

## **Echoes May-June 2006**

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## **MOTHER EVELYNE FRANCOIS, SUPERIORESS GENERAL**

### **Visitatrices' Encounter**

**Paris, 8-28 May 2006**

### **Opening of the Encounter**

My dear Sisters,

I am very happy to be speaking to you, and in my own name and that of the General Councillors I would like to officially welcome you to the Motherhouse and wish you a good retreat. The days before this encounter must have been very busy ones for you and I am sure you are looking forward to the peace of the retreat and to the deeper level of conversation with the Lord that this promotes.

The Preparatory Commission for the Encounter, the Sisters responsible for the liturgy, and the Sisters of the house, have done everything they could to ensure that you will benefit from these days. We all assure you that our prayers will be with you. I know, too – from the many messages received – that the Sisters of your Provinces are closely united to you and that they keep your retreat in their prayers.

I will have the opportunity of speaking to you again during the Encounter itself which will begin on 17<sup>th</sup> May, but today I would like to add briefly to my words of welcome by suggesting to you that you listen, very specially during this retreat, to the words of two Daughters of Charity.

**This year we are celebrating the bicentenary of the birth of one of them, Saint Catherine Laboure, and the centenary of the birth of the other, Mother Suzanne Guillemin.**

I am well aware that the annual retreat is, more than anything else, the work of the Holy Spirit, that it is a personal encounter with Jesus, being close to Mary and our

Founders. But circumstances of time and place, 2006 in the Motherhouse, lead me to suggest that you also listen to these two Sisters, We have to benefit from the graces that come to us from this bicentenary and this centenary. Celebrating an anniversary is more than a simple looking back to the past, paying homage or taking part in a family act of devotion. It can be a source of grace if we know how to discover the gifts the Lord is offering us on this occasion, for our own times.

These two Daughters of Charity lived in this house at certain times in their lives, and have left there a mark, an impression, a message, that the silence of the retreat will help you to grasp. Both of them made their Seminary here, prayed in our chapel, strolled round the garden. Saint Catherine used to come here regularly from Reuilly as did all the Paris Sisters; she made her last retreat here in November 1876 and came back the following month for the feast of the Immaculate Conception. For a long time before the period 1962-1968, Mother Guillemin was also a frequent visitor to the house. These two women are different in many ways. A whole century separates them: one spent her life in the most ordinary way possible, serving 46 years in the same house and exercising the same office: the other was Superioress General and an expert at the Vatican Council. They both received the same grace. They allowed the Lord to work in them. They allowed the Lord to develop and increase in them the virtues linked to “the state of charity” of the Daughters of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. I have highlighted three of these virtues in their lives but if you let these two Sisters speak to you during the retreat, perhaps you will discover others.

I think that Saint Catherine and Mother Guillemin have in common what I would call:

- openness in their dealings with the Lord and with the Blessed Virgin
- greatness of soul, another name for spiritual courage
- a warm and deep love for others

### **OPENNESS IN THEIR DEALINGS WITH THE LORD AND WITH THE BLESSED VIRGIN**

Saint Catherine’s openness to the Lord and the Blessed Virgin characterised her whole life. We can think of her childhood in Burgundy where she grew up under the watchful eye of God and Mary; her satisfaction in work well done and her desire to respond to the call she recognised; think of her close relationship with Mary in 1830 and her death at Reuilly as she joyfully waited to “*see Our Lord, His Mother and Saint Vincent.*”

In May 1965, during a retreat for the Visitatrices in Rome, Mother Guillemin said to them, “*The most important duty we have concerning those in our charge is to strive after our own spiritual perfection.*” She added, “*The personal life of every member of the Council, but more particularly the Visitatrices, has a great influence, a much greater influence than we think, on the spiritual life of the Province and of each Sister, and it is absolutely true that their closeness to God and their intimate relationship with Him are much more important in the formation of souls than any actions or words could be.*”

## **GREATNESS OF SOUL, ANOTHER NAME FOR SPIRITUAL COURAGE**

Saint Catherine's greatness of soul, or spiritual courage, is seen in the way she conducted herself after the apparitions and her perseverance in ensuring that the message confided to her by Mary would be heard. On the very day she died, 31<sup>st</sup> December 1876, she said again how much she wanted the chapel to be open to pilgrimages and she reaffirmed that Our Lady of the Globe really did appear to her.

To conjure up the greatness of soul or spiritual courage of Mother Guillemin we have to think back to the troubled days of the post-Conciliar period and the difficulties encountered during the process of aggiornamento. I quote her words: *"It is not a question of adapting religious life to today's way of living: it is a matter of renewing Religious Institutes at a deep level; on the one hand adjusting their way of living their spirit at a deep level, and at the same time bearing in mind the apostolic needs of the times. Let us see it from the perspective of conversion."*

## **A DEEP AND ARDENT LOVE FOR OTHERS**

It is in her work for the old men at Reully that we see most clearly the ardent love Catherine had for the poor. At times this led her to fight for their rights and their dignity to be respected. During the troubled period of the Commune she worked hard to ensure that the Sisters could continue working with old people and children. She showed the same warm affection for her Sisters. How many postulants and young Sisters who were afraid of the old men who could be very demanding, did she not encourage and console?

To recall Mother Guillemin's warm love for the Sisters, I go back to what she said during the 1965 retreat, *"The first spiritual disposition you should have with regard to the Sisters is Charity. We have to have love in our hearts for all who are entrusted to us. ....What makes us able to understand the Sister for what she is, and in her particular situation, is principally our charity and the love we have for her."*

May this retreat here in the Motherhouse in 2006, allow you to reap the spiritual fruits reserved for you by Saint Catherine and Mother Guillemin who were servants, witnesses and prophets in their times. They will help you to prepare for our Encounter. We will need to be close to the Lord and to Mary, to be filled with spiritual courage and ardent love, in order to search together for ways of dynamising the future for the Company and for those who are poor, in the 94 countries we represent.

I would like to end this message of welcome by reminding you of what Our Lady confided to Saint Catherine on the evening of 18<sup>th</sup> July 1830. *"Come to the foot of the altar. There graces will be poured out on all who ask for them with confidence and fervour."* May these words resound in your hearts each day of your retreat.

Sister Evelyne Franc  
 Daughter of Charity  
 Paris, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2006

MOTHER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Visitatrices' Encounter  
Paris, 8<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> May 2006

**The Company today**

My dear Sisters,

The atmosphere of prayer that you have experienced during the peace of the retreat, together with the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, the conferences of Father Javier and the help of the liturgy, have now brought you to another stage in our Encounter, with what Saint Louise called “a heart full of joy and knowledge” (that is to say, an understanding of the things of God.”). Indeed, she wrote to Saint Vincent on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1650: *“Monsieur, my heart is still overflowing with joy on account of the understanding which, I believe, our good God has given me of the words, ‘God is my God’ .....therefore I cannot help communicating with you this evening to ask you to assist me to profit from this excess of joy and to suggest some practice for me tomorrow”* (Spiritual Writings p. 340). I don’t know that it is necessary to add that Saint Vincent wrote in the margin of that letter this reply: *“Blessed be God, Mademoiselle, for the tenderness with which His Divine Majesty honours you! You must receive it respectfully and devoutly and in view of some cross which He is preparing for you.”* (Ibid p.340) I don’t think that crosses are likely to come to you during the coming days; they will probably be waiting for you when you get back to your Provinces. Today, the Lord is offering us a new time of grace, which we will share with one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Before going on to the main part of our topic, I would like to make a few remarks about you as a group. You are 77 Visitatrices and one Regional Superior. One of you has just been designated Visitatrice but has not yet been installed, 34 of you were here last May for the Encounter for newly-designated Visitatrices and 62 of you took part in the General Assembly in various capacities (Visitatrice, Delegate, Provincial Assistant, General Councillor). In fact there are only 4 Visitatrices who were not at the 2003 General Assembly or the Encounter for newly designated Visitatrices in May 2005, so you are practically identical as a group. In a spirit of faith you have courageously agreed to begin or to continue a mission, that of *“promoting the spiritual and apostolic vitality”* of your Provinces (cf. C.73a). I hope that these days of our Encounter will allow us to clarify with one another, the way we exercise our mission with regard to those who are poor and to the Sisters, to share simply and trustingly our concerns, our joys and our hopes. This, of course, will all take place within the framework of a programme and working method carefully drawn up by the Preparatory Commission, something that Sister Margaret Barrett will be explaining to you in detail this afternoon.

In my talk this morning I want to put before you the aims of the Encounter. There are three of them: we will be assessing the progress made since the last General Assembly, we will be experiencing together a time of formation and of sharing, and the final and most specific goal, will be our remote preparation for the next General Assembly. My talk will be in two parts. The first will be about what has happened since the last General Assembly and this will be a way of bringing us all up to date with what we have done together – “We,” that is to say you in your Provinces and we in the General Council – what has been happening in the Company, and I will end this first session by giving you some current statistics. In the second part I will give you some guidelines for the future. I will just do this in broad outline, pointing out some directions to take, so as not to anticipate the work we have to do in the coming days.

## **1-A LOOK AT THE COMPANY FROM 2003 TO TODAY: REFLECTION AND SOLIDARITY**

Good communication with one another helps the working of our big family of more than twenty thousand persons. On this point, our new website will be launched on 4<sup>th</sup> June, Pentecost Sunday, and I hope it will facilitate this communication which is so essential for us! So may I now take up some key events in our lives since 2003, I have grouped them as follows:

- Work of reflecting and then compiling, undertaken in accordance with the wishes of the 2003 Assembly
- Attitude of solidarity and collaboration

### **1A work of compilation and reflection, undertaken in a spirit of fidelity to the 2003 General Assembly**

#### *a) Action Lines, Constitutions and various guidance points*

The work of the General Council after the 2003 Assembly centred on drawing up the Action Lines. This was the mandate given by the General Assembly with the aim of dynamising the Company’s journey forward during a new inter-assemblies period. The Action Lines were sent to the Provinces in January 2004.

Another task assigned to us by the General Assembly was that of presenting the Constitutions and Statutes to the Sacred Congregation for their approbation. With this in mind, we invited His Eminence, Cardinal Rode, to come to our Encounter but he wasn’t able to come because of important duties in Rome. We profited from the work of the Commission appointed for this purpose but it was also an important, exciting and difficult task which helped us to study these texts at a deep level. As you know, the approbation by the Sacred Congregation came very quickly, on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2004; this was followed by the massive work of translating and printing them and finally, the official text came into force on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2004. It is difficult for me to mention everyone concerned but I would like to thank the Constitutions Editing Commission, one of whom is here present, the Secretary General and the translators, while not forgetting the mutual aid shown among Provinces by collaboration in the work of translating and tackling the problems of printing and distributing the Constitutions.

This work was followed by your own endeavours; I am referring here to the tremendous efforts made in each Province to organise sessions for study, reflection and sharing on the new texts. I would also like to offer my warmest thanks to Father Javier Alvarez and Father Fernando Quintano for the study documents published in the Echoes.

As well as this, I must mention the updating of all the Guides that are landmarks for our everyday living and for formation. The new Constitutions have delayed the distribution of the latest Guide for Provincial Treasurers, the provisional draft of which was already finished: this Guide will soon be sent to you and Sister Rita Ferri, our Treasurer General will be speaking to you about it. Then with the participation of your Provinces, we named the Commissions for updating the documents concerning the Visitatrice and her Council, the Sister Servant, the Provincial Secretary and the Instruction on the Vows. These documents are not yet finalised but we are following this up at Council meetings because the time factor is important. I would also like to add that you will also be receiving a Guide for the Provincial Archivist.

*b) All the work of discernment carried out in your Provinces*

In accordance with what you were asked to do, you have carried out an immense programme of consultation in your Provinces with a view to updating your Provincial Plans. You have also revised your Formation Plans. You have sent us, too, your norms presenting the method you have chosen, with your Council and after consultation with your Province, for designating the Visitatrice and Provincial Councillors. Up to now we have approved 34 Provincial Plans and the Provincial norms for designating the Visitatrice and Provincial Councillors for 33 Provinces (including one for the election of a Provincial Councillor). You know that we do not need to approve Formation Plans but you have always shared them with us and studying them has been an enriching experience, a sharing that will be reciprocated through your General Councillor. I would like to express our gratitude for your hard work. It must have entailed a lot of discernment by the Province and the Provincial Council. Studying your Provincial Plans and your norms was a grace for the General Council. We shared a lot on our criteria and reflected on your different situations before either giving direct approval to your Plans and norms, or suggesting first some modifications.

## **2. An attitude of solidarity and collaboration**

I have so many good things to say about this! First of all, the solidarity we all experienced during the catastrophes, the tsunami, hurricane Katrina, landslides, famine and earthquakes. These tragedies inspired great waves of prayer throughout the Company and a sharing of personnel – particularly in Latin America, where there is no visa problem – and considerable financial aid. We will talk about this again later.

Another form of solidarity has been practised, one linked to the needs of formation and our works. Shortly after the 2003 General Assembly, I made an appeal for you to come to the aid of the Motherhouse and I suggested a way of doing this that combined studying a foreign language, working in the Motherhouse, and having a period





These **21,002 Sisters** are spread over:

**94 countries**  
**77 Provinces**  
**1 Region**  
**2,424 houses and 85 annexes**

Continents	Countries	Provinces	Region	Houses	Total no. of Sisters	Seminary Sisters	Average age
Africa	21	9		126+ 6 an	955 4.55%	41	47.97
Latin Am. (Spanish speaking)	20	15		388+ 10 an	2818 13.42%	54	60.17
Latin Am. (Portuguese speaking)	1	6		236	1687 8.03%	26	65.17
N. America	2	5		112+4an	838 3.99%	2	71.12
Asia	18	9		239+11 an	1815 8.64%	114	54.66
Europe	28	32	1	1307 + 49 an	12 816 61.02%	52	72.04
Oceania	4	1		16+ 5an	73 0.34%		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2424 + 85 annexes</b>	<b>21,002</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>66.91</b>

## II. A GLANCE TOWARDS THE FUTURE

The timetable, starting from today's which we have already explained, will give us the opportunity to reflect together on several aspects of your mission as Visitatrice, servant, witness and prophet. A feature of this Encounter is the freedom we have in sharing. So I have chosen a few points for reflection and I would like others to be dealt with over the coming days.

### 1. Living and serving the "Communio" – giving a new impetus to the spiritual life

Some theologians define the objective of exercising authority, an objective which is to be achieved through animating and coordinating, in the following terms: "living and serving the *communio*." This requires all Superiors to be vigilant about the quality and the depth of their own life, to involve the community by sharing the experience with it, to help people to grow as individuals and to motivate communities with the power of a shared vision.

*a) To be vigilant about the depth and the quality of their own life*

This is a new way of expressing what Mother Guillemin said to the Visitatrices in Rome in 1965, and what all the Superiors General, using words and examples taken from their own times, have been saying to Sisters for over three centuries, namely, the importance of nourishing one's spiritual life, of preserving an inner thirst for God, for the Absolute.

In the post-synod apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, the tenth anniversary of which we are celebrating this year, Pope John Paul II explains it like this in section 93 and he adds the value of giving witness: *"It is precisely the spiritual quality of the consecrated life which can inspire the men and women of our day, who themselves are thirsting for absolute values. In this way the consecrated life will become an attractive witness."*

This is just what we are being told in the second Action Line: *"Let us give a new impetus to our spiritual life so that in our Communities we experience God and communion among our Sisters for the Mission."* Out of the 22 paragraphs of our Action Lines, this is my favourite one because it seems to me to be the root and source of all the others. *"Let us give a new impetus to our spiritual life";* our spiritual life first of all. I am sure your retreat has helped you in this and I would like to stress again your special role in this matter as Visitatrices. I think that the new impetus we will be giving to our spiritual life is crucial for the whole Province. This impetus that is renewed every day, will help us not to lose sight of the fact that our mission is a service, a temporary service, which brings with it no privilege except that of serving our Sisters and loving them as much as we can.

Moreover, we often have the opportunity to make choices, we take decisions with the advice or consent of our Councils. All these decisions, whether they are from our own personal choice or decisions taken in Council, are influenced by the example we give, they reflect the kind of life style we want for our Province. They show how clearly we are opposed to the negative aspects of globalisation. It could be said that after two centuries of resisting, Catholics are adopting the ways of today's world just at the very time when today's world is beginning to doubt itself and to realise the harmful consequences of modernity. Are we going to let ourselves be carried away by the whirlwind of postmodernism, in the era of consumerism? The new impetus given to our spiritual life is the pledge of discernment, of criteria that are firmly rooted in our personal life and also in our work with the Council. The Province needs our discernment, needs the criteria we have drawn up with our Council after listening to the Sisters and studying our situation.

*b) Involving the community by sharing the experience with it*

The first community to be involved and informed is our Council. Except in exceptional cases where we have a duty to be reticent and discreet, we should share as much as possible with the Council. The involvement of other communities is done by passing the information on via the Sister Servants. In general, their mission is more difficult than ours and we need to accompany them, listen to them, be available and be concerned for their formation. In this way we will come near to achieving that

“*atmosphere of trust and dialogue*” advocated by C. 31b and the advice Saint Louise gave to the Sister Servants.

- c) *Helping people to grow as persons and motivating communities with the power of a shared vision*

This embraces every aspect of formation, which “*allows the woman to live her vocation as a progressive modelling of herself on Christ, with renewed fidelity to the Spirit and to the aim of the Company.*”(C.49, last paragraph). Number 43 of *Vita Consecrata* puts it like this: “*Those who exercise authority cannot renounce their obligation as those first responsible for the community, as guides of their brothers and sisters in the spiritual and apostolic life.*” It is certainly up to us to help people to grow as persons and to motivate communities by sharing with them the ardour within us, but let us acknowledge that we also receive from Sisters and from local communities for it is they who often console us by the ardour of their lives of total commitment and by their joy in service.

## **2To bring contemplation into the world of suffering and poverty**

I am using here the beautiful phrase used by Father Mezzadri, CM, to describe Saint Vincent’s contribution to apostolic life. He calls the Daughters of Charity, women consecrated for service. It is a lovely way of expressing that basic insight of Saint Vincent, “*Given to God, in community, for the service of Christ in the poor*”: I would like to stop for a moment and think of that word “contemplation.” It is not a question here of setting it against the word “action” but of linking it to other words such as *friendship, closeness, gratuitousness*, and verbs such as *to give time, to know people personally, to form a relationship*. We know that these days particularly, this is what people who are poor need. Mission is accomplished through meeting people personally, through a relationship of heart to heart, glance to glance, hand to hand. Friendship with those who are poor is a sign of peace with those that society is at war with, it creates and sustains peace and intensifies a thirst for God, His Kingdom and justice. Being concerned to contemplate in this way is the same as being concerned for the apostolic vitality of the Province. This approach to our service of the poor is a good way of avoiding the pitfall of activism. It allows us to think of service as something other than “work”, it implies respect, cordiality, gentleness and devotion and it helps us to move from contemplating Christ in prayer to contemplating Christ in those who are poor.

This contemplation is a preliminary stage before we take action but it is essential because it will colour our actions. If contemplation does not come first, what we do, the service we offer, will lack the most important element, will be colourless and banal.

I was struck, too, by the phrase, “*the world of suffering and poverty*” for it is a good description of our world in the 94 countries where we are present. It takes us back to our first Action Line and to the “*situations which affect our lives, human rights, peace and a balanced ecology.*” I don’t think that many of our works fail to address this world of suffering and poverty but perhaps it would be well to check this? I can also see

another way of interpreting this phrase with reference to our elderly Sisters' apostolate of prayer. Without leaving their house, they can, by their life with God, contemplate the world of suffering and poverty and obtain the graces needed by so many people who are far away from them. This phrase of Father Mezzadri helps us to avoid the danger of setting, in an academic, somewhat sterile and outdated way, insertion against institution. The question we should rather be asking is this: which service carried out in an institution or by our insertion, helps us to contemplate the world of suffering and poverty. Or can it be that tension, the fact that we have fewer Sisters, the amount of work to be done or the way that we approach our works – routine, being too settled down – completely hide this contemplation, this spirit of faith which brings the Lord to others and finds the Lord again in other people? Let us look again at Constitution 16:

C.16a – *“The Daughters of Charity, given to God for the service of Christ in persons who are poor, find in this aim their unity of life.”*

C.16b) – *“Service is for them the expression of their total gift of self to God in the Company and gives it its full significance. It is at the same time a vision of faith and the concrete expression of that love, whose source and model is Christ. It is this following of Jesus the Servant that Saint Vincent and Saint Louise recommended to the Sisters – in order that they might live as good Christians and be good Daughters of Charity – This service nourishes their contemplation and gives meaning to their community life, just as their relationship with God and their life in common constantly revitalise their apostolic commitment.*

C.16c) – *“The Daughters of Charity see those who suffer, those stripped of human rights and dignity, and those in poor health as children of God and brothers and sisters with whom they are in solidarity.*

*Following the example of their Founders, they look upon them as their masters, ‘who preach to them by their very presence’, and as their lords whom they must love tenderly and respect highly. Above all, poor persons represent for them Christ, who said, “as often as you did this to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.”*

The word “contemplation” is used explicitly in Constitution 16 and is implicit in such expressions as, *vision of faith, loving tenderly, poor persons represent Christ for them...* In our contacts with the Sisters, in formation sessions at every level which we plan with Father Director, the Council and the Formation Commission, we have to be careful that this link between contemplation and service does not become weakened. We have to ensure that the Sisters receive the spiritual nourishment and experience the joy of community that Sisters need, and at the same time have the opportunity to think about their work in order to rediscover the connecting link of contemplation which they could lose track of through physical fatigue – we might think of a Sister who from early morning tries to receive with competence and tenderness a crowd of sick people queuing up at the door of her dispensary – with regard to psychological fatigue – let us imagine a Sister after eight hours teaching in a technical school in a problem area on the outskirts of the city, and think of so many other Sisters whom we each know so well.

I will share with you one of my anxieties: I worry that after sending Sisters on mission, the “contemplation” aspect of service, which was so clearly explained in the Seminary, may be obscured if the young Sister feels trapped in the yoke of “a job to be done” rather than feeling she is sent to bring contemplation into the world of suffering and poverty. I feel the same concern for Sisters who have newly arrived on the mission ad gentes. Moreover, this “contemplation dimension” of service needs to be revitalised at every stage in our lives.

### **3. Living more as an international community**

Constitution 6 lists several characteristics of the Company’s internationality. I would like to dwell briefly on the last one: *“The Company is international by communion, collaboration, and sharing among the Provinces.”*

I described earlier the vibrancy of our sharing and the benefits of collaborating with one another, but I think we are called to make even greater efforts to serve Christ better in those who are poor and also to be more open to the valuable asset we have in our internationality.

The figures I showed you just now, might lead you to be pessimistic, even to feel panic since the data curves show a downward trend, the needs of the poor are so great, we are so weak as regards numbers and trained personnel. If we follow this path of fear, the Lord may well reproach us for our lack of faith. I think that in the midst of our poverty, we have to rediscover the great treasure of our internationality and our diversity. The tremendous effort that has been made in the Company for more than 30 years to develop Vincentian spirituality at national and international level, the fact that so many Sisters have left for the missions and have come back after this work to share experiences with their Province of origin, the new foundations that are only just beginning.

I think that the Lord is calling us to be even more inventive and imaginative so that we may live more in communion, collaboration and sharing among the Provinces. The parable of the wicked rich man and that of the widow’s mite are very relevant today. Have we riches to share or do we keep them to ourselves? Do we know how to share in the midst of our poverty? I would also like to stress what I might call “received internationality”, openness to universality, to the gift of displaced poor people who come to make us open to other cultures, other forms of poverty that challenge the way we live and serve.

A rudimentary sense of universality was already present in the teaching and works of Saint Vincent. He practised it by sending Priests of the Mission and Daughters of Charity to places beyond the frontiers of their country and also by being open to the world of other people and not closed in within his own culture: we might think of his relationships with the alchemists, Protestants and free-thinkers, an idea that is developed by Father Francois Hiss, C.M. Our Founders’ interest in these unconventional people was inspired by charity, the desire to help the marginalised, and also by an enquiring mind and openness of heart towards those who were different. More than being a matter

of institutional choice, of geographical distribution or the capacity for multicultural communication, universality is an attitude of heart which flows from our catholicity, from the centre of our life and mission, the Eucharist. Let us take to ourselves this refusal to be closed in on ourselves, on our particular culture, our communities or Provinces.

It is not for me to tell you how to develop among us communion, collaboration and sharing. It is up to you to be inventive, to reflect on this in view of the needs of the poor and the formation of the Sisters, within the framework of transparency and freedom that our Constitutions give us.

I hope then, that in these coming days of reflection and sharing which are so important for those who are poor and for the Company, you will be guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. *“The Spirit, in fact, is that interior power which harmonises hearts with Christ’s heart and moves them to love their brethren as Christ loved them, when he bent down to wash the feet of the disciples and above all, when he gave his life for us,”* said Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas est* № 19.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to give us hearts that are full of joy and full of knowledge of the things of God, as Saint Louise’s heart was. It is the Spirit who will give us the freedom to do God’s will. I also confide each one of us and each Province to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the only Mother of the Company.

Sister Evelyne Franc  
*Daughter of Charity*  
 Paris, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2006

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

9<sup>th</sup> study document on the revised Constitutions

**CHAPTER VI: GOVERNMENT**

PROVINCIAL LEVEL

C. 72-80: St. 53-62

**I. INTRODUCTION**

This part of the chapter on government at Provincial level is one of the longest in the book of Constitutions and Statutes. Its length is understandable and it is fitting. Not only does it speak of the office of the Visitatrice, who is responsible for governing the Province, but the section also deals with the different offices of those who collaborate with her, the Provincial Director, the Provincial Assistant, the Councillors, the Provincial Treasurer and the Provincial Secretary. The Provincial’s mission is primarily a charismatic one but it has some juridical aspects stemming from universal and proper law. All this shows us how important this chapter is.

In general the texts are clear and precise. Some terms are explained in the glossary to the Constitutions. For this reason, and in order not to make this document too long, we will just indicate the changes that have been introduced, we will make a brief summary of the main points of this section (C. 72-80: St.53-62) and we will spend more time on points that are new and important and so need to be explained individually.

## II. MAIN POINTS OF THE DOCUMENT

### The Province

*“The Visitatrice has the immediate government of the Province, which she directs in accordance with the prescriptions of universal and proper law.”* (C.73d). This section on government at Provincial level begins, quite logically, by explaining what we mean by a Province ( cf. 72a). The Code of Canon Law gives this definition: *“A Province is a union of several houses which, under one superior, constitutes an immediate part of the same institute, and is canonically established by lawful authority.”*(Can.621). The person in charge of the Province is the Visitatrice, who is a Major Superior: the Province is located in a given territory, within determined boundaries.

This *“union of several houses”* that makes up a Province, takes on different forms in the Company’s present day circumstances. In general, the *“given territory”* and the *“determined boundaries”* are those of the particular country. But quite often it happens that there are several Provinces in the same country as, for example, in Brazil, Colombia, Spain, the United States, France, India, Italy and Poland. It can also happen that a Province can cover several countries as is the case with the Provinces of the Near-East, Central America, Central Africa and North Africa. Statute 53 allows for the possibility of a Province having local communities within the territorial boundaries of another Province, or in countries where the Company is not yet established. These two options are already being implemented now in the Company.

The 1983 Constitutions gave the Superior General, with the consent of the Superioress General and her Council, the authority to make decisions about the erection, division, combination and suppression of Provinces (cf. C.3.35). Article 72b transfers this authority to the Superioress General with her Council. The Vice-Provinces, the Quasi-Province and the Regions are similarly affected. In practice, the Vice-Visitatrice and the Vice-Province correspond to the Visitatrice and the Province. At present there are no Vice-Provinces in the Company. The Region, on the other hand, is dependent on a Province and has its own special Statute. It has a Regional Superior who is an ex officio member of the General Assembly (cf. C. 87c).

It is certainly true that it is the Superioress General with her Council who knows most about the circumstances and needs of the Provinces, Vice-Provinces and Regions where it is a matter of erecting, dividing, combining or suppressing them. From this point of view the transfer of powers from the Superior General to the Superioress General is logical. Of course, the Sisters concerned should be consulted about all these decisions

and there should be an equitable distribution of assets and personnel (cf. C. 72b, St. 53a,b).

Vice-Provinces and Regions are, by their very nature, a response to temporary conditions. Also, shortly before the 2003 General Assembly, the Vice-Provinces and Regions became Provinces. So representation at the Assembly improved and its members were a better reflection of the actual situation of the Company. At the present time there is only one Region, Albania, which has links with the Province of Slovenia. Shortly after the last General Assembly we realised the need to restructure the Quasi-Province. This is directly dependent on the Superioress General and has its own particular Statute.

### **The Visitatrice**

The influence that the teaching of the Second Vatican Council had on the Church and its institutions also had an impact on the Company. The principle of subsidiarity and the importance of inculturation, for example, contributed to enhancing the role of the Visitatrice. We have seen this in the fact that some of the functions of the General Superiors defined in the 1983 Constitutions, have been transferred, in the present Constitutions, to the Visitatrice.

The Constitutions and Statutes deal with many of the juridical aspects of the office of the Visitatrice (cf. C.73, 79; St.54, 60). But we have to point out, for this is important, that they begin by emphasising the charismatic aspects of this office: *“The Visitatrice promotes 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);...*“In collaboration with her Councillors, she endeavours to foster in the Province an atmosphere of simplicity and trust”* (C.73f). *“She is the bond between the Province and Superiors at General level, with whom she maintains close contacts which are indispensable for the unity of the Company.”* (C.73g). The juridical aspects are important but they will always be in the nature of support for the charismatic elements.

Two important changes are introduced in article 73b: the Visitatrice is *“designated”* by the Superioress General with her Council. Previous to this, she was *“appointed”* by the Superior General, in agreement with the Superioress General and her Council, after consultation with the Sisters of the Province (cf. C.3.36 of 1983). The Constitutions’ glossary defines the word *“designation”* as *“the act of filling a position or function, either by election or by appointment”* (Glossary p.198). Now it is for each Province to suggest the method for designating the Visitatrice: either she will be appointed by the Superioress General with her Council after the Sisters of the Province have been consulted, or she will be elected. In the latter case, universal law requires the election result to be confirmed by the Superioress General ( cf. CCL, can. 623). Since in the Company, vows are annual and renewable, the Constitutions lay down that a Sister designated as Visitatrice must be *“at least fifteen years of vocation and have confirmed her commitment in the Company in the course of the year by the renewal of her vows”* (C.73c). No mention is made of age but as Statute 26 says that the minimum age for



entering the Company is 18 years, this means that a Sister cannot be designated Visitatrice before the age of 33. She is designated for a period of six years and can only be designated again for a further three years (C.73b,c).

*“The Visitatrice has the immediate government of the Province”* (C. 73d; glossary p.201) The Superiors General have universal and supreme power in the Company but it is the Visitatrice who has the immediate government of the Province, with personal authority but obviously, subject to the authority of the Superiors General (cf. C.73d; CCL c.622). In order to have this immediate government the Visitatrice needs to have *“executive power”* (cf. glossary p.203; St. 54b), that is to say, she must be able to take decisions and give permissions in accordance with the Constitutions and Statutes. The Sisters owe her obedience. The Superiors to whom the Sisters owe obedience by vow are the Visitatrice, the Vice-Visitatrice and the Regional Superior (cf. C.31a). The Visitatrice is a *“major Superior”* (cf. C.73e). Canon 623 defines major superiors as *“those who govern an entire institute (Superiors General) or a Province (Visitatrice) or a part equal to a Province (Vice-Visitatrice).”*

This same article 73 presents other duties of the Visitatrice, for example collaborating in the unity of the Company (C.73g) making regular visitations (cf. C.33f), convoking and presiding over the Provincial Assembly (cf. C.73h).

It is in Statute 54 that we find the other duties that are assigned to the Visitatrice by universal and proper law:

\*She appoints the Assistant and the Provincial Treasurer (formerly it was the Superior General and his Council who did this); the Provincial Secretary and the Sisters in charge of formation; the Sister Servants for a period of three years which is renewable, this after consulting the community and the Sister herself (cf. St.54d; 60c: C. 82e) and in exceptional circumstances this can be extended for a further three years with the consent of the Superioress General (formerly it was the Superior General who appointed her). All these nominations are sent to the Superioress General. The consultation with the Sisters of the Province, before a Sister Servant is appointed, is the same procedure as that mentioned in Statute 65b. The Visitatrice must consult the Sisters of the local community, only if she is appointing a member of that community as Sister Servant or extending her mandate for a second period of three years or longer. (cf. C.82c).

\*With the collaboration of the Provincial Treasurer, she is responsible for the movable and immovable goods of the Province so that these are administered in accordance with universal, proper and civil law.

\* She submits to the Superioress General a report on the regular visitations of houses. These visitations are made about every three years by the Visitatrice or her delegates, the Councillors (cf. St. 54f).

\* She authorises Sister to live outside a house of the Company for reasons stated in Statute 29a, or to publish writings on religious or moral questions (cf. St.54i). According to the clause added by the 1985 Assembly, it was the Provincial Director who gave this permission. This present amendment seems logical since it is to the Provincial Council that this permission should be given. In this way the Councillors can give their opinion on the matter, as can the Father Director.

### **The Provincial Assistant**

Article 74 of the Constitutions and Statute 55 give a brief and precise account of the office of Provincial Assistant and the procedure to be followed for her appointment. No further explanation is needed.

### **The Provincial Director**

The revised Constitutions and Statutes have introduced many important changes concerning the office of Provincial Director. The texts describe clearly and precisely his mission and his duties. In the new presentation the pastoral aspect of his mission is highlighted: he is to promote the Vincentian spirit, be attentive to the formation of the Sisters, visit the local communities, be available to the Sisters, etc. (cf. C. 75b).

Article 75a describes the office of a Provincial Director of the Daughters of Charity as *“a Vincentian animation and accompaniment, in collaboration with the Visitatrice and her Council.”* So his service does not include a governing role, even though he is asked to collaborate in the governing of the Province, in the process of discernment and to give his support to decisions taken. Of course, in this collaboration a good relationship with the Visitatrice and her Council is absolutely essential. As he is not a Superior in the Company he is not listed among the Superiors whom the Daughters of Charity are bound by vow to obey as stated in C.31a of the Constitutions.

He is appointed by the Superior General whom he represents in the exercise of his duties that are determined by the Constitutions and Statutes (cf. C.75b). Let us emphasise in passing this statement that the Provincial Director represents the Superior General, because this is something new. As the Superior General’s role in the Company is one of spiritual animation and helping the Sisters to carry out their apostolic mission (cf. C.64b), the Director’s role is of the same nature. He is also asked to *“promote the Vincentian spirit”* and *“be attentive to the formation of the Sisters”* (C.75b; St. 56f). The fact that he is a Priest of the Mission presupposes that he knows this spirit, and that the mission he has been given impels him to promote and be concerned about the formation of the Sisters.

Statute 46 of the 1983 version stated that the Director *“assists”* at Council meetings and *“presides”* over the Provincial Assembly. Article 75b introduces two changes: not only does he assist but he also *“participates”* both in the Council meetings and in the General Assembly, but both of these are presided over by the Visitatrice (cf.

C.86b). It is a matter of active participation: he intervenes when he has some contribution to make or when his advice is called for.

The Provincial Director should “*visit the local communities*” (cf. C.75b; St.56d). Canon Law requires Superiors to visit communities (cf. CCL,c.628&1). These are canonical visits, prescribed by Canon Law. Since the Director is not a Superior the visits he makes are not strictly speaking canonical. They are a duty prescribed by the Company’s proper law (cf. C.75b; St.56d). The new Directory calls them “*pastoral visits by the Director*”. It is important that all the Sisters should be aware of the Director’s important role in the Province, as set out in the new *Directory for Provincial Directors*.

“*Everything that pertains to vows in the Company is within his competence*” (these words refer to the Superior General) (C.64c). Since the Director is his representative in the Province, the Constitutions give him the right to “*grant poverty permissions related to the personal goods of the Sisters*” (cf. C.75b). Asking poverty permissions is a feature of the Daughters of Charity’s vow of poverty (cf. C.30a) and it is a good opportunity for them to reflect with the Director on their life style and on the “*good works*” for which the Sisters use “*their personal goods.*” (cf. C.30d,e).

Statute 56a describes the process of appointing a Provincial Director by the Superior General and the duration of his office. The option of appointing a Sub-Director (cf St. 56b) applies in special circumstances, as for example, in Belgium. At present this is the only Province that has both a Director and a Sub-Director, and that is because the Sisters in that country speak two very different languages.

Statute 56c lists nine important points on which the Director should give the Council his opinion. The Council members are not obliged to follow his advice but he should be asked for his opinion and he should give it. These nine points refer to important stages in Sisters’ lives, authorisation for a Sister to live outside a house of the Company, dismissal or readmission, use of the Province’s goods in important matters. The Director participates in meetings of the Council but he is not a member of it: consequently he does not vote, but by virtue of the mission entrusted to him, he collaborates, he helps the Council to discern and to make appropriate decisions.

### **The Councillors**

The changes introduced in article 76 and Statute 57 of the new Constitutions as opposed to the 1983 ones, are important. Previously, it was the Superior General who appointed the Provincial Councillors after consulting the Sisters of the Province and with the consent of the Superioress General with her Council. Now, article 76 of the Constitutions states, “*The Provincial Councillors are designated by the Superioress General with her Council.*” The other change refers to the way these Councillors are to be designated. It is the Province that proposes this method to the Superior General with her Council for approval; designation after consultation or by election. In the latter case, the decision has to be confirmed by the Superioress General (cf. C.76a; St.57a).

As Councillors they do not have a governing role, but they are there to help the Visitatrice to implement the Constitutions and Statutes in the Province, to let the Sisters feel they are supported, to see that the different works and activities contribute to accomplishing the aims of the Company and that the Vincentian spirit is very much alive in the Province (cf. C.76b).

The wording of Statute 57b requires some explanation. The Visitatrice is designated for six years and the Councillors are designated at first for the same period of time. When the Visitatrice's mandate comes to an end, so does that of the Councillors. The Visitatrice may be designated for a further three years and so can the Councillors, too. It can happen that in the designation of the first Council, there could be a Sister who had already been a Councillor for six years with the previous Visitatrice. In this case, that Sister can only be designated for three years because she cannot serve for more than nine consecutive years. If the Visitatrice finishes her term of office after six years, with the new Visitatrice and her new Council there might be Sisters who had already been Councillors for six years in the previous Council. These, then, will be designated for a further three years only.

Provincial Councillors exercise their office at Council meetings where they give their advice or their consent with regard to the matters being dealt with. The other duties they might take on are delegated to them by the Visitatrice who, in view of decentralisation, and for other reasons, will try to delegate, especially in the matter of encouraging and supporting different branches of the apostolate in the Province (St.57c).

### **The Provincial Treasurer**

*“The Visitatrice is responsible for the movable and immovable goods of the Province”* (St. 54e). However, it is the Provincial Treasurer who *“administers the temporal affairs of the Province”* but always under the direction of the Visitatrice with her Council (cf. C.77a). The Provincial Treasurer is appointed by the Visitatrice with her Council and she transmits this appointment to the Superioress General (cf. C.77b). Previously, she was appointed by the Superioress General and the appointment was confirmed by the Superior General. She may also be a Councillor if designated for that office (cf. C.77c).

Statute 58 gives us further clarification. It lists the duties of the Provincial Treasurer: she is appointed for six years and may be reappointed for two additional three-year terms (St. 58a). Whenever there is a question of economic or financial matters, as well as legal affairs having economic consequences, she participates in the Council meeting with a right to vote (St.58b). She gives a report to the Visitatrice and her Council on the management of the goods of the Province (St. 58c). She guides the Sister Servants and the Treasurers of local communities (if there are any) in the administration of the goods of the Company and gives the Visitatrice and her Council a report on the financial management of the local communities (St.58d). At the request of the Sisters, she may advise them about the management of their personal goods (St. 85c). It is helpful for the Provincial Treasurer to be assisted by a Finance Commission (St. 58f)

usually made up of lay people and Sisters who have experience in financial matters. As with other offices in the Company, the Provincial Treasurer can also refer to the *Guide for Provincial Treasurers*.

### **The Provincial Secretary**

Another important office in the Province is that of Provincial Secretary. Her office is to help the Visitatrice in her administration (cf. C.78a). She is appointed by the Visitatrice with her Council and the appointment is transmitted to the Superioress General (cf. 78a; St. 54c). She may also be a Councillor if designated for that office (cf. C.78b). Statute 59 lists the various aspects of her office.

### **The Provincial Council**

*“The Provincial Council is composed of the Councillors assembled with the Visitatrice”* (cf. C.79a). It usually meets once a month (St. 60a). The Visitatrice prepares the agenda, presides over it and conducts the discussion. The Director takes part in it (cf. C.79b). In the absence of the Visitatrice it is the Provincial Assistant who convokes and conducts the Council meeting (cf. 79d). At least half the number of Councillors must be present (cf. C.79c).

At their meetings the members of the Provincial Council deliberate on matters within their own competence, as well as those to be presented for the approval of the Superioress General with her Council (cf. C.79b). The Councillors give their opinion or their consent. Statute 60 lists the matters on which the Visitatrice must ask *“the opinion”* of the Council but she is not obliged to follow the advice (cf. CCL c.127 &2, № 2). There are other matters for which the Visitatrice needs the *“consent”* of the Council (cf. St. 60c). As you will have noticed, these are more important questions (concerning the different stages of the life of a Daughter of Charity; the vows, absence from the community, appointments, opening and closing of houses, financial matters) than those mentioned in Statute 60b, for which the Visitatrice only needs the opinion of the Councillors. For matters requiring the consent of the General Council, the Visitatrice must follow the opinion expressed by the absolute majority. The Director and the Visitatrice do not vote. If the result is a tie, the Visitatrice may settle the question (cf. St. 60d).

### **The Provincial Plan**

The Constitutions and Statutes of 1983 asked each Province to specify *“its missionary priorities and the principal features of its way of life”* and to draw up its Provincial Plan. Were these meant to be different documents? The Constitutions of 2004 clarify this by stating that it is in the Provincial Plan that the missionary priorities and general lines of action are specified (cf. C. 80).

In Statute 62 we are given further guidelines – some of them very new – to develop: fidelity to the charism of the Founders and to the spirit of the Constitutions and

Statutes in accordance with the orientations of the Company and of the Church; taking into account the socio-cultural context, the realities of the Province and the contributions of the local communities. The Provincial Plan is envisaged as an instrument to dynamise the Province's response to specific appeals of the poor. It must be approved by the Superioress General and her Council (cf. St.62).

### **The Provincial norms**

The texts of the revised Constitutions show us how much the Company is in tune with some features of our modern culture: inculturation, subsidiarity, unity in diversity, for example. One of the ways in which sensitivity to these issues could be passed on to others, and an appropriate response made by each Province, would be to incorporate them into the Provincial Norms (cf. St.61a). This subject was debated at length at the last General Assembly. It was approved as a possibility, not as a matter of obligation: *"Each Province may propose Provincial Norms.....These Norms are submitted for approval to the Superioress General with her Council"* (St. 61a;cf. C.66e).

The Constitutions and Statutes require each Province to propose to the Superioress General the method by which the Sisters will designate the Visitatrice and the Provincial Councillors (cf. C.73b; 76a; St.54; 57a). When this proposed method is approved it will become a Provincial Norm just as other Provincial decisions can, and these may be included in an appendix to the Provincial Plan.

How are we to understand correctly the meaning of the phrase: Each Province may propose Provincial Norms? (cf. St.61a). In this case, who constitutes the Province? It is all the Sisters, but we have to keep in mind that after she has consulted the whole Province, the Visitatrice with her Council has to practise discernment and then send the Norms to the Superioress General with her Council, for approval. Statute 61b specifies the way that these Norms are to be prepared: *"As a general rule, after discussion during the Provincial Assembly; in other cases, by the Visitatrice with her Council, after consultation with the Sisters"*.

This document has many juridical aspects because it deals with matters that follow the rules of Universal Law, or because these rules need to be specified by the Company's Proper Law. There are so many juridical points dealt with, that in order to maintain a certain balance, we need to keep in mind the *"General Principles of Government"* (cf. C.60-63), and the explanations of these given in the previous study document because they are applicable to the three levels of government: General, Provincial and local. So the charismatic elements will give spiritual depth and meaning to the juridical ones, and the juridical elements will support the charismatic ones. Both will contribute to making authority a service whose role is to preserve and stimulate the Company's fidelity to its spirit and its particular mission in the Church.

### **SOME QUESTIONS TO HELP OUR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND COMMUNITY SHARING ( AT LOCAL OR PROVINCIAL LEVEL)**

\* Compare the revised Constitutions with those of 1983. Note the changes made in these articles that are studied in this document.

\*Relationship between Provincial government and the local communities: which aspects should Provincial government pay attention to in relation to the local communities? Which aspects should local communities pay attention to in relation to Provincial government?

\* Reinforcing the sense of belonging to the Province means reinforcing the sense of belonging to the Company. What can we do, as individuals and as a local community, to develop this sense of belonging to the Province?

\* Do you find consultations a way of expressing co-responsibility and participation?

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*Director General*  
 Father Fernando Quintano, CM

### FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Guidelines for the monthly retreat

***“How great is your name through all the earth!”***

(Ps. 8,2)

The monthly retreat day is a green space amid the countless activities of every month, (cf. C.21d) a garden round which our life can take a stroll under the watchful and infinitely compassionate eyes of God: a brief respite from our service of those who are poor. It is an “unproductive” day. It only serves to remind us of the One who sustains our life and it brings to our minds the meaning of the work we do every day.

Psalm 8 is a hymn to God the Creator (*“I look up at your heavens, made with your fingers”...*) We all surely have in our mind a favourite spot, a place of our dreams, a pathway that brings us close to luxuriant nature or carries us across fields and fields to where the horizon meets up with the sky. Recalling such scenes, we can make a day’s retreat and so feel God’s benevolent presence. Nature has always been one of the books that best speak to us about God. All we need to do is to be able to read.

### **NATURE CHALLENGES US**

As a rule, the pace at which we live does not give us much time to ponder on essential questions. Some of these surface when we contemplate nature or when we

make a retreat. In fact, a retreat is very similar to a place of natural beauty or to a walk in the country where we are surrounded by silence, our minds become calm and we are able to think of “other things.” A retreat is a genuine ecological space.

At first, nature does not answer our questions, but rather challenges us by its obstinate, mute presence, and the cyclic rhythm of its seasons. The brief sequence of a day is repeated every 24 hours. Every 365 days, the long sequence of a year begins again. Spring arrives, to be followed by summer; autumn ripens and finally winter ends the cycle by lowering the temperature to the level of death, so that the spring which follows appears to be a new birth. When we were a rural society these rhythms of nature dictated the pace of human life; times for work and for rest were determined by light and darkness. Even the liturgy in former days was influenced by these rhythms. The modern world has broken these nature-imposed rhythms.

However, when we contemplate nature, when we immerse ourselves in Creation, some fundamental questions come to us: who made the sea? Why do the stars exist? How was this countryside shaped? What is the meaning of human life? Why does every living creature have a limited existence? Is there another life?

This is our main concern: to find out whether hidden behind our environment, which often takes our breath away by its impenetrable beauty, God exists. To enjoy the beauty of creation we need to dwell often on questions like these. Let us not forget that if our faith believes in the God of the world, it is logical that we should seek God in the world; that we cannot conceive of a creation bereft of his presence. The “inevitable” questions allow us to contemplate nature in a serious way, from the inside.

## **NATURE AWAKES IN US FAITH AND JOY**

Everything that exists (a river, a flower, a stone, a tree, a bird) is an authentic letter signed by God. When the unprejudiced mind contemplates nature it comes to the conclusion that it is God who created the sun, moon, stars, fish and animals. It is God who breathed life into human beings. Afterwards he looked at what he had made and found it “*very good*”(Gn 1, 31). Everything created is made in the image of God. But through the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s presence in the world is even stronger than that in creation. So we can say with Saint Paul that the whole of creation shares in the glory of the Risen Lord.

But to discover God it is not enough to be a lover of nature, to appreciate a sunset or to have frequent walks in the mountains. One also needs to have a sacramental understanding, that is to say, the ability to see that every created reality reveals the mystery of God. We have to go beyond the material nature of things. In this way, the most ordinary actions (breathing, walking on wet grass, drinking a glass of water, looking at the stars, cutting a hedge, watering the garden, cultivating a rose tree, planting tomatoes, swimming in the sea, picking strawberries, looking out of the window and seeing the rain) can become genuine faith experiences. They will be this in the measure that they fill us with deep joy. The logic of this is obvious; when someone encounters



God the first effect of this is joy, and the second is serenity. So anyone who contemplates nature in depth will surely enjoy these gifts.

### **NATURE CAUSES PRAISE TO SPRING TO OUR LIPS**

The person who recognises God in creation is able to savour and to praise the Creator's works. Francis of Assisi reached this state after a period of intense purification. In his "Canticle of Creation" he praised the God of creation for all his works: the sun, ("*symbol of You the Most High*"), the moon ("*pale reflection of His light*"), the stars ("*radiant, precious and beautiful*") the earth ("*filled with blessings*")....

We praise God, not only when we recognise his glory reflected in the beauty of his works, but also when we strive to "*prolong, with our puny hands what his powerful hands created*". God's creation is in a constant state of evolution and it is also encapsulated in human creativity because creation is not just seen in nature but also in culture. A city with its skyscrapers, motorways, suburbs, its noise and neon lighting, is the symbol of human culture. There, too, even if it proves more difficult, we are asked to recognise the imprint of God and rejoice in his presence. So we could compose a modern version of Francis's "Canticle". We might say, for example: Blessed are you, Lord, for the motor car (*which gives agility to our human legs*), for the photocopier (*which is precise, exact, clean, silent*), for pills (*so small and yet so efficacious in getting rid of headaches and heartburn*), for the washing machine, the electric stove and the microwave (*which make life easier for us*), for the telephone, for the bed-rest that raises up the elderly, for the cranes that are used in buildings. For our sister ("telly") with its wonderfully clear and gay colour, be praised O Lord! For our young brother, the modern computer, which is useful and fascinating, praise to you O Lord!

Creation is more than the sum of things created by God and/or human beings. Creation is also the human person. A human being is special, the "king of creation", the cherry on the cake of the world. "*You have made him little less than a god*" says psalm 8, line 6. In the order of created things, God's favourite works are his most vulnerable and defenceless children; the Poor. If the human being is "the image of God" then this is most true of those who are poor. Through our contact with poor people, a prayer of praise and petition should spring spontaneously and naturally to our lips. At this point in creation, Francis and Vincent are at one.

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

\*Read and meditate on some passages from the Bible: Psalm 8; Dn 3, 57-88 (Canticle of the three young men), Mt 6, 25-34 or Lk 12, 22-34).

\* Do I find it easy to discover God in nature and in things created by men and women? Do these creation realities lead me into prayer?

\* Does my relationship with poor people lead me to God?

Father Javier Alvarez  
*Director General*

## PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

### **Migration**

### **in the light of the Scriptures**

Notes taken from a conference given by Cardinal Hamao

#### **INTRODUCTION**

I would like to reflect with you, first of all, on 3 passages from Scripture which do not deal precisely with the subject of migration but which seem to me essential.

#### **The human race constitutes one organic whole**

The first passage is taken from the chapter on creation, in Genesis. For five days God filled the earth with all that it contains and on the sixth day He created man. In Genesis 1, 27-28 we read: *“God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, and all living reptiles on the earth.’”* A little further on the bible text adds *“The man named the woman Eve (Life) because she was the mother of all who live.”*<sup>1</sup>

Addressing the Areopagus, Saint Paul said, *“From one single stock he not only created the whole human race so that they should occupy the entire earth, but he decreed how long each nation should flourish and what the boundaries of its territories should be...”*<sup>2</sup>

These passages imply that the “human race constitutes one organic whole; this unity springs from the fact that all people share a common origin. Later in his discourse Saint Paul affirms that God is the Father of all humankind. *“It is in him that we live, and move, and exist, as indeed some of your writers have said, ‘We are all his children.’”*<sup>3</sup>

Since every person is a child of God, the human race can be regarded as one family and all men and women as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and our brother. From this point of view we can say that migrants or non-migrants, we are all one and the same family. All the members of a family have the same right to share the family’s goods. This is the basic foundation of “the universal destination of goods”

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<sup>1</sup> Gn 3.20

<sup>2</sup> Ac, 17, 26

<sup>3</sup> Ac, 17, 28-29

concept that underpins the Church's social teaching. Consequently, human solidarity and charity should not exclude anyone from the rich variety of peoples and cultures found in the world's nations.<sup>4</sup>

In our relationships with migrants and displaced persons, the first thing we have to bear in mind is that they are our brothers and sisters, and, as such, we have to show them affection and respect. They are not just some needy people whom we are graciously showing a kindness to, they are members of our family and we have a duty to share with them what we have.

### **Christ present in the lowliest people**

In the gospel account of the Last Judgment, Christ considers as done to himself whatever is done to every human being, and particularly the most defenceless. In serving migrants we are serving Christ himself. He regards our actions, our thoughts and our attitudes to migrants as being directed to himself.

### **One single Body in Christ**

We who are baptised belong to one another in a much more intimate way than do members of a human family. *"We are all part of the same body,"* says St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians.<sup>5</sup>

All Christians constitute a single entity, the Church, which is not an association but a union of people. It forms one body. This is the destiny to which God is leading all humankind, *"to bring everything together under Christ"*<sup>6</sup> in his Body. If I do not look after the migrant I do not look after the Body of Christ and consequently I do not look after myself. Since this body is the Body of Christ, it is Christ himself whom I care for or do not care for.

## **MIGRATION: A DISPLACEMENT AND AN OPPORTUNITY**

### **In the book of Genesis**

1. – Migration is a very ancient phenomenon which dates back to the garden of Eden. We all know that at a certain point in time, Adam and Eve left the garden, but the reasons for their departure are interpreted differently in two biblical texts.

In Genesis 1, 28-29 we read that after creating man and woman, *"God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth..... See, I give you all the seed-bearing plants that are upon the whole earth, and all the trees with seed-bearing fruit: this shall be your food."*

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. CCC 361

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor 12-13, 27

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eph 1, 10

Later on, after the Flood, God reiterated this command to Noah: *“Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth....Every living and crawling thing shall provide food for you, no less than the foliage of plants. I give you everything.”*<sup>7</sup>

In these two passages migration might be interpreted as part of a God-given mission to “dominate” the earth, though obviously without disturbing the harmony of nature. Man and his descendants had to leave the Garden of Eden in order to go all over the planet and populate it, to become God’s instruments in conserving, developing, and transforming it until at last all creation was unified.

2. – In Chapter 3 of Genesis, God says to the man and woman, *“You must not eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden”*,<sup>8</sup> but they disobey his command. God upbraids them and tells the man, *“Accursed be the soil because of you. With suffering shall you get your food from it every day of your life. It shall yield you brambles and thistles, and you shall eat wild plants.”*<sup>9</sup> *“So Yahweh expelled him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he had been taken.”*<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, migration and exile are seen as a punishment from God for man’s disobedience. Man is expelled from the garden of Eden, has to suffer and toil laboriously for his daily bread.

There is a link between this and another event, one which took place in a valley in the country of Shinar, called Babel. The people who *“spoke the same language,”*<sup>11</sup> said to one another, *“Let us build ourselves a tower with its top reaching heaven.”*<sup>12</sup> Because of this foolish and vain action, Yahweh confuses their language and scatters them over the face of the earth. The building of the town is interrupted.<sup>13</sup> This migration is clearly a punishment from Yahweh.

What conclusions can we draw from these two ways of looking at migration?

1- It is seen as an instrument for the accomplishing of God’s designs on the human race, and however unfaithful we may be, and whatever mistakes we may make, God’s will is always accomplished in the end. He does not allow our errors to thwart his plans but in his infinite mercy he doesn’t hesitate to use even these errors to bring his plans to fruition.

2. –Much suffering is often involved in fulfilling God’s Providential plan for us (cf. the plan of Salvation) but in the end God always emerges triumphant.

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<sup>7</sup> Gn. 9, 1

<sup>8</sup> Gn. 3,3

<sup>9</sup> Gn. 3, 17-18

<sup>10</sup> Gn.3, 23-24

<sup>11</sup> Gn, 11, 1

<sup>12</sup> Gn. 11,4

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gn 11, 7-9

These two ways of looking at migration are often found in today's phenomenon of migration.

### *1. The negative aspect*

Migration causes much suffering for those who leave for other lands. Even when people choose to move from their homeland this still means being uprooted. Migrants leave their normal surroundings to settle in another milieu where the language, customs, traditions, culture, mentality and food are different. There are also new ways of behaving and acting and these can be misunderstood or interpreted wrongly. Many people are forced to leave their homes because of war, persecution, famine, natural disasters.... Other migrants who do not find themselves in such extreme situations, leave their homeland because they are unable to live there with dignity, enjoy a good quality of life and security. These people are looking for a better future and better living conditions.

### *2. The positive aspect*

Migration is the pathway of hope – the search for a better future for the individual and his family, an opportunity to escape from danger and to regain one's human rights. It is an opportunity to live in freedom, to profit from one's talents or abilities and to share these with others. Persons who have the task of giving pastoral support must not only offer material and spiritual help to migrants, but must also help these people to give of themselves and put their skills at the service of others so that they may fully accomplish God's plans for them.

## **The migration of the Patriarchs**

The itinerant nature of the chosen people is particularly evident in the pact that God made with Abraham: Go, leave your country, your family and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you.

Yahweh later appears to Abraham's son, Isaac, to guide him on his migration journey and to tell him where he has to settle: *"There was a famine in the land....Then Isaac went to Abimelech, the Philistine king at Gerar. Yahweh appeared to him and said, 'Do not go down into Egypt; stay in the land I shall tell you of. Remain for the present in this land, and I will be with you and bless you. For it is to you and your descendants that I will give all these lands'....So Isaac stayed at Gerar."*<sup>14</sup>

Then Yahweh appears to Isaac's son Jacob, but in a dream. When he was on his way to look for a wife, the sun was setting; he took up a stone to use as a pillow and fell asleep. God said to him, *"I will give to you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants shall be like the specks of dust on the ground; you shall spread to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south, and all the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you."*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gn 26, 1-6

<sup>15</sup> Gn. 28, 10-11, 13-15

Yahweh calls Abraham and asks him to leave the land of his fathers, promising to make of him a great nation. In this God has a plan. To fulfil this design, Yahweh wants to make a new people, a people who will recognise Him as their God and walk in the way of his commandments.

### **The exodus from Egypt<sup>16</sup>**

For Israel and the chosen people, the Exodus was the most important event in their history; it was marked by their departure from Egypt and their wandering in the desert. Once again it is a matter of migration, the migration of a whole people freed from slavery. In the midst of all their trials Yahweh continues to be with them ((Ex 13, 21). For 40 years Yahweh leads his people through the desert, trying to fashion them into a new people, a people that belongs to him. But this people does not keep faith with him. In spite of everything, Yahweh keeps his promise to his people and leads them towards the Promised Land.

### **A New People**

Migration today is an important factor in the melting pot of cultures, religions and beliefs. This can be an enriching experience when contact between different peoples leads them to be open to one another. But it can also create tensions because of the demands made by a new local identity.<sup>17</sup> In this situation God journeys with the migrants in that new local community, in order to accomplish his designs for the human race, that is, to create a new people, not because they are the descendants of Abraham but because they form one single Body in Jesus Christ. This new people has a new commandment: the commandment of Love, given by God's Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

Today, an important aspect of the task of those engaged in pastoral work is to journey alongside migrants so that these may find their place in this new people of God because, even if they do not know it, that is the divine destiny to which every person is called.

### **Catholic migrants**

It is important, therefore, that we teach Catholic migrants about the Word of God in order to help them to put the Gospel into practice in their lives.<sup>19</sup> In being prepared for the sacraments they find the strength to live their vocation of baptised persons in a world that does not make it easy for people to live a truly Christian life. If they are well

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<sup>16</sup> EMCC 14

<sup>17</sup> Cf. EMCC 35

<sup>18</sup> Mt 22, 34-40, Rm 13,10

<sup>19</sup> Cf. EMCC, JPR Art.1§1

instructed and supported, Catholic migrants can also be witnesses and evangelisers in places where Christianity is not known.<sup>20</sup>

## **Dialogue**

In a world of migrants, Christians from all the Churches and ecclesial communities live side by side. They are in contact with non-Christians and people who have other religious beliefs. In the past this was a cause of tension and some traces of it still remain today. The best antidote is to have dialogue at every level: ecumenical dialogue, inter-religious dialogue, inter-cultural dialogue, dialogue with non-believers. This process leads people to discover values they hold in common and it promotes respect for differences.<sup>21</sup> It is another task to be undertaken by pastoral workers (cf. *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* № 56-59)

## **Proclaiming the Gospel**

Dialogue, however, cannot be based on religious indifferentism.<sup>22</sup> As Christians we have a duty to bear clear witness to the hope that is within us.<sup>23</sup> So, Catholic migrants should be prepared not only to effectively promote dialogue, but also to respectfully proclaim the gospel.<sup>24</sup>

An essential part of the work of people engaged in pastoral ministry to migrants is to collaborate in bringing about the fulfilment of God's plan for humankind; to make them a new people, His people, one single people in Jesus Christ.

## **Welcoming the stranger**

THE OLD TESTAMENT often speaks about welcoming strangers. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of this is the account of what happened at Membre<sup>25</sup> when Abraham offered hospitality to the three mysterious young men who halted near his tent.

A privilege! Abraham's words of welcome show that welcoming a stranger is a privilege (Gn 18). Then one of the strangers promises that Abraham's wife, Sarah, will bear a son, and the following year Isaac is born.

It also means protecting the stranger. When Abraham and Lot offered hospitality to two men from Sodom, the people of that city demanded that the men be sent back. Abraham replied, "*Do nothing to these men for they have come under the shadow of my roof.*"<sup>26</sup> Welcoming a stranger means protecting him: "*You must not oppress the*

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. EMCC, 34-36; 56-59; 69

<sup>21</sup> Cf. EMCC, 34-36; 56-59; 69

<sup>22</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, № 56

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Cf. EMCC 3,9, 59, 69

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Gn 18

<sup>26</sup> Gn, 19, 8

*stranger, for you yourselves were once strangers in Egypt.”<sup>27</sup> “If a stranger lives with you in your land do not molest him. You must count him as one of your own countrymen and love him as yourself – for you were once strangers yourselves in Egypt.”<sup>28</sup> “Yahweh loves the stranger and gives him food and clothing. Love the stranger, then, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”<sup>29</sup> Yahweh sees strangers as guests and He asks the Israelites to show understanding for their vulnerable situation since they had had the same experience in Egypt.*

THE NEW TESTAMENT goes even further. Christ raised the standard of loving by giving the supreme example of love. *“Love one another, just as I have loved you,”<sup>30</sup> and “A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.”<sup>31</sup> We know from his suffering and his death on the Cross just how much Christ loved us. This is the level of love he expects from his disciples, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike.”<sup>32</sup>*

## CONCLUSION

I would like to end my reflections on migration in the light of the Scriptures by reminding you of the parable of the Good Samaritan. When a man asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus told this parable. And who is shown to be a neighbour to the unfortunate victim of bandits? It is not the Levite or the one who assists him in church services but a travelling Samaritan, a migrant from a nation that was hostile to the Jews. What is this parable saying to us who work in the pastoral ministry to migrants? It is saying that the only thing that counts in the Kingdom of Heaven is Love, and that migrants may well be better than we are in showing love. Our work with migrants must allow them to express fully the love that the Holy Spirit has put into their hearts.

Cardinal Stephen Fumio Hamao  
*President of the Pontifical Council  
 for Pastoral Ministry to Migrants and Itinerants*

## PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

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<sup>27</sup> Ex 22, 20

<sup>28</sup> Lv 19, 33-34

<sup>29</sup> Dt 10, 18-19

<sup>30</sup> Jn, 13, 34

<sup>31</sup> Jn 15, 13

<sup>32</sup> Mt 5, 44-45



## **Migration in the light of the Church's social teaching**

Notes taken from the conference given by Cardinal Hamao

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Church's social teaching explains events in human history in the light of the Gospel and mediates between the message of the Gospel and the problems found in people's everyday lives. It sensitises people to what is truly good for them and for society as a whole in keeping with God's designs for them, and it urges them to act accordingly.

The Church's social teaching presents certain fundamental principles:

- The transcendent dignity of the human person both as an individual and as a member of society. It is this dignity that gives a person human rights and responsibilities
- The dignity of human work
- The common good
- The "universal destination" of goods
- The principle of subsidiarity
- The need for everyone to work for the common good
- The practice of solidarity

### **MIGRATION AND THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING**

Let us now try to analyse some ethical aspects of migration from this particular perspective.

In my first talk I mentioned the different reasons for migration: people unable to live in safety in their own country, poverty, violation of human rights, inequality of opportunity, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small group, war, violence, persecution, famine, natural disasters. In such circumstances people begin to move away from their homeland. This brings us to my first point: the right not to emigrate.

#### **The right not to emigrate**

In *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII affirmed the right of every person to remain in his or her own country; the right to grow up in the land where they were born. All forms of migration involve suffering because there is always an uprooting: different mentality, different ways of acting and speaking, different food....

The fact that only some citizens are obliged to emigrate, points to injustice and social inequality. Not everyone has access to this world's goods which are meant to be shared by all. On the World Day for Migrants and Refugees in 2004, John Paul II

declared, “*The right not to emigrate is the right to live in peace and dignity in one’s own country. With careful administration at local and national level, fairer trade and the support of international cooperation, it is possible for every country to guarantee its people, not just freedom of expression and of movement, but also the means of satisfying basic needs such as food, health care, work, housing and education. When these needs are not met many people are obliged to live in a situation where the only option for them is to emigrate.*”

In 1974, the Pope’s message on world migration gave a strong reminder to countries about their responsibilities to avoid people having to emigrate.

The first thing pastoral workers have to do is to supply information. In fact, many would-be migrants dream of going to a country flowing with milk and honey, an image they gain from television or from false information given by recruiting agencies. So it is very important to give potential migrants correct information about the situation in the country they are going to, about genuine opportunities and imaginary ones, as well as the dangers they can encounter. Prevention is better than cure.

### **The right to emigrate and to immigrate**

Unfortunately, we know that there are occasions when it is necessary for people to leave their homeland. The International Charter on Human Rights says, “*Every person has the right to leave a country, even his own land, and to return to it.*” *Pacem in Terris* emphasises a person’s right to emigrate to another country and to settle there. So it is the duty of a country to accept these immigrants insofar as the good of the country allows this. This does not include the departure of people who are subject to criminal investigation.

### **Welcome and solidarity**

The Church thinks that the more prosperous nations have a duty, “*to welcome, as far as this is possible, strangers who come looking for security and for gaining a livelihood which is not possible in their country of origin.*”<sup>33</sup> This is part of the concept of the universal destination of goods; a person in need has the right to seek these goods anywhere they are to be found.

In *Populo Progressio*, Paul VI asked governments to welcome migrants and he encouraged families and institutions to join in this welcome.

*Erga migrantes caritas Christi*<sup>34</sup> says, “*The entire Church in the host country must feel concerned and engaged regarding immigrants.*”

With the help of social and pastoral agencies, the local people should be made aware of the complex problems of migration and the need to overcome suspicion and prejudice against foreigners. We have to find appropriate ways of helping Christians to

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<sup>33</sup> CCC 2241

<sup>34</sup> No. 41

develop a sense of welcome. This welcome is based on our love of Christ who said, *“Whatever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do it to me.”* (Mt 25, 40).

### **The right of States to protect their borders**

The Church recognises that States have the right to protect their borders and control the entry of people into their territory, in order to protect their sovereignty, security, people’s basic rights and liberties. This is in line with defending the common good. However, when it is up to States to make practical decisions in controlling immigration, it is important to remember the principle that migrants must always be treated with respect. With regard to controlling the flow of migration, concern for the common good must still keep this principle in mind. The challenge lies in finding a way to give everyone the welcome that is due to every human being, especially those in need, and at the same time, to recognise what has to be done so that people can live in dignity and peace.

### **Illegal immigration**

Stringent immigration laws and restrictive policies, as well as the limited access that migrants have to social services, have not discouraged international migration but have, on the contrary, contributed to the growth of illegal immigration. Many people have recourse to people who will smuggle them into a country, often paying huge sums of money for this and consequently getting into debt, or else mortgaging or selling the property they have in their own country. In spite of paying out so much money, many people perish on the high seas or on journeys through the desert.

People trying to enter another country illegally may be deceived with regard to the employment they were promised. They could be exploited, be drawn into prostitution, moonlighting, or become victims of modern forms of slavery or even have their organs extracted. Without realising it, they become victims of human trafficking. Illegal immigrants are in a very vulnerable situation. Since they are not in their own country and their country of destination does not recognise them, there is nobody to guarantee that their human rights or their right to work will be respected. Protecting the rights of illegal immigrants would be an important step towards stopping the migrant being exploited and abused.

However, as regards basic human rights, the International Convention for the Protection of the Human Rights of all migrant workers and their families does not make a distinction between legal and illegal immigrants. People who are not legal immigrants need help with living expenses and, whenever possible, help in legalising their situation. If an association gives accommodation to illegal immigrants they do not have in mind an act of “civil disobedience”, their aim is simply to defend people whose human rights have been violated. The Church is asked to call on governments to provide more appropriate legislation. Sometimes there is no legal way of regularising a person’s situation or of their returning to their own country. Solidarity urges us to find a solution to cases like this.

To give you an example, in 1998, during the 4<sup>th</sup> World Congress for Ministry to Migrants and Refugees, John Paul II made a passionate plea for something to be done for the many people who are illegal immigrants. We should note that some Bishops' Conferences took up that call in their respective countries.

### **In the host country**

The Church's social teaching shows great concern for migrant workers, particularly with regard to the serious problems they encounter: discrimination, xenophobia, deception in the matter of work contracts or working conditions...The Church's message to governments is clear: they must protect all workers from these evils, deal with immigration at source, and try to find a just and global economy.

### **The woman migrant**

One of the features of migration today is the increased number of female migrants. Most of these are employed in domestic work. This work is often precarious and does not provide social insurance cover. So giving legal recognition to "the rights of domestic workers" would be a step towards protecting these women. In some parts of the world, there is even greater need for protecting women's rights. A migrant woman often needs to be doubly protected for the simple reason that she is both a migrant and a woman.

### **Migrant families**

Included in the right to emigrate, is the right of families to emigrate for their physical, spiritual and religious welfare. It also includes people's right to remain with their families. John Paul made a strong protest against systems that perpetuate the enforced separation of spouses, or of parents from their children.

The Church's pastoral care juxtaposes the need to defend the family's values, its freedom of movement and the right to make decisions, its right to bring up its family according to its own traditions, its cultural and religious values, and the other rights listed in the Charter of Family Rights. The Church's social teaching says that States have the duty to ensure that immigrant families have the same guarantees as those accorded to their own citizens. Christian communities in the host country are asked to practise solidarity and to share the burden carried by immigrant families. The Church is the family of all oppressed people.

### **Defence of migrants' rights**

The pastoral worker must intervene to defend the rights of migrants when these rights are not being respected. The abuse of human dignity and human rights brings moral suffering that is wounding to the whole human family. The Declaration on Human Rights states that all human beings are born free and are equal in dignity and before the law.

## **Mixture of traditions, cultures and religions**

Migration doesn't simply cause problems, it is also to be seen as opportunity, because it brings together people of different nationalities, religions, customs, history, language, traditions.... This melting pot of cultures, religions and beliefs can lead to mutual enrichment but most often it is a source of tensions. It is only through dialogue that people can recognise that they have common values and that they can come to respect differences in an atmosphere of genuine understanding.

The Church's social teaching calls for the cultural practices of migrants to be respected and accepted insofar as they do not run counter to the universal values inherent in natural law or contravene basic human rights. Religion is also concerned with culture which is closely linked to the migrant's personal and spiritual identity. Experience teaches us that the first step towards integration in the local Church is when migrants feel "at home" there, whether this be in the matter of language, liturgy, spirituality, or particular traditions... This path of ecclesial integration is enriching for God's Church, it is the fruit of the dynamic reality of the Incarnation of the Son of God. Migrants make their contribution to the catholicity or universality of the Church: they promote openness to what is different and a life of communion. The transformation of monocultural societies into multicultural societies may perhaps be a sign of God's living presence at the heart of history and in the human community, and as such it is a call for people to develop a culture of solidarity so as to create, together, a genuine communion of persons.

## **CONCLUSION**

During his pontificate, John Paul II delivered numerous messages about the dignity of the human person, his social relationships and his culture:

- People who are obliged to emigrate; refugees, and the violation of their most basic rights (1979, 1984)
- Emigrant families and the challenges they have to face (1980, 1986, 1993)
- Promoting the cultural identity of migrants (1981, 1985, 1991, 1999, 2004, 2005)
- The human dignity of illegal immigrants (1984, 1995)
- The serious problems encountered by immigrants (1987)
- Particular difficulties of women migrants (1994)
- The love that Christ and his Church have for migrants (1997, 1998)
- Respect for the religion of migrant people (2002)
- Commitment to fight all forms of racism, xenophobia and exaggerated nationalism which have an effect on migrants (2003)
- The right not to emigrate (2004)
- The right to emigrate (2004)

Messages, however, do not put an end to problems of social justice. The Church's social teaching is an expression of her faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit is continually

urging Christians to follow ever new ways of living out the gospel and evangelising. This spiritual reality, the gospel, is different from other messages given by different groups in defence of migrants. The gospel message promotes justice and increased migration throughout the world. It leads to a change of heart and a change of outlook; it promotes the recognition of each person's dignity, it encourages solidarity, commitment, and service of one's neighbour; it says that everyone has a place in God's designs.

Cardinal Stephen Fumio Hamao  
*President of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Ministry to Migrants*

### VISIT BY SUPERIORS

Mother Evelyne Franc  
and Sister Wivine Kisu, General Councillor

### **Visit to the Province of Nigeria**

14<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> February 2006

On 14<sup>th</sup> February 2006, Mother Evelyne Franc and Sister Wivine Kisu, General Councillor, arrived in Nigeria to visit the Sisters in three different areas.

#### **South-East zone**

After welcoming Sister Evelyne in Afro-Nigerian style, the visitation began with Mass concelebrated by the priest of the parish and Father Eamon Raftery, Provincial Director. In his homily, Father Raftery emphasised the mystery of God's call.

Sister Francesca Edet, Visitatrice, gave a power-point presentation of the history of the Province and the life and work of the Sisters. At present the Province has 11 postulants, 13 Seminary Sisters, 28 Sisters under vows and 98 indigenous Sisters who have made their vows, as well as 3 Sisters from Ireland. Problems at this time include the growing number of street children, teenage pregnancies, AIDS sufferers..... We are limited in what we can do because of financial constraints, the difficulty of finding trained staff, and at times, the individualism of certain Sisters.

Then Mother Evelyne shared with us some reflections on :

- The Community being our first place of belonging
- The importance of dialogue and communication in community life,
- The need for obedience as a way of searching together to discover God's will for us and to be as ready as possible to do it.

- The ability to speak about the community in a positive way, both within and outside of the community.

Then Mother Evelyne met representatives of the Vincentian Family in the Province and she stressed the need for collaboration in order to provide a better service. She also greeted the French community of Port Harcourt and thanked them for the support they give our Sisters.

After a sharing session with the Provincial Council, and one with the Seminary Sisters, Mother Evelyne visited several communities in the South-East region where the Sisters work mainly with mentally ill people, with handicapped children and with AIDS patients.

### **Western zone**

At Umunede, Sister Evelyne met the Sisters from the seven communities in the western zone. She encouraged them to become more and more available to others for this is a concrete way of giving witness that we belong to the Company. During her visit to Ossiomo, Mother Evelyne talked to the Sisters who work with lepers and in a hospital caring for patients with physical ailments or sight problems.

### **Northern zone**

At Abuja, Mother Evelyne met the Sisters from the northern zone who had gathered at Saint Vincent's Provincial House. She urged them to deepen their knowledge and appreciation of the Constitutions which are a spiritual, apostolic and community path to be followed: "*The Constitutions play a vital part in forming the Daughters of Charity in the spirit of the Founders,*" she said. She also stressed the virtue of availability. A Daughter of Charity who practises this virtue has the freedom of heart to serve and to love.

Before leaving us, Mother Evelyne told us how touched she had been by the suffering of the persons she had visited and also by the quality of the Sisters' service. She spoke of her gratitude and joy for what the Lord is accomplishing in each Sister in the Province. All the Sisters were happy about what they experienced during the visit; they expressed their gratitude to Sister Evelyne and assured her that they would pray for her work, "*How lovely on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news!*" Deo Gratias. After Mother Evelyne left us, Sister Wivine continued the regular visitation of the Province of Nigeria and of the three communities in Ghana.

A group of Sisters

### VISIT BY SUPERIORS

Mother Evelyne Franc  
and Sister Julma Neo, Councillor General

## Visit to the Province of Indonesia

9<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> March 2006

*“Indonesia is a very long way from the Motherhouse but it is very close to the heart of the Company.”* It was with these words that Mother Evelyne Franc, accompanied by Sister Julma Neo, Provincial Councillor, opened the visitation on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2006: 8 days to study with Mother Evelyne the definition of our vocation: *“Entirely given to God, in community, for the service of those who are poor.”*

Sister Evelyne greeted in turn the young Sisters under ten years vocation, and the Seminary Sisters, the Sisters in the different works, the Sister Servants and formators. She offered some reflections on the revised Constitutions and Action Lines, stressing the importance of community life, the quality of our service, being attentive to the signs of the Spirit in our lives, discernment, dialogue, collaboration, participation, co-responsibility and subsidiarity at all levels. Mother Evelyne listened attentively to the life experiences of the Sisters. She encouraged them to take inspiration from the writings of the Founders in order to live according to their spirit in today’s world. Then the Sisters had the opportunity to meet her personally.

Mother Evelyne visited several communities: Cilincing, Jakarta, Kedin with Saint Damien’s House for lepers, another house for elderly women and a school, Surabaya with an orphanage and a service for mentally sick people (in collaboration with the government). It was also the occasion for Mother Evelyne to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Daughters of Charity’s presence in Indonesia. This event, was celebrated at the Provincial House by sharing a meal with poor people.

Sister Evelyne was also very impressed by the number of young Sisters actively working for poor people. She was proud to find that in every community a lot of lay people collaborate with the Sisters and are committed to the Vincentian Family.

On the occasion of this visit, Mass was celebrated by three Priests of the Mission in the traditional Javanese church at Puhsarang (Kedin). There was music, traditional Javanese hymns (gamelan) and Javanese dances. The Sisters were joined by members of the Vincentian Family in the Kediri region (CM, AIC, SSVP, the Congregation of the Mother of the Sacred Heart, and the Institute of lay missionaries (ALMA).

A cultural evening prepared by the Young Sisters, the Seminary Sisters and the Postulants, demonstrated the richness and diversity of Indonesian culture.

On 17<sup>th</sup> March, Father Armada, CM, celebrated the closing Mass in thanksgiving for this visit to the 95 Sisters of the Province.

We are grateful to the Lord for this first visit; a time of special grace for the Province, renewing each Sister’s desire to be ever more faithful to her vocation. Thank you, Sister Evelyne for giving all this time to learn what life is like in our Province. We would like to say thank you in Indonesian: *Terima kasih seribu!*



Sister Engelina  
*Daughter of Charity*

THE POOR SPEAK TO US

Quasi-Province

***Love is infinitely inventive***

A month ago I met Christiane. Her smile, her courage and her faith all spoke to me of God. Since then, I have thought about her every day and she makes me want a little more to live, to struggle, to love. With her I have come to know yet again that love is infinitely inventive.

Christiane is 40 years old, the mother of a family; she is handicapped and confined to a wheelchair. At the age of 27 she suddenly felt a terrible pain in her head and then felt paralysis moving progressively to her lower limbs. When her husband returned home he took her to hospital where she was admitted as an emergency case. On several occasions she nearly died. She came from a practising Catholic family but now began to doubt the existence of God, asking herself countless questions and feeling that she was going down to hell.

However, from the day she had that accident to her brain, her husband and children rallied round Christiane in a very special way, redoubling their loving attentions, As new needs became evident, her husband and children thought about what they could do to make life easier for her, to help her move around and be independent. Seeing all these efforts her family was making, Christiane felt her inner rebellion gradually diminish. This path of love traced out by her husband and children gradually got the upper hand over her personal suffering,

Today she is constantly telling people that God exists. She calls him her “Consoler.” Through the affection and creativity of her husband and children she knows that God is with her. In spite of her limitations and her physical dependence on others, Christiane radiates the peace-giving presence of her “Consoler.”

Sister Catherine  
*Daughter of Charity*

SPECIAL BICENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF CATHERINE LABOURE

**Saint Catherine,  
her ardent love for God and for those who are poor**

**IV- DAUGHTER OF CHARITY AT REUILLY**

**INTRODUCTION**

Let us now reflect on some of the major events in Catherine's life at Reuilly. We cannot ignore this period at Reuilly; it represents the essence of her whole life as a Daughter of Charity, whereas the apparitions only lasted a few months. The worldwide repercussions of the sign of the Medal could have forced the seer into being a celebrity but she knew how to guard her secret with extraordinary spiritual courage and intelligence. It was in order to keep faith with her vocation as a servant of the poor that she lived a life of great self-sacrifice and utter obscurity. Reuilly gives us a good idea of Catherine's personality. Her life of service is a masterpiece of art, it is like a painting enclosed in the framework of the apparitions. We can be lost in amazement that Catherine should have spent most of her life engaged in the most ordinary tasks, 46 years is a long time. Just like life in Nazareth, so life at Reuilly helps us to understand the nobility of a simple and obscure life style. The holiness of a Daughter of Charity does not lie in performing great deeds but in living out the virtues of humility, simplicity and charity to an extraordinary degree. It doesn't matter what sort of work a Sister does for the poor, it is a question of doing it extraordinarily well. Outstanding works are of no value if they are not performed within the context of a life entirely given to God. On the other hand, the most ordinary actions of someone totally given to God can allow the real presence of God's love to be clearly seen. The witness of her life as a servant is the best proof of her privileged spiritual experiences during her Seminary. It can be said that at Reuilly Catherine found God in all the ordinary situations: the kitchen, the garden, the household accounts, sweeping, mending, caring for old people....Let us reread these few lines with a deep interior sense of what is meant by genuine sanctity and authentic and effective apostolic ministry.

***The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve*** (Mt20, 28).

On 5<sup>th</sup> February 1831, Catherine arrived at Reuilly to join the community of 4 Sisters who worked in the hospice for old men at Enghien. It was in this deprived district in the south-east of Paris that she would be serving the poor for 46 years.

In April 1830, Catherine said her first "yes", a response that would become more fervent each day. She understood the implications of her vocation. The talents that the Lord had given her were to be continually developed so that they could be used in the service of others, of the Lord's favourite people, the poor. For 46 years Catherine would continue to listen to the Lord and respond to his will with an energy and enthusiasm which never seemed to fail. However, there was no lack of problems and these came to her in a variety of ways. But her relationship with the Lord and with the Blessed Virgin

and Saint Vincent was so close that as her life was drawing to a close she could say, *“Why should I be afraid? I am going to see Our Lord, his Mother and Saint Vincent.”* The quality and intensity of her life during these 46 years is astonishing. How did Catherine manage to do all that?

***I am in the midst of you as one who serves*** (Lk 22,27).

When she arrived in Reully, Catherine was put in charge of the kitchen. She was very suited to this work. With all her experience on the farm and during the time she spent working in her brother's restaurant, she was determined that the old men should be well looked after. However, she had to work with Sister Vincent who did not see things in the same way: Catherine gave generously and without stinting, Sister Vincent was stingy. This caused tension and Catherine had to exercise great self control in order to preserve sisterly charity. Being a countrywoman, she was also made responsible for the huge garden and all the animals. These would have been more than enough to keep her occupied: rabbits, chickens, pigeons, cows and the horse. She managed everything efficiently and was able to transform the garden into a sort of mini farm, successfully rearing chickens and pigeons. Two cows were put into the cowshed and these provided large quantities of fresh milk for the old men. One evening, Sister Vincent forgot to prepare the soup. Catherine did not rebuke her but said calmly, *“Don't upset yourself, I have just milked the cows and people will be happy to have fresh milk.”* Catherine kept perfectly ordered accounts of the thousands of pigeons and chickens sold for everyone's benefit. These accounts show some mistakes in spelling but the figures were always accurate.

***I know the trials that beset you..., do not be afraid of the suffering that awaits you*** (Ap 2, 9-10).

In the spring of 1831, three months after she came to the hospice at Enghien, an inner voice urged Catherine to tell her confessor once again about the message of the medal. She yielded to this prompting which was causing her a lot of anxiety, and spoke to Father Aladel about it. He cut her short saying, *“Don't give in to illusion.”* Catherine was not crushed by this new storm! However, she felt relieved that she had spoken and she calmly resumed her work in the kitchen and in the garden. She prayed from the bottom of her heart and placed herself in Mary's hands. The interior voice was insistent. What was she to make of these contrary signs coming from Our Lady and from God's representative?

Six months later, Catherine had a third meeting with the person Our Lady wanted to influence. Catherine spoke to him in stronger terms, just as the angel had done with her on 18<sup>th</sup> July when she doubted his word. Aladel dismissed Catherine even more sternly. However, he was troubled by this new intervention. Like Samuel, he would need three successive interventions before allowing himself to be moved by heaven. He put the matter before Father Etienne, the Procurator General, who decided to speak to the archbishop of Paris about it. Mgr Quelen reacted favourably, saying, *“Let us go ahead and just distribute this medal. The tree will be judged by its fruits.”* On a later occasion,

when Catherine went to confession, Father Aladel asked Catherine to give him again an account of what took place on 27<sup>th</sup> November.

***He who dwells in me, and I in him, bears much fruit*** (Jn 15,5).

Catherine knew nothing of the Archbishop's decision. Guarding her secret, and absolutely opposed to any form of ostentation, she was mistress of herself and continued to carry out very efficiently the work she was asked to do. She was also put in charge washing, ironing and mending the linen.

In February 1832, there was an outbreak of cholera in Paris: 20,000 died in the capital. There was panic. Father Aladel was overwhelmed with the work of caring for the sick and the dying; he forgot about the medal. At the end of May the epidemic seemed to be abating. He passed on the order to the jeweller. Then the epidemic broke out again. There was even more panic but the manufacture of the medals was in hand.

***The blind see, the lame walk, the poor have the gospel preached to them*** (Is 61, 1-2).

On 30<sup>th</sup> June 1832 the first medals were distributed but there was no explicit reference to the apparition. Catherine was given one at the beginning of July, as were the rest of her community, but no distinction was made and her secret was safeguarded. You can imagine her interior joy and her feelings of thanksgiving. During the epidemic medals were given out to sick people in hospitals and cures and conversions were not long in coming. These successes only served to make Catherine even more discreet. The miracles that were being talked about made people curious about the medal's origins. Since February 1834, before any account had been published, the medal was commonly referred to as "the miraculous medal." There was a whole compendium of physical and spiritual miracles recorded, first of all in Constantinople (1834), and then in the United States (1836), in Poland and China (1837) and in Russia (1838).....A charismatic movement sprang up round the Medal. Ozanam was wearing it when he founded the Saint Vincent de Paul Conferences in 1833. At the beginning of 1842 all the newspapers were talking about the conversion of Alphonse Ratisbonne, a young Jewish banker from Alsace, who had previously been fiercely anticlerical. Five months after he was baptised he entered the Jesuit Order and became ardently engaged in Judeo-Christian dialogue. In 1845, two months before his conversion, Newman wore the medal round his neck. More than a million medals were distributed. It signalled a new awakening for the people and a recovery for the two families of Saint Vincent. Cures, conversions, testimonies of Mary's protection, created a new religious climate. These events led to discussions and to prayer. In 1834, Mother Boulet re-established uniformity and regularity in all domains. Reforms went ahead. What had seemed impossible was happening every day. Superiors were astounded at the renewal of fervour and the new vocations that came along. Faith which had seemed powerless, now cured, converted and protected people

***Cut off from me, you can do nothing*** (Jn 15,5)

Catherine, who was well aware of post-revolutionary decadence, was full of thanksgiving in spite of the shock she felt when, the previous year in April 1834, her eldest sister, Marie-Louise, had made the incomprehensible decision to give up her vocation. Calumny led to Marie-Louise being “deposed” as Sister Servant in 1829. Deeply hurt by this injustice, Marie-Louise had lost the enthusiasm that had given meaning and joy to her life. On the feast of the Annunciation 1834, Marie-Louise did not renew her vows and left the Company a few days later. She soon found a teaching post in Paris.

A year later, on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1835, the anniversary day of her baptism, Catherine made her first vows: “*Lord, in response to your call which invites me to follow Christ and to be a witness to his charity to the poor, I, Catherine Laboure, renew the promises of my baptism and give myself to You in the Company of the Daughters of Charity.*” For Catherine, her vows took on the character of a “replacement” as she awaited her sister’s return. Catherine persevered in prayer, never resigning herself to this parting. If so many miracles had been worked for three years in the Community why should it not be possible for her sister to return to the Company?

***When you give alms, let your almsgiving be in secret: and your Father who sees in secret, will reward you (Mt 6,4).***

By now, the Medal was known all over the world as “miraculous” and everyone knew that it was the result of a vision. So at the end of that year, Monseigneur de Quelen began proceedings to endorse this instrument of grace at its source. He asked to see the witness, even if it had to be with her face covered and no attempt made to reveal her identity. Catherine formally refused. A further attempt was made in January 1836 but Catherine’s concern was to safeguard her secret. The Archbishop finally bowed before the secrecy of a conscience and “the king’s secret.” “*God has his own way of doing things,*” he said formally. So the Cause of the Miraculous Medal was, for Catherine, only “contumacious proceedings” [proceedings in absentia] which signified the person’s refusal to appear before the Tribunal. Father Aladel and Father Etienne testified, “*The Sister’s unwillingness to appear is due simply to her humility.*” So Catherine remained anonymous except to God alone and the poor people to whom she was so totally committed.

***Jesus said to Thomas, “ Give me your hand ; put it in my side. Doubt no longer but believe”***

After a trial period Catherine was given the work of caring for old men. These were not always easy to deal with and were often churlish but she saw them as the suffering members of Christ. She was sensitive to their sufferings and knew just how difficult life could be in a hospice. In addition to the limitations that come with age, these old men felt that being plunged into living with others was a form of banishment. They lost hope and their self-esteem and their days were passed in uncertainty and discouragement which often led them to sink into alcoholism. As well as having to cope with their disabilities, they had the added sorrow of loneliness and having to depend on others.

*An apostle of charity*, Catherine was at one with Christ in stretching out her hands over the wounds of these old men, be these injuries physical, psychological, emotional, moral or spiritual. She was always mindful of their suffering and cared for them like a servant, following the example of the Servant Christ.

That is why she redoubled her efforts to discreetly care for them and she showed great respect for their private affairs, allowing them to keep some secrets to themselves. She tried to get them to cooperate, even in the smallest way, so that they would not have to leave. *“No one ever complained about the welcome they got from her.”* She was very welcoming and showed special concern for new residents; she treated them all alike and was careful to respect each person’s dignity. Infinitely kind, and understanding their “fear of missing out on anything”, Catherine was open-handed in serving them and she would always ask them, *“Have you got enough?”* She knew that they always liked to keep something in reserve in their drawer. When one of them couldn’t eat a particular type of food she made sure she was able to get him something else. She would not bear to see any stain or any tear on their clothes and she helped them to keep themselves clean in spite of the infirmities of old age. Catherine combined endless patience with firmness. She had a keen sense of justice and reacted strongly when anyone overstepped the mark; she could be stern but she was also flexible. She would put to bed an incorrigible drunkard who came back senseless and would wait till the following morning before reasoning with him and trying to get him to change his ways.

Catherine believed that the risen Jesus continues to manifest himself in every person suffering life’s hurts. She contemplated in the faces of these old men the humiliated and often unrecognisable image of the face of Christ: Jesus Christ who was poor, humiliated and disfigured by his Passion. *“What else can I do, I see Our Lord in them.”* With her habitual kindness Catherine restored each man’s confidence and helped them to give of their best. Gradually a peaceful atmosphere reigned in this work for old men, a work that was generally held to be difficult. Catherine did not spare herself. On occasions she would go without sleep in order to be with a dying man in his agony and help him to make his last journey peacefully, *“Not a single one of them died without being reconciled with God,”* said Sister Dufes at the end of her life. Did not these old men experience every day, in this smiling goodness, these compassionate actions of their caring servant, the presence of the risen Christ, shedding around his “rays of light” that bring warmth and peace to the heart?

With this long experience of the difficulties inflicted by old age and sickness, Catherine would have felt even more keenly the loneliness and suffering that her father endured before his death on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1844. She had never realised how deeply he felt desolate and abandoned. When she learned about this she was heartbroken. She expressed her sorrow in a strongly worded letter to Marie-Louise in which she reproached her sister for not looking after their father when she was “free” to do so.

*I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done for you* (Jn 13, 15).

If the Charity of Jesus Christ crucified impelled Catherine to serve others, this charity was sometimes a burden. Catherine knew that divine charity is no ordinary charity, it is a gift from God that is given every day. Nourished by prayer, and by the Eucharist, where she discovered the Lord's body in the poor and simple signs of the Word and of the bread and wine under which He presents himself, Catherine learned to recognise him more and more in the bodies and minds of the poorest of the poor. Throughout the day she would fix her gaze on Mary, taking her as model at the beginning of everything she did, as we know from her retreat notes (1838). Mary, the humble Servant taught her to overcome herself, to empty herself, in order to continually receive God's gifts and so discover the fulness of life. If, in 1830, Catherine contemplated Mary's beauty, she was also able to see grace and love even in the physical or psychological dregs of society. One day some children came to visit her when she was cleaning the commodes. This was a smelly job and the children held their noses. Catherine smiled at their discomfiture and said laughingly, *"That, my children, is what the Sisters of Charity are all about; these are our jewels."*

***"Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not yet come"*** (Jn 2, 4)

The first groups of the Association of Children of Mary Immaculate were set up in the Sisters' educational establishments and were quite different from earlier Marian "congregations." Their originality lay in the fact that the groups were composed of young people from working class areas. The first Association was established at Beaune in 1840. Father Aladel, obeyed Our Lady's command, convinced that the association he had "founded" was of supernatural origin.

The Medal, too, had been struck, but there still had to be made the statue representing the first phase of the apparition on 27<sup>th</sup> November. Father Aladel had obstinately refused to give permission for this but Catherine, tormented by the setback, renewed her request. In spite of these tensions, Father Aladel seems to have allowed himself to be convinced, and in 1841, he asked for another account of what happened. He noted down the details Catherine gave and sent them to an artist who made a preliminary sketch of the Virgin of the Globe. Catherine waited in hope but the project got no further. On 15<sup>th</sup> August that year, Catherine was asked to give a written report on the apparition of the Medal.

***"A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends"*** (Jn 15, 13)

Two months earlier, in June 1841, Catherine was in hospital with sciatica but nothing could be done for her. She was 35 years old. So, although she outwardly seemed to enjoy very good health, she was in constant pain but nobody knew this since she never said anything about it. Her niece, Leonie, said, *"She had pain in her knees...If we tried to sympathise with her she would say that it was nothing and that as long as she could go on working she would consider herself very fortunate."* In spite of this physical disability which she was to suffer from all her life, Catherine continued her work without

complaining. Rheumatism made her knees very painful but she showed physical and spiritual resistance in bearing the pain. People thought she was strong. She always kept for herself the humblest and lowliest tasks. She was always the one to wax the floors of the old men's rooms with the heavy "galley slave" polisher.

***"Son, this is your mother. And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home (Jn 19, 27)***

Catherine developed an increasingly close relationship with the Blessed Virgin in the mystery of Christ and the Church. She has an unparalleled insight as is seen in her retreat notes: *"Mary is there at the foot of the Cross. Mary is there in the Cenacle with the Apostles. She waits silently for the coming of the Holy Spirit. What a lesson for us! Mary is our model. O Mary, make me love you and then it will not be difficult to imitate you."* Mary is a figure of the Church, the model of a Daughter of Charity who can only fulfil her vocation through the gift of love, the gift of grace. Christ is the Gift given, Mary is the Gift received. Moreover, Mary, Mother of the Poor, leads her servants to a "happy death:" *"Mary loved the poor and a Daughter of Charity who loves the poor will have no fear of death. She will be very consoled because she has served the poor well. It is unheard of for a Daughter of Charity who has loved the poor, to be terrified of death. On the contrary, she has been filled with the sweetest consolations and death is the sweetest one of all."*(retreat notes).

***"The seventy-two came back rejoicing. 'Lord', they said, 'even the devils submit to us when we use your name.' He was then filled with joy by the Holy Spirit"***  
(Lk 10, 17, 21)

On 4<sup>th</sup> August 1843, Father Etienne was elected Superior General. The two Vincentian Families were carried along by this tide of renewal which brought an increase in numbers and a better spirit in their members. This renewal of fervour had its influence on every aspect of life; prayer, human relationships, generosity and faith in the service of the poor. In his first circular letter there was an overt reference to the apparition as the source of the grace that was now inundating the two families of Saint Vincent. Catherine must have quivered with inner joy when he said, *"I cannot fail to recognise such an obvious intervention on the part of Mary, august and Immaculate, who has given us such extraordinary tokens of her tenderness. It is her powerful mediation which obtained from God the grace that our two families should not perish in the midst of the misfortunes that overwhelmed us and that He should use this way of reviving faith. Can we find another reason for such incomprehensible numbers of vocations that are appearing everywhere....or for such prodigious developments in our Company in the very midst of the tempest?"* Let us try to imagine Catherine's great purity of intention: in the face of such a triumph she remained silent and did not draw attention to herself in the slightest way; there was no trace of personal vindication – it was all for God and for the service of those who are poor. Doesn't Catherine's great self-effacement remind us of the purity of heart of Mary Immaculate, the one she chose at the age of 9, to be her Mother?



***“Whatever you do to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me”*** (Mt 25, 40)

As well as being in charge of the old men, Catherine was also responsible for seeing to the poor people who came to the house. She sorted out countless material or psychological problems. The domestic staff loved her because she showed concern for them. She did not hesitate to visit them if they became ill or were in need and she was most resourceful in finding ways of helping them. There was real chemistry between Catherine and the poor. People who were in difficult circumstances went to her for help. Catherine never spared herself. She recruited as a helper, a former Seminary companion who was emotionally disturbed, useless, and well on the way to becoming a tramp. This was Blaisine, known as the “Blot”. Catherine was the only one who could help her. But at what cost! One day, Catherine happened to meet the wife of Marshal Mac Mahon, President of the Republic. She told her the sad story of a family facing eviction unless they could find 30 gold francs. Catherine got the money.

***May the Lord be generous in increasing your love*** (1 Thess 3, 11)

In May 1845 Sister Mazin was elected Superioress General. On 26<sup>th</sup> June the Council agreed to allow Marie-Louise to return to the Daughters of Charity. She took the habit again at Enghien and was now 50 years old. Catherine had prayed so hard for her and she now felt in her heart a joy too deep to be expressed in words.

In spite of her long and tiring days serving the old men and the families of the neighbourhood, Catherine kept in touch with her own family. She shared the joys and anxieties of each one. Catherine showed particular concern when any of them found themselves in difficult circumstances and she found ways of supporting them materially and spiritually. However, she was very strict about seeing them only when she could and never at times when this would interfere with her duties. She kept in touch with one of her young nephews who was a violinist: she had been asked to see that he didn't go astray in the capital. On 9<sup>th</sup> August 1863 she accompanied Tonine's son, Philippe, who was joining the Lazarists. He was ordained in 1869 and later said of her, *“She always acted with the utmost discretion and charity...without putting any pressure on me whatsoever.”* Catherine's respect for people's freedom moderated her zeal. Her brother-in-law, Tonine's husband, was knocked down by a locomotive and was gravely ill. Like all good bourgeois of his time he declared himself an atheist and said, *“She's a good woman but she's not going to catch me.”* However, he was converted *in extremis* on his death bed. Finally, the husband of her niece Antoinette, Tonine's daughter, took himself off to America without telling anyone and it was thought he had died. Catherine gave support to the niece who was presumed to be a widow, and her two children; getting help for them with their schooling and other expenses. She supplied them with food during the times of famine when Paris was under siege and during the Commune, 1870-1871.

***Anyone who welcomes a little child like this in my name, welcomes me*** (Mt. 18,5).

Catherine's young nephews and nieces were attracted by her kindness and so were the young children of the neighbourhood, especially those who were most needy. When she crossed the courtyard to go to Enghien, the children from the orphanage would rush up to her and link their tiny arms through hers. One of her nieces, Leonie, often went to see her. She tells how she went one day but couldn't find Catherine; she made her way to the chapel feeling sure she would find her there. When she saw her, Leonie began to fidget in order to attract her aunt's attention. No use! Catherine kept her eyes fixed on the tabernacle. When she finished praying, Leonie pulled a face and said sulkily, "*I've been waiting a long time for you.*" Catherine replied, "*You weren't out in the street; you were near God. We can never spend too much time with God.*"

***Keep faithful.... and I will give you the crown of life*** ( Ap 2, 10)

The Children of Mary Association was already functioning and had even been officially approved by Pius IX in 1847. In 1851 Father Aladel established the association in the school at Reully so Catherine was able to see it start and to watch it grow.

Twenty years after the July 18<sup>th</sup> apparition, one of the prophecies made on that occasion came true: two religious communities joined the Family of Saint Vincent; first came the Sisters of Charity founded by Elizabeth Ann Seton, and these were followed by the Austrian Sisters of Charity founded by Leopoldine de Brandis.

The work of enlarging the chapel at rue du Bac was undertaken in 1849 and there was a new high altar, behind which was a statue of Our Lady with rays coming from her hands, as portrayed on the Miraculous Medal.

***Why have I not found favour with you, so that you load on me the weight of all this nation?*** ( Nb, 11,11).

Catherine was still tormented with anxiety because as yet there was no altar to the Virgin of the Globe, to commemorate the Apparition and to make the Chapel the place of pilgrimage it was to become. She hadn't yet achieved half of what Our Lady had asked her to do. Father Aladel was becoming increasingly involved in his work of establishing the Children of Mary Association and he kept his distance from her. In 1851 Father Chinchon became her regular confessor and remained so until 1875. He was more approachable than Father Aladel but he would not take on any of these projects which were outside his jurisdiction. He kept urging Catherine to have confidence; "*Sister, if God truly wants this, it will happen. Be at peace.*"

We can imagine, however, the deep spiritual joy that Catherine felt in the midst of all her worries when, on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. How fervently must Catherine have thanked God for this action by the Church to honour Mary! Four years later, when she heard about the apparitions in Lourdes she would say, "*It's the same One!*"

Just over a year after the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Catherine was asked to write an account of the visions of Saint Vincent's heart and the first Apparition of Our Lady. These reports were kept very secret.

In 1865 Father Aladel died suddenly; he had not been able to fulfil all Our Lady's wishes.

***“Wrap yourselves in humility to be servants of each other”*** (1P 5,5).

In 1860 Sister Dufes was appointed Sister Servant of the community. At the age of 54, Catherine was going through a difficult period in her community life. Sister Jeanne was 37 years old and full of ambitious plans; she was enterprising by nature and took on a lot of works. She became increasingly involved in different works in the neighbourhood and rather neglected the old men in the hospice who bitterly resented this. The Sister Servant had a will of iron and this unsettled the Sisters. They found it hard to accept her as Superior but Catherine did not hesitate to bring them together and urge them to act in a spirit of faith, *“Don't murmur, our Superiors represent God for us.”* She helped her companions to overcome their resistance and act as a united community. She herself accepted many undeserved reproaches. Sister Jeanne owed a lot to Sister Catherine but the latter made light of it. Now that Sister Jeanne was accepted as Sister Servant she could press ahead.

Why did she treat Sister Catherine so unreasonably and so harshly, often reproaching her unjustly? We don't know the reason but we do know that Catherine accepted these trials without a word, *“We have to give everything to God and not complain.”* Catherine's inventive charity found ways of smoothing things over and she would think of some permission to ask and use this as a way of renewing contact with her Superior. However, Sister Jeanne's attitude set a bad example and some of the more “intelligent” companions began to treat Catherine as an “idiot” or “simpleton.” Catherine had the easily-roused temperament of a Burgundy peasant but she did not react. Her desire for God overcame all other considerations and her interior struggle always ended with humility triumphing over the temptation to give a quick retort or to justify herself. At the foot of the altar Catherine contemplated Christ who was meek and humble of heart; the thought of him being mocked and scourged brought her peace and strength: peace in the face of humiliations and unjust treatment; strength to resist any temptation to be bitter or critical, strength to pardon others and to courageously choose to live in a sisterly way and create a sisterly spirit around her. Her incomparable humility made her reject any remark that might impair unity, or lessen in any way the good reputation of any of her companions.

***He said to them, “In whatsoever house you enter, let your peace descend on it”***  
(Mt 10, 13).

On 19<sup>th</sup> July 1870, Emperor Napoleon III declared war on Prussia. The French were delighted at the thought of a future victory and the Sisters at Reully felt the same way. Catherine did not share their enthusiasm for this war. She knew that war brings its

tally of tears and bloodshed. She could only think of the suffering it would bring; "*The poor soldiers*," she said. This date coincided with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first apparition and it must surely have reminded Catherine of the sad look on Mary's face when she spoke of "*bad times*."

The war turned out badly. It was a national disaster and the government fell. Then came alarming news; it had been decided to turn the house and school at Reuilly into a military hospital. The house which had been a haven of peace for the old men now became a place of intense suffering and death. Catherine had to be both cook and nurse. Her job was made harder by rationing but Catherine found all sorts of ruses to obtain "supplementary rations" for the sick and the wounded. She herself, however, was content with a piece of black bread, in spite of the back-breaking work she had to do.

In January 1871, two generals secretly prepared an attack and mobilised all available forces. They came to Catherine's hospital, looking for men who were able to fight. "*Poor lambs*," she said, "*they are being led to the slaughterhouse*." In the midst of all that was happening; war, catastrophes and fear; disasters that made people want revenge and violence, Catherine maintained a certain freedom of spirit, an inner calm and total trust in God. At the end of January 1871, an armistice was signed. Some people in Paris would not accept the defeat and started a revolt against the government which had taken refuge at Versailles and was supported by a section of the army known as the "Versaillais". The National Guard joined with the men fighting the Versaillais. It was civil war: the Commune.

This movement of popular resistance, the "Communards", was hostile to anything connected with the old regime and one of its characteristic features was a radical anticlericalism which brought much suffering to priests and religious.

At Reuilly, the Sisters saw the spectre of revolution that had reigned throughout the whole of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century rise up again. Catherine kept telling her companions, "*Don't be afraid*." Fear paralyses love and she would add, "*We must pray that God will shorten these bad times*." Catherine had a horror of violent revolutions because the poor were always the first to suffer from them. The repression of M. Thiers was particularly bloody.

The military hospital where Catherine worked was opened and it took in all wounded soldiers no matter which side they were on. One day the Sisters risked their lives by sheltering two wounded Versaillais guards whom the insurgents wanted to shoot. The Sisters refused to hand the men over and helped them to escape. After that, two National Guards were stationed at the entrance of the hospice which was now a military hospital, in order to keep the Sisters under surveillance. A warrant was issued for the arrest of Sister Dufes. Catherine decided to go to the Communards' headquarters to plead her Superior's cause. She had that noble mindset which presumed that those who were fighting for that ideology so different from her own, were basically like herself, and would show the same regard for truth, the same courage, generosity and self-forgetfulness as she showed in fighting for the truth. Catherine bore their harassment and

insults in silence because she had the ability not to be surprised or riled by anything. She let the storm pass over her and spoke to them as a friend; her main concern was not to give offence. Her calmness and inner goodness turned them away from violence. When they had got it all off their chests she said, *“Will you please let me explain?”* In the end they listened to her. So once again, her humility and serenity extricated her from a dangerous situation. That very evening the National Guards left the house at Reully and this enabled the Superior and her Assistant to escape.

In the absence of Sister Dufes, Catherine took charge of the community and this at a time when the revolutionary occupation was at its height. She managed very well. She was so highly respected that the Commune called her as a witness in the trial of a senior “communarde” known as “la Valentin” and whom people described as a monster. Catherine had suffered at the hands of this woman when she was made *“responsible for eliminating the Sisters”* so the Commune counted on Catherine’s evidence to condemn her. But no! To the Tribunal’s dismay, Catherine testified in her favour and saved the life of “la Valentin.”

In April 1871 the struggle between Versailles and Paris intensified. New accusations were made against the Sisters. They were accused of killing three women from the neighbourhood. Catherine was summoned to appear before the Communards for interrogation. In spite of being threatened with death she remained calm and it was this calmness that once again got her out of a bad situation. But a few hours after she left, the Communards regretted their decision to let her go. Filled with rage they again invaded the Sisters’ house and threatened to kill them. Fortunately, one of these men, Siron, would not let them arrest anyone. The leader, Siron, was a former convict to whom Catherine had given a medal. This criminal had openly declared, *“I am a changed man.”* Indeed he was, for now he was the Sisters’ protector.

At the end of May 1871 the Commune came to an end. Catherine went back to the old men, the poultry yard, and the reception desk where the poor people of that area came to see their friend and talk to her.

***Father, not my will but thine be done*** (Lk 22, 42).

In 1874 Father Etienne died and Father Bore replaced him as Superior General. Unfortunately for Catherine he was not as attentive as his predecessor. That same year the Lord asked Catherine to take yet another step along the path of availability and humility. Sister Jeanne told her to give up being in charge of the hospice. After working there with great charity for 43 years, Catherine withdrew in great simplicity and a wonderful spirit of obedience, not allowing herself to be nostalgic for the old days. That very evening she handed the keys over to the Sister replacing her, as if this sacrifice were just a normal part of her vocation.

***Come to me all you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest*** (Mt. 11, 28).

Catherine continued her work at reception. She was distressed to see so many children being exploited in the wall-paper factories that had sprung up in the district. Like Our Lord, who was concerned that everyone should have their daily bread, Catherine found a thousand and one ways of giving help to needy families in the area.

***Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace***

Towards the end of 1875, the Superior General relieved Father Chinchon of all other duties so that he could devote himself exclusively to the novices' formation. Catherine asked, as an exceptional permission, to keep Father Chinchon as her spiritual director but this was refused. At the beginning of the year that followed, Catherine felt that Our Lady was urging her to ask Sister Jeanne to have a statue made, representing the first phase of the Apparition of November 27<sup>th</sup>. Sister Dufes was completely overwhelmed by Catherine's account of what happened and she said, "*You have been greatly privileged.*" Catherine replied, "*Oh, I was only an instrument. It was not for me that Our Lady appeared. And if the Blessed Virgin chose me, an ignoramus, it was so that nobody would be able to doubt her*" Sister Dufes was struck by the fact that Catherine, normally not much of a talker, was here able to express herself clearly and fluently. After seeking confirmation of this account from Father Aladel's former secretary, Sister Jeanne took the matter in hand with her usual efficiency and with a degree of enthusiasm commensurate with the wrongs she had done to Catherine. Three weeks later she obtained permission for a statue of the Virgin with the Globe to be made for the community at Reuilly.

***Father, into your hands I commend my spirit* (Lk 23, 46)**

The most astonishing feature of Catherine's life was her painless death. She clearly saw death coming. Early in 1876 she said, "*I won't see next year.*" People found it hard to credit this. She was so courageous that she used her last ounces of strength to perform small tasks. She still washed the old men's linen and cleaned the chamber pots at a time when there was no running water or toilets.

On 8<sup>th</sup> December 1876 she was still able to pay a last visit to the chapel in rue du Bac but on the way home she fell and dislocated her wrist. She bandaged it up with her handkerchief. "*What happened to you, Sister Catherine?*" asked Sister Dufes. Catherine held up her bound wrist, which she was holding with her other hand, and gave the light-hearted reply, "*Oh Sister, I'm holding my bouquet of flowers. Every year the Blessed Virgin sends me one like this.*" Catherine again declared she would not live beyond the year but people laughed at these ramblings. However, her health declined and at the beginning of December, the month she died, Catherine was often confined to bed. Her negligent nurse often forgot to bring her something to eat. Catherine did not complain. She did not want to bother anyone and she always thought that people did too much for her because the poor weren't treated in this way.

During the evening of December 31<sup>st</sup> Catherine felt ill but she remained calm. She continued, as best she could, to prepare little packets of medals as New Year gifts for

the Sisters. At 6.30 p.m. the last medals slipped from her hands and scattered over the sheet. Sister Dufes rushed in. Catherine could not make any further response. She smiled and then fell asleep without suffering any death agony. It was all over and they closed her eyes. It was 7 p.m. *“I’ve never seen anything like it,”* said a Sister with a lot of nursing experience.

### **CATHERINE, A SAINT FOR OUR TIMES**

This simple and so very intense a life speaks for itself. Catherine’s secret lay in being able to combine the brilliant wonder of the apparitions with the humble performance of the service she offered. From her daily contact with the poor she learned, in a very profound way, to encounter Christ. Constitution 16 defines the life of a servant of the poor as being at the same time a vision of faith and the concrete expression of that love, whose source and model is Christ. Isn’t this the best way we could sum up Catherine’s life?

#### **A servant who sees with the eyes of faith**

The most important thing about Catherine seems to be the way she saw God in everything. God always went ahead of her. He was already at work in every person she met. This was the basis of her human relationships. For Catherine, God was a loving presence. She saw God in the saints – those in heaven, beginning with the Blessed Virgin, but also those on earth and even in sinners called by God to be converted to holiness, a conversion she was able to glimpse against all expectations and something she so many times obtained. She saw God in happy events as well as in sad ones and trials. She also saw God in priests and superiors; she could even see God in their shortcomings and their weaknesses. Of course she saw Him most of all in the poor, even those that people called “wicked.” She had the eyes of a child who sees things that are hidden from those who consider themselves wise. She had the discernment to recognise the good qualities and sound values of the old men. She admired those who were content with what they had.

Catherine often admired the courage of the old men who often had to bear with the ageing process and their disabilities and even to “stomach” all sorts of harassment and humiliations: they had no way of defending themselves and had to endure in silence situations that hurt their pride. Yes, these were for her, Masters who preached to her by their very presence (cf. C. 19c).

Catherine’s heart was so full of love for all people that she would never place herself “above” others but was simply “with” them, one of them. She saw their weaknesses as a challenge to show them even more respect and esteem. Listening to their calls on her and knowing their need for genuine relationships, Catherine begged Our Lord to fill her with compassion and kindness. This way of looking on people also brought her close to the personnel of the house who had nothing but good memories of her.

#### **The servant’s spirit of union**

Another grace given to Catherine was that of restoring unity among people. With her, everything came from the heart, though she maintained a proper distance from people and showed them every respect. Catherine was never bitter or discontented but had the serenity and light-heartedness of all truly humble souls. With her discreet, supportive and comforting presence she would listen, encourage, and create a good spirit around her. She didn't have a lot to say and never took part in scheming or gossip. Catherine never joined in any murmuring by her companions but would cut short all critical or indiscreet remarks. She was cordial with everyone but she never took pleasure in jokes that were harmful or hurt anyone. Gentle, and able to foresee the needs of others, she touched hearts without realising it, by her kindness and humility. The calm manner in which she gave reassurance to people in difficult circumstances was something very special. She showed concern for young Sisters who were newcomers to the work, initiated them and comforted them when they felt overwhelmed by the task. Catherine had the gift of being able to create good relationships between people of different generations. She possessed this extraordinary grace that some grandmothers are blessed with. After her death, people of all ages and every social class united in paying tribute to her. The crowd that gathered for her funeral procession was in a way symbolic, uniting as it did the poor and the rich, the orphans and the young workers of the faubourg Saint – Antoine who wore the medal attached to a little ribbon. Also in the crowd was the Marechale de MacMahon, the wife of the President of the Republic, and someone who saw herself as something of a “disciple” of Catherine.

So the words that John Paul II addressed to the Bishops in his apostolic exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, illustrate in a wonderful way Catherine's sanctity: *The closer we are to people, the more this will help our mission, especially when this communion is lived out in the poverty of love which is the capacity to draw close to every person, group or culture, armed only with the power of the Cross, our one hope and the supreme testimony of God's love which is also manifested in a universal love for our brothers and sisters.*”

### **The spiritual fruitfulness of her mission**

Catherine did not found a Congregation but she did inspire (or the Blessed Virgin did so through her, which comes to the same thing) the whole great Marian thrust of the last two previous centuries.

We also know the indirect but most important part she played in the renaissance of Saint Vincent's two Institutes under the generalship of Father Etienne (1843-1846). In several documents he himself referred to the very special influence of Mary in this matter and he proclaimed this most solemnly when the Congregation of the Mission decided to renew its consecration to the Immaculate Virgin in 1843: *“Torrents of mercy and of blessings have been showered on us; we know that we owe this to your tender love. Our little Congregation would have perished but you raised it up again.”*<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> A. Lanquetin, *Catherine Laboure, the saint of Reuilly*



## CONCLUSION

Catherine's entire life reveals sanctity as a wonderful expression of simplicity and a sort of transparency through which God's light can shine. She was totally given to God and consequently totally given to the poor. What she did at Reuilly, and the few references we have regarding what she said while there, show that she was totally filled with the spirit of the Founders and that Mary was her teacher in the spiritual life.

The parallel drawn between Catherine Laboure and Bernadette Soubirous by Cardinal Gerlier, Archbishop of Lyons, in Notre Dame Cathedral during a solemn triduum requested by Cardinal Verdier to honour the new beata, is very enlightening. On 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1933 he declared, *"Both of them collaborated in the same work of Providence; the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception which is, without any doubt, the most significant date in the history of the Church during the XIXth century. The apparitions at rue du Bac prepared the way for it in an extraordinary fashion, the apparition at Massabielle confirmed it in a striking way. The Blessed Virgin chose two similar privileged souls, two confidantes. Both young women were modest and humble, both were pure and upright souls, neither of them capable of inventing the message they did not understand. They were two precious but obscure instruments of a divine work which was revealed to men's eyes through the incredible spreading of the Miraculous Medal and by the wondrous propagation of devotion to the Immaculate Conception."*<sup>36</sup>

Sister Anne Prevost  
Daughter of Charity

## SOURCES AND UPDATES

### **The Company's cultural heritage**

#### **Introduction**

After studying the circular letters issued by the Pontifical Commission for the Church's Cultural Heritage, the Sisters in the Archives service reflected on the cultural

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<sup>36</sup> Idem p.1

heritage of the Company, thinking particularly of the present Motherhouse. The main line they followed was this: the specific nature of this heritage is seen in the way that the Company's mission has been carried out over the centuries, and the concrete forms in which this heritage has been preserved in different places.

The Vincentian heritage takes on diverse forms in different countries, and in this lies its richness. France, the homeland of the Founders, obviously has many places connected with this heritage but the charism of the Founders is also lived out in other places and in important contexts where faith is expressed in artistic, cultural and spiritual forms.

A preliminary study was carried out at the Motherhouse and its findings led Mother Elizondo to suggest that a worldwide survey should follow. A proposition to this effect was made to the 2003 General Assembly and this has now been implemented. The following lines will explain the reason for this universal fascination with the word "Heritage" and the ways in which the Company has lived out, over the centuries, the "art of preserving memories" and how it has perpetuated this memory through visible signs of its relationship with God and the neighbour.

## THE COMPANY'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

### 1. Universal cultural heritage

The declaration made in 1982 by the General Conference of Unesco in Mexico, stated that, *"the cultural heritage is the most tangible form of cultural identity: it points to a value that is irreplaceable: the forms it takes may be material, intangible or spiritual."*

The Mexican Conference agreed that culture, in its widest sense, can today be thought of as having a whole range of distinctive features (spiritual and material, intellectual and emotional) which characterise a society or a particular social group. It embraces not just **the arts and literature, but also life styles, basic human rights, value systems, traditions and beliefs.** It also accepts that culture enables man to reflect about himself. It is through his culture that man **expresses himself**, gains self-awareness, **sees himself** as an unfinished work of creation, questions his achievements, and is constantly **searching** for new meanings and creating works that transcend his nature.

The Conference recognises, as a self-evident truth, that in every human community, culture is expressed through the diversity of actions and exchanges by means of which people give meaning to their lives and make their mark on history. Culture is universal, but there is no one single culture, since all cultures are part of humanity's common heritage. And even if a culture is the custodian of the most intimate secrets of its people's history, it is also the medium through which this history becomes accessible to others.

The Holy See agrees with this interpretation of culture; that is, it recognises its characteristic features. In his message, the Holy Father insisted on the need for *“a disinterested search for truth and for human values, the promotion of a culture that will stress more and more the dignity of the human person. A third aspect of culture is that of assigning technical expertise its proper place by stating explicitly that technology is meant to be at the service of mankind.”*

After this brief presentation of the concept of culture in general, the result of work done by representatives of different cultures all over the world, how, we might ask, does this question concern us?

Can the Daughter of Charity be recognised as such, in her vocation to serve people with a love that is based on the gospel?

Will the cultural heritage of the Company that we will be discussing in the following pages, express this “extra” respect for the absolute and the transcendent?

## **2. The Church’s cultural heritage**

The Church issues documents which are not only part of its heritage but also part of tradition which, together with Sacred Scripture, is one of the bases of our Christian faith. History clearly shows us how important in the eyes of the Church are these documents which it has been producing for 2000 years.

The letter dated 10<sup>th</sup> April 1994 and addressed to Major Superiors says, *“Since 1988 it has been the wish of Pope John Paul II, that among the Institutions that help him to serve the whole Church, there should be one universal and inspirational body devoted specifically to the conservation of cultural assets, namely, the Pontifical Commission for the preservation of the Church’s artistic and historical heritage, established by the Apostolic Constitution, ‘Pastor Bonus.’”*

On 10<sup>th</sup> April a circular letter was sent to the Rev. Mothers General and the Rev. Fathers General about the need to safeguard the cultural assets of Religious Congregations: *“I feel it is incumbent on me to write to every religious family, to urge them to respond immediately, as is their duty, to the Holy Father’s call for them to be more aware of the importance and necessity of the Church’s artistic and historic heritage, in order to preserve, develop, or contribute to it, for our own times and for the future.”*

## **3. The Vincentian cultural heritage**

With the above text in mind, can the Company speak of its cultural heritage in terms of how its members have lived in a specific way, throughout history?

Since its earliest days the Company has practised the art of “preserving memory.” Saint Vincent was anxious to safeguard the accuracy and textual uniformity of documents

that would be handed down. In 1660 he wrote to Superiors, *"I beg you to preserve, from now on, the letters written to you, and those you have in your houses, from whatever source they may come, when they contain anything special that might turn out to be important or which might provide guidance for us in the future... They should be kept in a special place where those who come after you can consult them if necessary. And if there are any such documents in your house dating from earlier times, please collate them in their correct order."* (Coste VIII p.388)

We also have a note in Saint Louise's own handwriting, *"about the topics that need to be dealt with in the conferences"* given by Saint Vincent. The conference was scarcely over when she reminded him, *"very humbly, to send us the little summary of the points you made."*

By using this "little summary of the points" and then the notes made by Saint Louise and some of her daughters, the contents could be agreed on and copies made.

More recently, John Paul II stressed the importance of archival documents, artistic objects both large and small, handwritten and printed manuscripts, museums and libraries because all these are vehicles of culture and evangelisation.

The Company might reply to the question asked earlier and say that its cultural heritage takes the form of:

- handwritten and printed documents
- administrative documents from the time of the Company's foundation
- artistic assets – architecture, paintings, statues
- intangible material – oral archives

How are we to understand the term "specific nature of their heritage" since in one of his conferences Saint Vincent explicitly speaks of the Daughters of Charity *"having only for convent the houses of the sick and that in which the Superioress resides, for cell a hired room, for chapel their parish church, for cloister the streets of the city, for enclosure obedience, with an obligation to go nowhere but to the houses of the sick, or places that are necessary to serve them..."* (August 24<sup>th</sup> 1659).

In our times it is obvious that the Company's heritage is not a matter of owning property. The vocation of a Daughter of Charity is a calling to Love: *"The spirit of your Company, Sisters, consists in the love of Our Lord, love of the poor, love of one another, humility and simplicity."* (Conference of Saint Vincent, 9<sup>th</sup> February 1653).

The formation that the Founders strove to give to the Daughters of Charity was meant to help them develop this love and, as far as possible, to live it. Christ and the Blessed Virgins are the models they are to imitate, while the Gospel and the Common Rules will provide the basic principles to help them respond to the cries of the Poor and their diverse needs in a given social context.

**So what is this heritage that has been bequeathed to us by our Founders?**

It is a combination of spiritual, temporal, artistic and intangible assets.

**1. Spiritual:** the teaching of the Founders, their writings, the Rules; the lives of the Founders, vocation lived out by Sisters over the centuries – even to the point of martyrdom. Awareness of the measures to be taken to preserve this fragile and precious aspect of our heritage as well as the desire to value it, make it known and explain it to the Vincentian Family.

**2. Temporal (secular):** architectural assets – ownership of property or the lease in perpetuity of locations connected with a particular work. These assets are classified and a thorough inventory is made of them.

**3. Artistic:** these assets have deeply spiritual associations: statues, paintings, medals, mosaics – and are to be found in many places.

**4. Intangible** assets: oral teaching, communication, exchanges, sharing, music, hymns, faith experiences, the contents of cassettes and videos – a whole range of values that give meaning to life.

Finally, the life story of the members of the Company, lives lived under the direction of the Spirit of Charity, the Spirit of Holiness, contain genuine spiritual experiences and this is the **hidden driving force** behind what we might describe as the specific form our “cultural heritage” takes – **our relationship with God:** *“You shall love the Lord your God...”* and **our relationship with our neighbour,** *“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”*

Sister Claire Herrmann  
*Archives service*

O Mary,  
grant us hearts that are humble and gentle,  
attentive to the needs of others,  
so that we may receive with tenderness and compassion  
all the poor people you send our way

O Mary,  
give us hearts that are full of compassion  
so that we may love and serve them,  
so that we may banish discord,  
and see in our suffering and broken brothers and sisters  
the living presence of Jesus.

Lord,  
bless us with the hands of your poor ones.

Lord,  
smile on us through the eyes of your poor ones.

Lord,  
receive us one day  
in the blessed company of your poor ones.  
Amen.

Jean Vanier