knocking. The young woman who represented the Immigration Service was merciless but the judge, on the contrary, was compassionate. After stating that the case was approved she added, *“There has never*

*been a more terrified person in my courtroom and I will do whatever I can to protect her.” After we left the courtroom, my client said, “I knew La Milagrosa would help us.”*

### **Practising Law in a parish setting**

When I worked in diocesan offices, I did not represent the poorest of the poor and for a long time I dreamed of opening an office in a more marginalised setting. In January 1999 that dream became a reality. With the support of my Province I opened an office in Saint John’s parish in Brooklyn, where Vincentians and Daughters of Charity work together to serve those who are poor. We have a bilingual worshipping community with vibrant liturgies and laity actively involved in ministry, a parish school, a religious education programme, adult education, a soup kitchen and a thrift shop.

I love the fact that my office is located in a parish setting. I see many of my clients at Mass and at other parish activities so contact does not end when the legal work is finished. I am not involved in the practice of law but in a ministry of law. My office is not located in a law firm but in a parish centre. One young man had got himself into serious trouble with the Immigration Service by supplying false information on an application form. When I stressed that he really had to tell me the truth, his response was, *“I will tell you the truth because I know this is God’s house.”*

So my dream of hanging up my “professional name plate” in a marginalised neighbourhood came true. The work is meaningful and challenging; there is much to learn. Of course there are frustrations, too. So many people need help and it is not humanly possible to help them all. Perhaps the most difficult thing I have to do is to tell undocumented persons that there is no remedy for their situation within our current law. I can spend an hour trying to gently explain to a client that I would love to help her but simply cannot. She will then look at me and ask, *“So what are you going to do for me?”* Latin Americans have a wonderful expression, *“Hope is the last thing you lose.”*

Saint Vincent told our first Sisters that if they went ten times a day to visit the poor, ten times a day they would find God. In my case, those who are poor come to my office, which after more than six years, has become for me a sacred space. I find that I absolutely need direct contact with the poor and it is there that we meet. I am convinced that it is there that God speaks to me through those I serve, those models of courage, faith and hope. I bring the needs of my clients to prayer and find support in the prayers of my community. For more than twenty years this has been my ministry and I love what I do.

Sister Georgia Brezler  
*Daughter of Charity*

## APPOINTMENTS

### **APPOINTMENT OF VISITATRICES AND PROVINCIAL DIRECTORS**

**PROVINCE OF MOZAMBIQUE:** Sister Terezinha Madureira Goncalves was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Felisima Sambu, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2005

**PROVINCE OF EVANSVILLE:** Sister Honora Remes was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Catherine Madigan, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2005

**PROVINCE OF AUSTRALIA:** Sister Pauline Flynn was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Celine Quadros, 6<sup>th</sup> April 2005

**PROVINCE OF LOS ALTOS HILLS:** Sister Margaret Keaveney was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2005

**PROVINCE OF CONGO CONGO:** Siste Suzanne Iloko was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2005

**PROVINCE OF SLOVENIA:** Sister Barbara Selih was designated Visitatrice for a further period of three years, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2005

**PROVINCE OF CHELMNO:** Sister Hanna Cybula was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Krystyna Jaroszevska, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2005

**PROVINCE OF RECIFE:** Sister Silvia Maria de Oliveira Mota was designated Visitatrice, replacing Sister Maria Jose Dantas Coutinho, 21<sup>st</sup> December 2005

\*\*\*\*\*

**PROVINCE OF CONGO CONGO:** Father Stanislaw Deszcz was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2005

**PROVINCE OF FRANCE SOUTH:** Father Bernard Massarini was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2005

#### VISITS BY SUPERIORS

Mother Evelyne Franc

#### **Visit to the Province of Ireland**

25<sup>th</sup> –28<sup>th</sup> November 2005

On **25<sup>th</sup> November 2005**, Mother Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, came to celebrate with our Province the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the presence and service of the Daughters of Charity here.

On her arrival, Dublin airport was decked out in winter beauty with a thin, white coating of snow- an unusual scene so early in the winter. Despite the icy wind Sister

Evelyne was greeted with a warm *Cead mile failte*, the Irish phrase for *A hundred thousand welcomes!*

Accompanied by Sister Prendergast, Provincial, and some members of the Provincial Council, Sister Evelyne made the journey to Drogheda, to retrace the steps the first four Sisters took in 1855. En route, a stop was made at Mosney – a Direct Provision Centre for asylum seekers. Five hundred families, mainly from Nigeria and some of the Eastern European countries, are accommodated here while they await the outcome of the asylum process. The Daughters of Charity Child and Family Services manage a pre-school facility for the children.

From there, Sister Evelyne made a pilgrim visit to St. Peter's Church, Drogheda, where in 1855 the first Sisters were greeted and welcomed by the Archbishop of Armagh, Doctor Dixon, and the local people. The present Archbishop of Armagh, Dr. Sean Brady, greeted Sister Evelyne in the Sisters' house in Fair Street. During her visit to the Day Care Centre, Sister Evelyne unveiled a plaque commemorating 150 years of service to the people of Drogheda. In the evening she met the Sisters of the Provincial House.

The next day the marquee erected in the grounds was the place for welcoming the 350 Sisters, friends and collaborators from the four corners of Ireland. There were Sisters present, too, from Great Britain, Nigeria, Eritrea, Congo and Australia. As his predecessor had done in 1855, the Archbishop of Dublin was the main celebrant at the Mass of Thanksgiving. In his homily the Archbishop paid tribute to the contribution the Sisters have made, and continue to make throughout Ireland, in the fields of health care, education and pastoral ministry. He said that the creative inspiration of St. Vincent some four hundred years ago, still holds the same freshness and presents a challenge today. Later, everyone present was given the "Little Book of St. Vincent and St. Louise" by Don Mullan which is a collection of many quotations from our Founders. Enda Connelly, presented the new Vocations Ministry website and Sister Jacinta Prunty, a Holy Faith nun and lecturer in the History department of the National University (Maynooth), gave a lively account of the arrival of the first Sisters. Then, in her address, Sister Evelyne stressed the need for defending human rights, something required of us by the Gospel.

On the day that we celebrated the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions at rue du Bac, Mother Evelyne gave each person a miraculous medal as an invitation to follow in the footsteps of Mary, the humble Handmaid of the Lord. At the end of the evening Sister Evelyne left for Rickard House where she met the elderly Sisters.

On Sunday, there was a visit to the works at Henrietta Street, Mount Prospect and the St. Francis Hospice. Here, Mother Evelyne addressed the Sisters and the focus of her talk was our belonging to the Company; she related this to the Gospel and to our revised Constitutions. She reminded us that these Constitutions are always to be our point of reference. Then she shared news of the Company all over the world. A pleasant afternoon was spent in cultural celebrations, one of these being a dramatic presentation by the students of Caritas College who helped us to relive the arrival of the Sisters in Ireland 150 years ago.

On Monday, 28<sup>th</sup> November, a visit was made to St. Teresa's house where Alzheimer patients are looked after, and then to St. Vincent's Boys Infants School and St. Vincent's Girls National School, St. Louise's nursery and St. Agatha's Food Centre. She joined the many regular clients of the Food Centre and had the mid-day meal with them. Finally, she was taken to the Dublin City Food Bank, the Vincentian Housing Partnership (SVP Society, Daughters of Charity, Priests of the Mission) which offers temporary accommodation to homeless people, and to the Vincentian Refugee Centre in St. Peter's Phibsboro', another collaborative venture of the Vincentian Family.

PHOTO At St. Louise's nursery

Father Eamon Flanagan, CM, the Provincial Director, showed Sister Evelyne a number of icons in St. Peter's church and during a short prayer service they all thanked God for everything that is happening in the Province and confided it to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

Before Mother Evelyne left for Dublin airport we thanked her for sharing her precious time with us. Let us continue to remember one another "at the foot of the altar."

Sisters Aine O'Brien and Eibhlis Nicuaituas  
*Daughters of Charity*

### SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Curitiba – Brazil

#### **2005- Vincentian Youth Year**

"Sharing the Vincentian charism with the different generations:  
prayer, formation and service of those who are poor."

The challenge presented by those in charge of the different branches of the Vincentian Family during their 10<sup>th</sup> annual meeting, was to reach out to young people in order to share with them the charism of Saint Vincent.

Brazil is considered a "young" country because the number of 15 to 24 year olds who live on Brazilian territory makes a total of 34 million young people, that is to say, 20% of the whole population. (*Censo 2000-IBGE*). However, only 4% of these young people belong to any Christian movement.

Faced with this situation, the members of the Vincentian Family in southern Brazil (Daughters of Charity from the Province of Curitiba, Lazarists from the Southern Province, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, AIC and the JMV) took up the challenge by planning meetings for all young members of the Vincentian Family. During the year 2005 there were five Regional Days organised and more than 20,000 took part. These were

young people from parishes directed by Priests of the Mission and who were engaged in Vincentian works.

On 27<sup>th</sup> November, feast of the Miraculous Medal, there was the closing ceremony of the Vincentian Youth Year which brought together, in an atmosphere of great joy, all who had taken part in the five Regional Days. The Eucharistic celebration was an important time and so were the intensive sessions of evangelisation and sharing on the Vincentian charism. This charism was represented in different ways: the life of Saint Vincent, scenes from the lives of young people today, different types of dance, singing, music groups. Present at this meeting were the Visitor, Father Eusebio Spista, CM, and the Visitatrice, Sister Paula Pereira Alves, who relayed to us a message from Father Gregory Gay, Superior General.

#### PHOTO

The enthusiastic way in which these young people took part in the day was very striking. We were conscious of the dynamism of these groups and their response to our suggestions encouraged us to do more in this domain.

Working with young people today is a big challenge. They have their own way of thinking and acting....they want to be respected and loved for what they are. We are called to be with them and help them to walk, in their own way, along the path of Jesus Christ.

Sister Bernadette Valenga  
*Echoes correspondent*

Province of Thailand

### **30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Care Centre for the descendants of lepers at Khon Kaen**

On the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nomxomboon Centre for lepers, there was a great gathering of all the former patients and their children who have benefited from the day care, meals service and educational courses provided by the Centre. Over the years, the Centre has broadened its work for children of lepers to give these education, and even to help some of them to reach university level. December 31<sup>st</sup> 2005 was a day of rejoicing and thanksgiving and the celebrations had been prepared for by the Sisters, the teachers, staff and some former patients. These former patients, their children and grandchildren were very happy to meet up again with their friends, classmates, their former teachers, the care staff and the Sisters, and to get to know all the people who are currently at the Centre and those who work there.

Many cultural activities such as dancing and traditional music were performed by the people themselves. A token of their gratitude was presented to all the Sisters and the persons who had helped and supported them from the time this mission began. Then came testimonies praising the Sisters' 30 years of love, devotion and zeal for helping the children of lepers to regain their dignity: *"Sisters, thank you again for giving us the material, educational and spiritual support we needed. As well as caring for us and giving us food, you have enabled us to follow a normal school programme, and some of us were even able to go to university or to follow professional courses. Thanks to you we have been able to get diplomas and have access to a good future. We are full of gratitude to you for helping us to become what we are. Without you, we would never have succeeded."*

The Sisters replied very simply: *"We share your happiness. You give us the opportunity to love and know the happiness of serving. It is for us to thank you."*

#### PHOTO

During the Eucharistic celebration we all thanked God for this happy day and for all the love given and received. For their part, the Sisters thanked God for the happiness of being able to serve Him in the person of lepers, for three decades.

Sister Norma Esperas  
*Daughter of Charity*

Province of France-North

### **When young people in a disadvantaged area stand up to help others**

During a meeting that took place in May 2004, Sister Monika Dlbacz, a Polish Sister who is now working in the General Secretariat, told me about the difficult circumstances in a Children's Home in Cracow, which was then trying to find people who would repaint an entire storey of the building.

When I got back to Sarreguemines, I spoke about this to a group of young people from a disadvantaged area, youngsters whom I accompany. Immediately they said to me, *"We know from experience what it is like to be poor, so we should go there."*

Seeing how keen they were, I worked out what such a project would cost. I spoke to my community about it and they were all in agreement. Then I went to visit the parents of these young people individually because the youngsters were all under 18 years of age. Several of the young people were not able to take part in the project because of school commitments or for health reasons. I asked the help of two qualified

men, Gerard and Hubert, and these agreed to help me in directing these young people in painting the building. Seven young people were ready to start.

We still had to find the sum of 3, 700 euros to pay for travelling expenses, food, materials ( brushes and paint...) "*Since it's for poor children, we'll manage to do it*" they kept on saying. Their determination meant that their contacts and other young people agreed to find ways of raising the money: raffles, cake sales, etc... In February 2004 we were still 900 euros short. We went to see the Archpriest who was very enthusiastic about the project and suggested to the young people that they should come and make an appeal at the Masses from the beginning of Lent. Writing such a message was easy, but going up to a microphone in front of a lot of people wasn't that at all! In the end, William, the youngest member, agreed to do it. So much money and so many cheques came in that we were able to share some of it with Sister Barbara Golab who was in charge of the Children's Home in Cracow. The local newspaper took up the project and published an article with a photograph of the group. It was then that they made a discovery: "What we're going to do is worthwhile, the people say so." These youngsters who were more used to being mocked than to being complimented, were at last being recognised for the good they could do.

On 4<sup>th</sup> July 2005, we left at 11 for Cracow: the seven young people supervised by Gerard and Hubert for the painting work, Alphonsine and I for the housekeeping (cooking, laundry...) and to prepare the prayer vigils. As well as our personal luggage we had 37 huge bags of materials. The youngsters discovered how cramped couchettes can be and the difficulty of storing our big bags. When we needed to change trains, we had to form a human chain from one platform to another in order to get everything unloaded quickly. Next day we at last arrived in Cracow. Sister Bozena was waiting for us at the station and she spoke to us "in French." Then she brought us to her community for a welcoming meal before we started work. So as to be able to visit places in the town during the afternoons, the young people had opted to work from 6 o'clock till 12 with another hour at the end of the day. The evening ended with a time for reading and prayer. Keeping up this effort for six hours at a time was a difficult but an interesting experience for them. In the afternoon, Sister Bozena took us to see the tomb of the parents and brother of John Paul II, the royal city of Cracow, the salt mines of Wileiecka where the nine underground galleries go down to a depth of 35 metres, the Basilica of Divine Mercy blessed by John Paul II, and finally to Auschwitz, an experience we all found very moving. Before we left, Sister Barbara and her community organised a celebration during which we all received a diploma for being the best painter of the year! The young people thanked them for being so welcoming and for letting them visit the town: "*We will always remember you in our heart.*"

## **Conclusion**

This work, from the time it was prepared for until the time it was finished, proved that every young person is capable of generosity and commitment. After this experience, these youngsters from a disadvantaged background came back more mature. When they got back to Sarreguemine, they went to see the parish priest, "*Now that we know how to*

*paint, will you allow us to repaint the inside of the church in our district because it certainly needs doing?"* He gave them permission and, helped by an adult, they went to take measurements and calculate the extent of the surfaces to be painted: after this they went to some paint shops, asking for estimates. The first part of this new renovation work took place during the autumn holidays and the decoration was done during the Christmas holidays. It was all finished on 23<sup>rd</sup> of December. They all came to Midnight Mass with their parents who were very proud of their youngsters. These are now asking me, *"What will our next repair job be?"*

Sister Jacqueline Bichler  
*Daughter of Charity.*

### THE POOR SPEAK TO US

Province of Southern India

#### **Jose, who suffers from AIDS, evangelised me**

Jose looked poor, dirty and contemptible: his wife had referred him to me at St. Vincent's Home because he had AIDS. After bringing him here she disappeared and didn't come back. Jose was seriously ill; his mind was disturbed and he used to take off all his clothes. I telephoned his wife. She came but threatened never to visit him again. Jose begged us not to send him back to his family where he felt he was being persecuted. I said to him, *"Jose, we believe that it is God himself who is taking you in here and He always takes care of you. God's love is wonderful and no other love can compare with it."* He didn't know how to pray so I taught him how to say the Rosary of Divine Providence. Shortly afterwards I heard him praying aloud in his room, earnestly asking for God's mercy.

As time passed, Jose calmed down. Once again he asked me not to send him home. I reassured him. Then Jose began to tell me his sins. I told him to go to confession but he protested, saying that he wanted first of all to tell me all his sins. With the priest's permission, I allowed Jose to tell me about his life. I consoled him and then spoke to him about God. Then he agreed to see the priest. After hearing his confession the priest said to me, *"I have never known anyone show such repentance."*

In the end, Jose became even more ill. When he said to me, *"This is because of my sins so don't look after me any more"*, I replied, *"It is my duty to look after you and I want to be there with you when the time comes for you to die."* We said together the Act of Contrition. Then he told me that he saw a lady dressed in blue with two little children dressed in white. I said to him, *"Don't be worried, Jose, Mary is praying with you and she will be with you."* Shortly afterwards he repeated, *"Jesus, Jesus"* and peacefully passed away. I will never forget this miracle of God's mercy.

Sister Jaya Mary Joseph  
*Daughter of Charity*

SPECIAL BICENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF CATHERINE LABOURE

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

**II. GOD’S CALL IS TESTED AND THEN CONFIRMED,  
AT CHATILLON, PARIS, FAIN, CHATILLON**

**CHATILLON-SUR-SEINE**

Antoinette Gontard, a cousin of the Laboure family, accepted Catherine into her well-known boarding school at Chatillon-sur-Seine so that she could learn how to read and write. At the age of 18 Catherine found herself on a school bench for the first time.

*Can any good come out of Nazareth?* (Jn 1, 46)

The school proved to be a great trial for Catherine. It is hard to learn to read at the age of 18 when you have had nothing in the way of preparation! It was an abrupt change for her to move from a situation of responsibility to that of a young child. She, who for six years had been accustomed to running the farm and being its mistress, now found herself a pupil. Moreover, she found the pace of studying very different from the intense labour at the farm. And above all, she felt out of place among these young ladies with all their ribbons and who laughed at this peasant girl. They tried to teach her good manners but in her simplicity she found their condescending manner and their scorn very hurtful. And becoming a young lady of high society was not at all what Catherine wanted. Even though she very much wanted to be able to read and write, the atmosphere here made her less able to learn and she derived little profit from her schooling.

*“Rabbi, where do you live? He said to them, ‘Come and see.’”* (Jn 1, 38-39)

It was during this humiliating experience at Chatillon-sur-Seine that Saint Vincent was to reveal to her God’s designs on her. In a dream he had beckoned her to approach; the time had come for Catherine to understand the meaning of his call: he showed her very clearly the path of serving Christ in poor people.

Catherine went to daily Mass in the parish that was close by. One day she plucked up courage to confide in the priest and tell him about her dream. The priest knew the Daughters of Charity very well. Struck by Catherine’s description of the old man, the priest said to her, *“I think, my daughter, that this priest can only be Saint Vincent.”*

A short time later, Catherine's cousin took her to the house of the Sisters of Charity in rue de la Juiverie. Catherine stood rooted on the spot as she looked at a picture on the wall. She recognised the person in the picture; it was the old man she had seen in her dream.

- "Who is that?"
- "That is our Father, Saint Vincent de Paul," replied the Sister.

For Catherine this was enlightenment: the mysterious dream was a sign from God. God was now going to flood her soul with new light; she knew where she was going to go. In spite of her love for her family, Catherine was ready to occupy herself with God's affairs. She asked her father's permission but he refused to give it..

***How can this be done?*** (Lk 1, 34).

Like Mary at the Annunciation, Catherine found herself in a puzzling situation: at the age of 19 she had a deep spiritual experience that made her very happy but at the same time caused her concern. In her inner solitude she thought over events. Realising that she was wasting her time at the boarding school, being very attached to her father, blaming herself, more or less consciously for leaving him, and being concerned about the work on the farm, Catherine decided to return to Fain and wait there till she came of age.

## **RETURN TO FAIN-LES-MOUTIERS**

***Jesus came to Nazareth where he was brought up (Lk 4,16)..... and they would not accept him.***

When she returned to Fain, Catherine quietly and serenely took up again the heavy work of the family home. God's time is measured out in stages and it calls for patience. On her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Catherine told her father about the plans she carried in her heart. His response was immediate and categoric: he had already given one daughter to God, he was not prepared to give two. Catherine was too useful, in fact she was essential for the smooth running of the farm; he appreciated her good qualities, he was very fond of her. The drama unfolded. Her father was furious and he decided Catherine must get married. Several suitors had asked for her hand in marriage but she refused them all. Catherine stood firm and became more and more rooted in God. Her father did not give up. In the spring of 1828, his son Charles lost his wife. He owned a restaurant for working men in Paris and Catherine was to go there and manage it. In the bloom of her 22 years she would certainly find an enterprising client who would persuade her to marry him. Young people found life in the capital attractive and Catherine's father had already instructed Charles to provide his sister with distractions which would make her change her ideas. Catherine found it very hurtful to be sent away by her father yet again; it meant breaking ties that she valued very much.

## **EXILE IN PARIS**

***Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you*** (Gn 12,1).

Catherine arrived in Paris. She found this uprooting from familiar surroundings very distressing. Only her sense of duty and her practical skills kept her close to her bereaved brother. Catherine's work, whether in the kitchen or in the restaurant, could not be faulted. The work was exhausting but she faced it with courage. On some days the restaurant would be full. The tightly packed clients were demanding and at times they tried to take liberties. Catherine knew how to make them respect her. She found this new place "*deadly boring*" as she later confided.

The most difficult part of this new ordeal was, for Catherine, the fact that she was becoming more and more detached from the person she loved most: her father. She said later, "*I found this sacrifice very hard...Only God and Mary know just how hard.*" She handled this "psychological death" of her father by uniting herself more closely to God. She turned to her heavenly Mother, asking her help in overcoming this problem. Mary at the foot of the Cross is close to anyone whose life is full of darkness. The notes that Catherine made during a retreat later on, are proof of this conviction.

***Jesus saw a large crowd and he took pity on them*** (Mt 14,14)

During her exile in Paris, Catherine learned the harsh reality that working people had to face. The period between 1815 and 1871 was the Golden Age of rampant capitalism in France but at the same time it was an era of great deprivation: life for the workers was extremely hard; money was everything and there were practically no policies on social issues. Catherine understood the dreadful situation of exploited workers, of seven-year old children working in factories. This experience made Catherine want, more than ever, to consecrate herself to God to serve Him in His suffering members.

Just as Mary had been her companion on life's journey when Catherine was nine, she was present, too, at this new and difficult stage of her life. Unknown to her, this exile in Paris was preparing Catherine to have an inner grasp of Mary's sorrow which she shares with suffering humanity – when, on July 18<sup>th</sup>. Mary spoke to Catherine about "*bad times*", tragic events that would affect people's lives. Mary also drew Catherine's attention to the distress that injustice and indifference was causing to children and young people.

## **A SECOND STAY AT CHATILLON-SUR-SEINE**

***The angel said to Zechariah, "Do not be afraid, your prayer has been answered"*** (Lk 1, 46)

A year later, Charles remarried. Catherine saw this as an opportunity to move away. She wrote to her sister, Marie-Louise, telling her about her vocation. Marie-Louise advised her to go back to Chatillon-sur-Seine and continue her studies. So the

autumn of 1829 saw her back in Chatillon. Cousin Gontard had married Catherine's brother, Hubert. They both spoke to the father in support of Catherine's vocation and in the end he gave in. After carrying the burden of realising God's call but seeing it thwarted, it is easy to understand Catherine's feelings now, and her prayers of thanksgiving.

***My soul glorifies the Lord*** (Lk 1, 46)

With a joyful heart Catherine went to see the Sister Servant of the Chatillon-sur-Seine community, to make her official request to join the Daughters of Charity. The Sister, however, had some reservations about Catherine because of her lack of schooling. A new shadow had fallen over Catherine's eagerness. God seemed in no hurry to welcome her. Once again she would have to wait patiently. But God was about to act quickly and He did this through one of the Sisters in that community, Sister Victoire. Impressed by Catherine's uprightness and simplicity, she pleaded her cause saying, "*Accept her – she is a good village girl, the sort that Saint Vincent likes.*"

## **POSTULANCY**

***I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me***

In January 1830, the "message to Catherine" that she was to start her postulancy was no doubt sent with a certain amount of reservation. But Catherine was firmly convinced of her vocation and was ready to face any lack of understanding. She learned to serve the poor better but to serve them in the sweat of her brow and the strength of her arms, something not new to Catherine. Since the measure of her love for God was to love without measure, so the limit of her service was to serve without limit. Catherine discovered a little more about Saint Vincent's way of seeing things: in her dream he had challenged her: "*My daughter, it is good to care for the sick.....God has designs on you. Don't forget this!*" Catherine pondered all these things in her heart. With encouragement from her sister Marie-Louise, and guided by Sister Victoire, she humbly applied herself to her daily duties, showing great openness and readiness to be of service, saying an unconditional "yes" to the Lord so that all His plans for her would be fulfilled.

Every Sunday and every Thursday, at about 1p.m, she busied herself with the "soup pot of the poor", that huge amount of soup in the great smoking cauldron, and the crowds of poor people waiting for it. Armed with a casserole, a pan or some other vessel, they took the soup away for their families or for people who were sick. Mariette, who worked in the house, was full of admiration for Catherine's fervour.

## **DEPARTURE FOR THE SEMINARY OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY**

***Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth*** (Lk 1, 39-40)

Three months later, Catherine was ready to leave for the Seminary in rue du Bac. Like Mary, she left in haste when she set off for the capital. She couldn't help but think back to the first time she left for Paris, an exodus and desert experience. This time the three day journey seemed more like a path of light leading her to the Promised Land. Catherine no longer belonged to herself: she was completely oriented towards giving herself totally and unreservedly to God. She knew that Saint Vincent was waiting for her, to teach her his way of looking on people and events and his way of serving the poor but she could never have imagined the extraordinary graces that God was preparing for her in the chapel of rue du Bac. Catherine arrived in Paris on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1830. The first place she went to was the chapel.

### III. A PERSONAL FORMATION COURSE AT RUE DU BAC

When Catherine arrived in Paris on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1830, she was full of joy in spite of the fatiguing journey. What a difference between this and her first visit! Two years earlier it had signified constraint and exile: it meant being away from her father who rejected her and far away from the dream she had had of Saint Vincent. Now that dream was coming true.

*I will lead you into the desert and will speak to your heart* (Ho 2, 16)

France had scarcely emerged from the turmoil of the Revolution and its after-effects. The wave of dechristianisation which had begun in the early days of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, continued to inundate society. And in Community, too, things were not going well. The Sisters who had survived the Revolution were now too old and the young ones were too young. The Rules were not observed and the spirit of good village girls was abandoned.

Didn't Saint Vincent tell the first Sisters, "*You have left your native place, your parents and your possessions; and why? To love Our Lord and His maxims. You are His Daughters and He is your Father; He has begotten you and given you His Spirit.*" (IX, 592). Had he not also told them to imitate good village girls: "*There is nothing to equal persons who really possess the spirit of village folk; nowhere will you find greater faith, greater recourse to God in times of need, greater gratitude to Him in times of prosperity*"? (IX, 81). At Chatillon-sur-Seine Sister Victoire had said of Catherine, "*She is a good village girl, the sort that Saint Vincent likes.*"

After the troubled times of the Revolution, can we not imagine Providence preparing a new type of Marguerite Naseau in order to rekindle in the Company the fervour, the special spirit, and the great missionary endeavours of its early days.

To see this happening, let us follow Catherine step by step during her time of initial formation when she received extraordinary graces. This rereading of the events of 1830, however, will be just one facet of the revelation of the great mystery of God's love for the Company, the Church and the world.

***In Scripture, when choosing someone for a special vocation, God promises to point out the way. (C.49)***

With great fervour, Catherine began her formation. She already had experience of discipline so she was happy to start this life style where first place was give to God and to prayer. Relieved, now, of the crushing burden of running the farm, she now felt extraordinarily light hearted. *“My feet never touched the ground,”* she wrote. And everything worked out just as if Saint Vincent de Paul who had brought her to this place, had been waiting for her since she arrived. Indeed, an unexpected piece of news filled her with great joy – Saint Vincent’s relics, which had been hidden away during the Revolution, were now in Notre Dame Cathedral. The Archbishop had decided to return them to the Vincentian Fathers. On Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> April, the relics were solemnly transferred to Saint-Lazare and the procession of people accompanying them was the most triumphal one that Paris had ever seen. The King himself took part and so did 1000 Daughters of Charity and the 112 Seminary Sisters, one of whom was Catherine.

***The Company gives great importance to both initial and ongoing formation, in order to strengthen and energise the Sister in her vocation.(C49).***

Each day of the octave that followed, Catherine went to Saint-Lazare and visited the crystal funeral casket installed above the high altar. She was literally overwhelmed with love for Saint Vincent, for Christ and for the poor. When she came back she had a vision of his heart on the wall to the right of the altar and beneath the small reliquary of Monsieur Vincent. On three consecutive days Catherine “saw” Saint Vincent’s heart overflowing with love for God and for the poorest of the poor. Each time the heart in the apparition took on a different colour: white, red, reddish black.

## **SAINT VINCENT THE FORMATOR**

Six years after her dream at Fain, Catherine discovered Monsieur Vincent again. This time she was wide awake. What could this vision mean? Wasn’t Saint Vincent coming to guide her personally in her vocation to be a Daughter of Charity? Had he not written to Jeanne Lepeintre, *“It is true, my Daughter, that spiritual direction is extremely useful: it is a means of giving advice when a person is in difficulties, encouragement when things are not to their liking, of refuge during temptations, of strength when one feels overwhelmed: in short, it is a source of blessings and consolation when the director is charitable, prudent and experienced.”*(III, 614)?

The vision she had was of Saint Vincent at the very centre of his being; his heart, completely given to God and to the poor. In three of his conferences Monsieur Vincent put forward a very good formation plan, *“My Daughters, you are to be good Christians.”* Right away he led Catherine to the heart of Christ’s teaching: that God is “Love” (1Jn 4,8), a teaching that reveals the fulness of His tender love for all people, in the person of His beloved Son who would give his life for the world and make Love – love of God and love of one’s neighbour – the great commandment he entrusted to his disciples

***The Sisters endeavour to follow Christ as their Founders perceived him*** (C. 8a).

In the vision of the “white” heart, signifying the peace that comes from God, wasn’t Saint Vincent awakening in Catherine the need to welcome Jesus, the Prince of Peace, so that she in turn could bring peace to poor people? Was it not also a reminder of the need to listen to the cries of the poor so that peace may reign on earth? In his message for the 1993 World Day for Peace, Pope John Paul II said, *“If you desire peace, reach out to the poor.”* Can we not say that Saint Vincent is asking Catherine to accept the gift of Peace in order to build, together with poor people, a just and fraternal society?

***The same love inspires and directs their contemplation and their service*** (C.7b)

In the second vision where the heart is now “fiery red”, isn’t Saint Vincent showing Catherine the fire of his love for Christ and his burning charity for all persons who are poor? Is he not trying to tell her about his double passion: to allow himself to burn in the divine fire in order to kindle *“to the ends of the earth”* braziers of love for the poor, *“all poor people”*, *“those who are truly poor”*, *“everywhere”*? Our lives are transformed and energised by God’s love. Catherine understands that the Company has to “renew” itself in a radical way, in order to kindle the fire of love in the four corners of the earth.

***The Daughters of Charity learn that no type of distress should be foreign to them.*** (C.11a)

The heart that is “reddish black” is associated with misfortune and suffering. This reminds Catherine of the heart-rending state of the poor which so touched Saint Vincent’s heart, *“Your sorrows are my sorrows.”* Isn’t Saint Vincent asking Catherine to develop a deep understanding and compassion for all who suffer, to unite herself more closely to the sorrows of mankind?

It is easy to imagine Catherine’s feelings of faith, charity and thanksgiving at this time. However, she acted with great discretion and was very reserved. Like Mary, when she had listened to the shepherds, Catherine *“pondered all these things in her heart.”* She felt that she was the bearer of a message that was infinitely beyond her. During her weekly confession she spoke about it to her confessor, Father Aladel, who didn’t pay much attention to it but told her to forget about her dreams and concentrate on preparing herself to serve the poor well. Catherine humbly accepted this but she couldn’t forget Saint Vincent’s heart: 26 years later she wrote an account of the vision.

Far from trying to escape from the reality of everyday life, Catherine filled her days with renewed faith and love. She listened eagerly to the instructions of the Seminary Directress who explained each day some aspect of the vocation of a servant of the poor. She understood even more that to practise charity one needs to have a deep spiritual life: *“Something that is very important and which you must apply yourselves to, is to keep in close communication with Our Lord”* (XI, 342-348). *“Let us strive to*

*become more spiritual and allow Christ to reign in us.” (XII, 131). “Our spiritual life is of the highest importance, if we fail in this we fail in everything.” (XII,131)*

## **SAINT VINCENT AND THE EUCHARIST**

*Christ is the Rule of the Daughters of Charity (C. 8a). The Eucharist is the centre of their life and mission (C.19b)*

Had the Seminary Directress already explained how the Eucharist was “*the central devotion*” of the Daughters of Charity? We do not know this but we do know the close union that Catherine had with God even from her childhood days: “*When I go to the chapel,*” she said, “*I place myself before God and I say to Him, ‘Here I am, Lord; give me whatever it pleases you to give’. ‘If He gives me something I am very happy and I thank Him. If he doesn’t give me anything I still thank Him because I do not deserve anything further. And then I tell Him everything that comes into my mind. I tell Him my sorrows and my joys...and I listen.’*” Her prayer is surely characterised by attentiveness, faith, humility, respectful listening, purity of intention in seeking to know the will of the Father, filial trust and gratitude.

Saint Vincent regarded the Eucharist as the special manifestation of God’s infinite love and that is why he urged people to give themselves to “*the lover of our souls. ‘Come to the Eucharist, it is here you must come if you wish to know about Love’*” (IX, 297) he said, adding that “*God is infinitely inventive.*” (XI, 146). Indeed, God is not lacking in creativity. He doesn’t try to make people advance at the same rate. We know how intensely Catherine desired to live in Christ, *to put on Christ*”. And God responded to this “*desire*” that was so pure, that it was like the desire and the hope of seeing God that we find in psalm 62 “*Day and night my soul longs for you.*”

In the months that followed, it was Our Lord that Catherine glimpsed, as though transparently, in the Eucharist: “*I saw Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament....all the time I was in the Seminary, except whenever I doubted (that is to say resisted),* wrote Catherine. For her, faith is a loving relationship with her God and at Mass she lets Jesus come to her in the very depths of her being. Then she prays with confidence and the Host reveals to her the One who is normally hidden from our eyes and Catherine, in a mysterious way, comes to know the Real Presence. Her Seminary days will be for her a great “*Eucharistic time*”: only God, only Christ, rules her life. How can we imagine her deep gratitude, something that “*always draws down new graces on her so that she can rise to new heights of love and perfection.*”

However, on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1830, the Feast of the Blessed Trinity, Catherine explains that the vision becomes darker, just as Saint Vincent’s heart had done two months earlier. The Lord appeared to her, “*in the Blessed Sacrament, like a crucified King divested of all his splendour.*” Catherine, in line with the declaration of the Sovereign “*King*” as depicted at the Last Judgment, identifies the crucified and risen Christ with all who suffer, with all victims of poverty, exploitation and oppression in any part of the world. Catherine discovers a basic religious truth. She is challenged by the divine compassion

of Jesus, our Brother in the flesh, and penetrates right to the heart of the Mystery of Christ's presence in human history. Bartolome de las Casas also saw, in faith, "*Jesus Christ..... scourged, tormented, buffeted and crucified....thousands of times.*"

This was a new way of experiencing Christ's presence and a revelation quite unlike any of the previous ones. Once again it was a supernatural happening, it was divine intervention. All her life Catherine will remain a "woman of the Eucharist". How many times will she go "to the foot of the altar" to find Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament? Catherine tried to confide her "thoughts" to Monsieur Aladel but without success. Yet Heaven continued to beckon to her irresistibly.

## **SAINT VINCENT AND THE BLESSED VIRGIN**

*The Founders inculcated in the Daughters of Charity, love and imitation of the Virgin Mary.* (C. 15b).

On the feast of Saint Vincent, (celebrated at that time on 19th July) Sister Martha spoke with great enthusiasm about his devotion to the Blessed Virgin. His devotion to Mary was not something separate from the rest of his spirituality. His Marian piety is both christocentric and christological in relation to his mission of evangelising the poor. "*The Company of the Daughters of Charity was established in order to love God and to serve and honour Our Lord its patron, and the Blessed Virgin.*" (IX, 20). Monsieur Vincent believed that Our Lady was with him. He held her up as a model for every aspect of our spiritual and apostolic life: "*My Daughters, it is no small matter to visit.....You must do it in the sight of God and act as the Blessed Virgin did when she went to visit Saint Elizabeth: that is to say with great gentleness, love and charity.*" (IX, 258).

Catherine listened attentively to what the Directress said. The Directress gave every Seminary Sister a little present; a fragment of the surplice that Saint Vincent used to wear. This made Catherine long, once more, to see the Blessed Virgin. She would dare to ask Saint Vincent to obtain this favour for her. These were her thoughts as she fell asleep that night: "*I swallowed it and I fell asleep thinking that Saint Vincent would obtain for me the grace of seeing the Blessed Virgin....I had been wanting so long to see her.*" This last phrase shows Catherine's secret impatience at having to wait. Her thoughts and her words were about Heaven. And on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1830, in the third month of her Seminary, God once again touched Catherine's life. This time it was not just a vision. The Blessed Virgin came in person to visit and spend some time with her.

*Whoever seeks to follow Jesus Christ encounters Mary who received Him from the Father.* (C.15)

*"Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could to..."* (Lk 1, 39)

The first apparition took place in an atmosphere of great serenity, of reassuring calm, like that in the Gospel account of the Visitation. Mary, who had once gone into

Zachariah's house, now comes just as serenely and joyfully to the Chapel to give her Motherly help to Catherine as she sets off on her vocational journey. Catherine was lost in wonder at the beauty of this Lady whom she had called "Mother" from her childhood days. We can imagine Mary's respectful and affectionate demeanour which prompted Catherine to approach her with confidence: *"I was at her side at a single bound."* These are simple words but they reveal Catherine's great liberty of spirit and her gratitude for Mary's visit. Did not Catherine say, from the bottom of her heart, these words of Elizabeth *"Blessed are you among women.....why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?"* In their joyful relationship with Mary did not both women sing the Magnificat?

As she had done since she was a child, Catherine put her life, her joys and her trials into Mary's hands. What answer could Mary make? Mary no doubt wanted to teach Catherine so it was with great delicacy and yet in a detailed way, that Our Lady spoke of God's great love for Catherine, for the Company and for all mankind. Mary urged her to seek to do God's will, just as she herself had done at the Annunciation. She also indicated that God had a special mission to confide to her. *"How can this be done?"* (Lk 1,34). At this point Catherine does not know, but she accepts this mission, confident that everything willed by God will turn out well.

Mary continued to confide in Catherine, telling her in some detail, about the great misfortunes that were about to fall on France and on the world. She even spoke of bloody religious persecutions. Mary urged Catherine to continue to pray most earnestly for all suffering people, just as Constitution 24f tells us to do, *"They consider it their responsibility to pray with and for those who are poor and in their name."*

Then Mary pointed to the altar where God showers down graces in abundance. When we experience His infinite love nothing can be as it was before. Everything is made new, beautiful, young and flexible. This is the new kind of life that Mary was referring to when she urged the Community to renew itself and be committed to rediscovering the fervour and vitality of its earliest days.

Finally, Catherine learned from the vision about projects that would be explained at a later date: the new Children of Mary Association that Catherine's confessor was to found.

***The Founders invited them to contemplate Mary, the humble, faithful Servant of the Father's plan (C.15b)***

For Catherine, this apparition of 18<sup>th</sup> July was a veritable school of faith. Mary helped her to see her vocation of servant of the poor as a gift from God, and to live it by His grace. This conversation with Mary was also to be the model for Catherine's dealings with her companions in community. All her life, Catherine was to show this concern for building up gospel-based relationships with everyone, uniting endless patience with the firmness of authority. Finally, Mary led Catherine to abandon herself completely to the will of the Father. In her most difficult moments, she would help her to

gain new strength by turning her gaze to “the altar” and Christ on the Cross. Catherine was constantly placing herself in God’s hands and was able to remain serene and confident even in the very difficult circumstances which were not long in coming. The Blessed Virgin gave her to understand, “*You will not be at peace until you have told this to the one who is responsible for directing you.*” Catherine passed on the message. Her confessor shrugged his shoulders. Charles X’s throne is secure, He has just conquered Algeria. This young peasant girl who has no problem with hard work, is wrong to be daydreaming in this way:

-“*Imagination!*”, he says, “*Stop thinking about it.*” And he closes the confessional grille.

A week later, on July 27<sup>th</sup>, another civil war broke out. The king of France, Charles X, was overthrown, churches were profaned, crosses were overturned, religious communities were taken over and destroyed, the archbishop was threatened. Catherine took no satisfaction in hearing this news but remained discreet. She had no more to say. Her confessor was relieved. That was the end of her visions.

But four months later, on **27<sup>th</sup> November**, the day before Advent, Catherine was in the chapel at half-past five for meditation when she was once more seized with “*a great desire to see the Blessed Virgin*”, a desire that came from somewhere far away. Our Lady appeared, standing on the right. It was like “*a painting*”, said Catherine,: an icon modelled on the Apocalypse: “*A woman clothed with the sun, and with the moon beneath her feet.*”

***The Founders invited them to contemplate her*** (C. 15b).

***Mary, hope of the lowly***

Catherine’s eyes were dazzled by the indescribable beauty of Mary which reflected the Beauty of God. Radiant with the light of Christ, Mary held in her hands a small golden globe surmounted by a cross. Mary, who is Mother of all humankind, opened Catherine’s heart to see things from a global perspective and to share Mary’s love for all people.

***Mary, Mother of mercy...leading to her Son all those who trust in her..***

Then, her hands radiant with great beams of Christ’s light, Mary presents herself as the messenger of God the Father, who “*gives good things to his children*” (cf. Lk 11,13) Is not the Love in our lives the face of God’s Light? When we experience the radiant goodness of God, we are filled with joy. His presence brings life. With Him, we live in love; without Him there is sadness and the rays no longer give light. Mary is there to remind us of this every day.

***Mary Immaculate.....intimately united with her Son...***

During this wonderful vision Catherine reads the invocation: “*O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.*” Mary is seen as the Immaculate Conception. The reverse side of the medal shows Mary as being completely oriented towards Christ the Redeemer.

It is interesting to note that Our Lady takes to herself some of the symbols that our Founders expressed in their writings, for example, “*the light of Pentecost*” or “*turn the medal over.*” In its simplicity, the Medal of the Immaculate Conception represents a whole body of religious teaching for us to live out: the mystery of the Redemption, Mary’s place and role in the Church, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, etc. This “condensed catechism” is particularly addressed to the lowly, the humble and the poor, and it gives them new hope.

Catherine told her confessor about Our Lady’s request to have a medal made depicting Mary Immaculate just as she had seen her bestowing God’s gifts.

- “*Illusion*”, he replied, “*If you want to honour Our Lady, imitate her virtues and beware of your imagination.*”

Catherine withdrew, apparently calm (he had observed her through the confessional grille). He was relieved – and so was she. She had done what she had been asked to do and she would now obey her confessor. She was able to refer everything to God; she was totally dependent on His will.

But in December the same apparition recurred. It was the third and the last time Our Lady appeared to her; it was her way of saying goodbye:

- “*You will not see me again but you will hear my voice when you pray*”

***The Company is missionary by nature*** (C.25).

Do not the apparitions of 27<sup>th</sup> November and December tell Catherine that she should be open to the Church and its appeals to evangelise the world (cf. C. 25b)? Do they not commit her to be a servant who spreads abroad God’s love, earnestly striving to promote a just and fraternal world (cf. C. 24)?

In conclusion, it can surely be said that through these three apparitions Mary strengthened in Catherine the basic values of her life as a Daughter of Charity: living fully her baptismal commitment, totally working for the promotion of the poor, embodying the gospel spirit of a servant of the poor.

## **WHAT WILL THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THIS YOUNG SISTER WHO HAS BEEN SO WELL FORMED BY “HEAVEN”?**

On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1831, her Seminary days came to an end. What would the future hold for this young Sister who had been fashioned in secret by “Heaven”? One of many ordinary Daughters of Charity, so discreet that we can read in her Seminary assessment

notes: *“Robust, of medium height, can read and write well enough for her level, seems to be of good character, average intelligence and judgment, quite pious, is working at her perfection.”*

Apart from the dream she had when she was a child, the apparitions were limited to the first nine months of her Seminary. She was to live the rest of her life in the darkness of faith, her heart filled with love for Our Lord, His Mother and Saint Vincent.

At Fain, when with a child’s spontaneity, Catherine chose Mary to be her Mother, this gesture of faith seems to be a basic element in her relationship with “Heaven”. And the day she made her First Communion, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1818, makes us think of the coincidence of dates, in the light of her dream when Saint Vincent came to her to make her open to God’s call in the person of people who are poor.

On the night before she died, Sister Dufes asked her, *“Are you not afraid of dying?”*. Catherine seemed surprised, *“Why should I be afraid? I am going to Our Lord, his holy Mother, and Saint Vincent.”* Yes, these are the three great loves that inspired Catherine’s whole life: in fact they were combined into one single love.

At Reully, Catherine did what thousands of Daughters of Charity do all over the world, but she did it with extraordinary fervour, with unusual humility, a way of seeing everything in God, of taking on everything in His name and doing everything for Him. It isn’t the apparitions that make Catherine a saint but an entire lifetime filled with and directed by this one Love. ( To be continued)

Sister Anne Prevost  
*Daughter of Charity*

Province of Austria

## **HUMAN RIGHTS PRIZE**

On 6<sup>th</sup> February 2006, in Styria, one of the Provinces of Austria, the governor, Franz Voves, awarded the Human Rights Prize to Sister Elizabeth Schwarzl, Daughter of Charity, who has been a Missionary in Madagascar since 1979, and to two other people, one of whom works to support persecuted writers, and the other helps the homeless in Graz.

### **PHOTO**

Why was the prize given to Sister Elizabeth?

A local newspaper and the seminary in the diocese of Graz give the answer: *“For 14 years she worked in a leprosarium in Faranfangana. For some years she has devoted herself to the struggle against tuberculosis in Northern Ranotsara. She is also trying to remedy the causes of poverty in Madagascar and has set up an educational project*

The Governor has shown great interest in Sister Elizabeth's work and he awarded her the Prize which is worth 2500 euros. Thank you, Sister Elizabeth, for your Vincentian witness!