

November- December 2006

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FATHER GREGORY GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

## **Advent 2006**

To all the Daughters of Charity

Dear Sisters,

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

### **A Christmas story for Advent 2006**

It was sometime around the beginning of Advent that a group of men from the Social Club approached me about the possibility of donating gifts for young children in one of the more distant villages for which I was responsible. I chose one of the villages on the coast. I drew up a list of the ages of the children and presented it to the members of the men's society. But along with the proposal, I suggested that instead of them giving me the gifts, they could come with me to visit the village, meet the children and distribute the gifts. They were delighted with that possibility.

On Christmas Day we got into three jeeps and drove along the Pacific Coast. The tide was in our favour as we drove along the beach to one of the most remote villages that I visited at that period of my ministry. I could not believe the number of children who were waiting for us at the entrance of the village. Thank God there was plenty to be shared. As we drew closer, it was touching to see their eyes wide open and the looks of joy on their faces as they looked forward to receiving a toy, just a simple toy, something that some of them may never have received in their whole life. The gentlemen were delighted to have the opportunity to bring some brightness into the lives of these small village children.

The first part of the proceedings was that the young men from the club met all the children, calling each of them by name, and played a series of games with them, which created a truly festive atmosphere. Then the gifts were distributed. What joy and excitement there was as they unwrapped the packages to find out what gift had been given them. They quickly went to their parents; mom or dad, or both, and showed them with great delight what they had received, something that they could call their very own.

Yet, at that very moment, what struck me was the attitude of the parents. As they observed their child's gift, they immediately began to compare it with the other gifts and then asked their children to claim something bigger and better than the others. What had at the beginning been delightfully receiving a cherished gift, turned out to be a fiasco of turmoil, anger and confusion.

The positive aspect of this experience was that each of the men had made a choice not just to donate money or hand over a gift to me so that I could distribute it to poor children. Instead, each chose to participate in the event and this gave him the opportunity to see how the people in a distant village lived and the joy that a simple gift could bring to the life of a poor child, and to come to know that child by name and interact in such a way that a bit of happiness might be brought to the child's heart.

The negative aspects were the attitudes of the adults which, in some sense, brought to an abrupt end the atmosphere of joy that had been created in a very simple, personal and relational way. So often, the desire to live a better life materially by comparing what one has with what others have, can create such negative attitudes as greed, selfishness, and discontent, which can even lead to violence and a lack of respect for the wellbeing of others. And these attitudes are passed on from parent to child!

I reflected a bit more deeply on the question of how "anti-values" get transmitted and can bring about the destruction of what was once a peaceful, harmonious and joyful environment. As Christians, as well as people of good will, we are called to create environments of harmony, peace, happiness and joy. We do so by passing on or transmitting to others values that are of a gospel nature, values that we call religious. But obviously we cannot pass on those values unless we have them ourselves. They are values which have been passed on to us from our families and from the Community's heritage.

Let us take a look at this story in the light of the Constitutions and Statutes, to see in what way it can help us in our preparation for Christmas 2006 during this Advent season. The prayer of generations of Christians at this time of the year is "*Maranatha.*" "*Come, Lord Jesus.*" You, as Daughters of Charity, create an environment for the Lord's presence when you invite others to participate in the life of the poor; when you invite others to come and see where and how the poor live. As Daughters of Charity, you create the possibility of the Lord's coming in your midst when you make personal contact with the poor and when you see them no longer as poor, but as friends (C 12a, 25a, 30b).

The second reflection that could be beneficial in this Advent season concerns the transmission of anti-values, or better still, the call to promote values that are Gospel-oriented. Today, more than ever, what is required are those values or attitudes needed to combat the anti-values that dominate our world. For this, we need to cry out more earnestly: "*Come, Lord Jesus: give us the strength that we need to be steadfast in the values that you have brought to us through the Gospels.*" One of the greatest values that have been passed on to us down the ages is our faith. It is the gift of faith which enables us to be like little children with their wide-eyed look of wonderment, as we are presented with a cherished gift, the Lord Jesus himself (C 10b, 50). The gift comes as word or sacrament (C.19b, c). It is the cherished gift of God's little ones, or of the Lord Jesus himself, discovered in relationships with people in community, or found in the depths of our own being (C 29d).

We contemplate God's goodness in the many, many ways that it has been revealed to us. Continually and gently, God invites us to repeat over and over again: *Come, Lord Jesus.* Sisters, may this time of Advent be for each and every one of you a special time of prayer (C.20c). Make sure you can find the time, make time and think of it as precious time, sacred time for being with the Lord. It is a precious and cherished gift that we receive and give to others. As Daughters of Charity you are called to be women of prayer. The people you are called to serve see you as people who pray and how let down they are when they fail to see that witness. Those you are called to serve look on you as experts in prayer and how saddened they are when they find the shallowness of your words. Those you are called to serve, and other people too, are drawn to men and women of prayer. When they fail to see that prayer is a fundamental part of your lives, they are no longer attracted by you and they simply walk away. If your prayer is rushed, shallow, repetitious, wordy or even lifeless, what a scandal it can be to those who expect to see you as women of prayer.

Sisters, let this time of Advent be a time to reflect on the quality of your prayer, the depth of your prayer and the source of your prayer (C21a). Let one of the main ingredients of your prayer be the Word of God as it is proclaimed in the Bible, the Word of God that is proclaimed by the lips of those who cry out to us for help and compassion. It is the Word of God that is exchanged among all those whom we call friends, be these members of the community, the people we serve out of love, other members of the Vincentian Family, members of the Church or the people we meet on a daily basis. (C25c).

Let silence, too, be one of the ingredients of your prayer, so that you can truly listen to what God is saying to you in the depths of your heart. Silence is necessary in

order to hear clearly the gentle voice of the Lord who speaks his love to you, his love for you (C.21c).

Let another ingredient be time. Let there be sufficient time devoted to prayer at the beginning of the day. In the course of the day slow down, come to a halt, so that you may hear what the Lord wants to tell you. At the end of the day dedicate time to recognising the goodness and the graces with which you and others have been blessed during the day, as well as to asking for forgiveness for graces to which you did not respond (C19d, S4).

Let another ingredient be space; sacred space, space you can call special, a place of encounter, a place of peace, a place that can easily be identified as God's place. That space can be shared with others, with friends in community, with the poor, with the elderly, or it can just be shared between yourselves and God (C19c, S 3a,b,c).

For Daughters of Charity, prayer is closely linked to action. *"Give me a woman of prayer and she will be capable of anything."* (cf. SV XI, 83). Contemplation and service are united in the life of a Daughter of Charity. They nourish and influence each other. Through this intimate union of prayer and mission, the Daughter of Charity becomes a contemplative in action, an apostle of prayer (C. 21b).

In conclusion, Sisters, let us join in prayer with the rest of our Vincentian Family and with all the people of God, as we say, *Come, Lord Jesus, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love.*

Saint Vincent reminds us:

*"Our Lord himself was a man of great prayer; and it was said that from his earliest childhood he would go apart from the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph in order to pray to God his Father. Throughout all his laborious life, he was careful and very exact about praying. People saw him deliberately go to Jerusalem; he went aside from his disciples to pray and went into the desert for no other purpose. O my God! How often did he not prostrate himself there, face downward on the ground! With what humility he presented himself to God his Father, burdened with the sins of the world! Lastly, he prayed even when exhausted by the fasting he undertook. His chief and constant exercise was prayer. On the night of his Passion, he again went apart from his disciples to pray and we are told that he went apart in the garden where he often went to pray. He prayed there with such fervour and devotion that as you know, his body sweated blood and water from the efforts he made."* (SV IX, 326, English edition).

May you have a blessed Advent and a holy Christmas.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, CM  
Superior General

**MOTHER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL**

To all the Visitatrices and the Regional Superior

**Letter of 16<sup>th</sup> December 2006**

Dear Sister

Some recent “family news” has impelled me to send you this little note a few days before Christmas; I would appreciate your sharing it with your Sisters and know that it will nourish their Advent prayers.

*“God Sabaoth, come back, we pray, look down from heaven and see and visit this vine; protect what your own hand has planted.”*

Ps 80, Mass of December 16<sup>th</sup>

Typhoon Durian which ravaged the province of Bicol in the archipelago of the Philippines, and afterwards the region of Vung Tau (a peninsula in the south of Vietnam, also known as Cap-Saint-Jacques) captured the attention of all the media for several days. We have all been praying for the Sisters in these Provinces and for their countries. I think it is important to share with you today the updates that have been sent to me from Sister Maria Teresa Mueda and Sister Justina Tran Thi Tuoi, the Visitatrices of the Provinces of the Philippines and Vietnam.

In the region of Bicol, located in the most southeastern part of the island of Luzon, Typhoon Durian was a deadly mixture of gusts of wind, mudslides and rock fall that recalled the catastrophe that took place in Leyte in February 2006. The various communities of Daughters of Charity serving in Bicol are distributed among schools (6), a hospital, parish (1) and residences for elderly persons (2). In addition, more than one hundred of the Sisters of the Province are originally from that region. All the schools, particularly the one in Tabaco, suffered severe damage to the roofing. Thank God there were no lives lost among the Sisters, their families or their collaborators, but the overall death toll of more than 1000 is strongly felt. The Daughters of Charity responded immediately, with schools in other regions deciding to cancel their celebrations planned for Christmas in order to send donations to the works that suffered damage. The nurses and other personnel at Mother Seton Hospital worked day and night during the emergency period. At present, the Sisters in Naga are directing the intake of volunteers and the coordination of supplies in connection with the Red Cross, and other Sisters are available to listen and provide psychological and spiritual support to the victims and those who witnessed this catastrophe.

Durian also caused heavy damage in Vung Tau. The Sisters’ house and the adjacent free school lost their roofs. Among the Sisters’ neighbours, two were instantly killed during the typhoon. In Vietnam, just as in the Philippines, the Sisters came to the immediate aid of the victims.

On behalf of all of you, the Company has already sent aid to the two Provinces involved. Let us also support them by our prayers so that the people who have been so greatly affected may still experience the peace and happiness of Christmas.

I had mentioned in a previous note the violence experienced by our Sisters serving in Africa. In Mozambique, armed robbers once again recently attacked a car full of Sisters. A similar incident also took place in Nigeria. The Sisters in the Province of Haiti have also told me about the daily abductions occurring among the population and the climate of unrest, especially in the capital, Port-au-Prince.

In my letter for January 1<sup>st</sup>, I will share more news, some of which is less tragic, but I didn't want to delay in asking for your prayers for the victims of Typhoon Durian.

Together, let us express our gratitude to Mary for her protection of our Sisters. Through the intercession of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, let us ask the Lord to strengthen our Vincentian insights, so that we know how to stand with poor persons through our prayer, specific service and the defence of their rights, in exceptional times as well as in our humble day to day life as servants.

With my devoted affection and my good wishes to each of you for a holy and happy Christmas.

Sister Evelyne Franc  
Daughter of Charity

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

12<sup>th</sup> Study Document on the revised Constitutions

**CHAPTER VII:  
ADMINISTRATION OF TEMPORAL GOODS  
(CC. 88-95; ST 72-76)**

**INTRODUCTION**

Very little has been written from a Vincentian viewpoint about the administration of temporal goods. We believe that the Company in general, the Provinces and the local communities, have enough information and knowledge, or at least sufficient resources, to properly manage temporal goods both financially and legally. However, we need to reflect on this matter from a Vincentian angle since our spirituality must also be concerned with these questions. Our study of Chapter VII of the Constitutions gives us the opportunity to do this.

We invite you to go beyond a merely theoretical approach to the subject. It would be good if local communities and Provinces could use this occasion to review

how they put into practice the administration of temporal goods. And if they come to the conclusion that they need to change some way of acting, they should have the courage to do this. This chapter on administration makes reference to the three levels of competence in the Company- the local, Provincial and general level – it is not concerned here with the management of temporal goods at a personal level because this is adequately dealt with in C.30d and in the *Instruction on the Vows* pp. 74-78.

The chapter opens with a quotation from Mt. 6, 25-26. This was not included in the 1983 Constitutions, where the introduction to the relevant chapter was a text from Saint Vincent, although the content of both quotations is rather similar.<sup>1</sup> The new text is a very appropriate framework for the chapter on temporal goods: these are intended to be at the service of life. And although it is necessary to have temporal goods, these should never undermine our confidence in God’s Providence. On the contrary, our use of these goods should strengthen our filial trust in this Providence.

## II. MAIN POINTS OF THE DOCUMENT

The eight articles of the Constitutions and the five of the Statutes that make up this chapter can be arranged under two headings: general principles and specific ways of applying them. Following this pattern, we will try to develop the guidelines presented to us by the Constitutions and at the same time point out any changes that have been introduced into the text of the 2004 Constitutions.

### 1 GENERAL PRINCIPLES CONCERNING THE ADMINISTRATION OF TEMPORAL GOODS

**a) The temporal goods of the Company have a twofold objective:** on the one hand “*they make possible the service of those who are poor*” and on the other hand they are used for “*the support of the Sisters.*” (C.89; cf C. 88a). In the Constitutions of 1983 this double objective is not stated so clearly but it is something that is well formulated in the teaching of Saint Vincent. Indeed the Founders considered temporal goods to be “*the patrimony of Jesus Christ*” which comes to us “*through the sweat of poor people*”, and they are meant to be used for the two purposes mentioned above.<sup>2</sup>

**b) We have to use these goods in the spirit of the gospel.** The Constitutions interpret the spirit of the gospel as follows: “*The Sisters refrain from acting as proprietors and avoid any semblance of luxury, excessive wealth or accumulation of goods, as well as anything superfluous.*” (C.88b). Underpinning this guideline is the decree on the renewal of religious life issued by the Second Vatican Council.<sup>3</sup> So in this matter, the Company is simply following the Church’s teaching about consecrated life in general. C. 89 uses other terms to describe, in a particular way, this same gospel spirit in which the Sisters should use the goods of the Company: these “*are administered with responsibility, competence, prudence, justice, and trust in Providence.*” All these recommendations are to be found in the teaching of the Founders.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. IX, 99, Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1643 on *the imitation of village girls*

<sup>2</sup> Cf. XI, 121, repetition of prayer, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1655

<sup>3</sup> In particular, number 13 of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the following: X, 876-877; IX, 99-100; SML. Letter 545



**c) All the Sisters are responsible for the Company's goods** (cf. C.90). There has been a slight change to the Constitutions of 1983: the Sisters have moved on from being "co-responsible" to being "responsible". The same idea is being expressed but the latter wording is more forceful than the earlier one because now the emphasis is on the individual, for individual responsibility cannot be watered down by collective co-responsibility. But let us have a clear understanding of the responsibility the Constitutions are calling us to practise. Not all Sisters devote their time to the administration or the management of goods in important matters, but each one should have a very keen sense of her own responsibility with regard to the goods of the poor or those of the Company. They must take care to look after these goods so that they do not deteriorate, are abandoned or destroyed.

Of course, those Sisters who have been given the specific work of administration, the Treasurers, have particular responsibility for goods. C.91b relates this principle of responsibility to that of subsidiarity. We would explain this connection between these two principles as follows: there are three levels of administration; general, Provincial and local. The Sisters in charge at these three levels are the Treasurer General, the Provincial Treasurers and the local Treasurers (where these exist) and they all exercise their office under the direction of their respective Superiors, in conformity with universal and proper law, and keeping in mind the different civil laws of the countries where the Company is established. Subsidiarity means that the boundaries of responsibility at each level are strictly adhered to. Throughout the whole Book of the Constitutions we can see the powers of each level clearly defined. In practice, subsidiarity in the management of goods means that in principle, the higher level of administration should not interfere in administrative affairs carried out a lower level. It also means that those engaged in administration should not have recourse to a higher level of authority when dealing with matters for which they themselves are responsible.

In the final analysis, the principle of subsidiarity in administration seeks only to organise this administration well and at the same time promote responsibility and collaboration on the Sisters' part. Obviously, the higher level of administration should only intervene when the lower level is not functioning properly, whether this be at local or Provincial level, and this for reasons of subsidiarity.

## 2.SPECIFIC APPLICATIONS

**a) The sharing of goods.** The Constitutions make provision for this to happen both within and outside of the Company. The basis for sharing goods between communities is set out at the beginning of C. 90: "*The goods of the Company are common goods.*" And the Exhortation, *Perfectae Caritatis* no. 13 specifically proposes the sharing of goods: "*Provinces and houses of the different institutes should share their [goods] with one another, those who have more, helping those who are in need.*" The Constitutions present various specific ways of sharing goods. For example, at Provincial level, "*the local communities send any surplus to their Province.*" The new text goes further than what was indicated in the Constitutions of 1983 which simply proposed that local communities should contribute towards the expenses of their Province (cf. 1983 Constitution 3.54). This new change is more in keeping with the vow of poverty which calls for dependency in the use of goods. In

fact, this new formula prevents communities accumulating goods. The annual budget which is required by this form of administration, can basically be seen as a global request that each local community makes for the use of goods throughout the whole year. (cf. St. 75c). And at this local level, St. 72a asks for mutual assistance between local communities of the same Province. This is arranged at Provincial level. The *Guide for Provincial Treasurers* points out that it is the Treasurer's responsibility to be vigilant and see that all the local communities of the Province have modest but sufficient resources. She will do this, of course, by suggesting specific measures to the Visitatrice.<sup>5</sup>

At general level, it is the Provinces that support the General Curia. This is another way of sharing goods. St. 72b states the need for such contributions to be made in a specific way. The practice is for the "general tax" to be fixed by the General Council at the level proposed by the Treasurer General and that it should be proportionally reckoned on a "per capita" basis, that is to say, on the average gross income per inhabitant, a figure that is arrived at by dividing the Gross National Product of a country by the number of its inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> Another new way of sharing resources at this level, indicated in C.90, is that the General Curia "coordinates interprovincial aid." St. 72a specifically states that it is the Superioress General with her Council who coordinates the sharing of goods between Provinces in the way proposed by the Treasurer General. The *Guide for the Provincial Treasurer* states even more explicitly: "*Provinces which do not have sufficient resources of their own are encouraged to establish medium and long-term goals for their development and needs of the poor. They will present these to the Superioress with her Council, justifying them with well-defined plans and estimates given in US dollars or in euros.*"

*"Provinces that have surplus funds send them (preferably by electronic transfer) to the Superioress General with her Council, for the needs of the General Curia and interprovincial aid:*

- *Construction of houses of formation, houses for the elderly Sisters, and other such projects*
- *Development projects for Provinces that have greater needs, according to the plans they submitted to the Superioress General and her Council*
- *Formation, reception, retraining, travel of missionary Sisters*
- *Financial support for Sisters working in countries where the economic level is unstable*
- *Emergency expenses, catastrophes and the needs of those who are poor<sup>7</sup>*

Interprovincial aid is coordinated in order to ensure that this aid is both effective and equitable.

As regards sharing of goods with people outside the community, the Constitutions state briefly, "*in the same way, they (the Provinces) remain attentive to*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Guide for the Provincial Treasurer of the Daughters of Charity* p.23

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Guide for the Provincial Treasurer of the Daughters of Charity* p.21

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.22

*the needs of persons who are poor, and the needs of the Church*” (C.90). Each Province and each local community will decide on the specific ways they will help, having first obtained the required authorisations (cf. St. 73). These latest Constitutions invite us to live in solidarity with the poor, something demanded by the Gospel and by our Vincentian vocation.

**b) Purchases, alienations, debts, obligations, foundations, legacies and gifts** (cf. CC. 91-94; St.73). The Company and the Provinces have the right to engage in all these activities but always in conformity with universal and proper law and in accordance with the Church’s teaching and the laws of the country or countries where the Province is established. This is tantamount to saying that the Company, the Provinces and local communities *“have juridical personality”* (cf. C.91a). Proper law regarding all these administrative actions is well explained in the articles of the Constitutions cited above. So we will refer back to the Constitutions because a careful reading of them is essential.

We would like to concentrate on C.94. In the first part of this article (section a), there has been a small change introduced: in order to accept foundations, bequests or gifts that entail obligations or risks for the Company, it is necessary to have permission from, not the Superior General, as stated in the 1983 Constitutions, but the Superioress General with her Council. The second part of Constitution 94 is new. Why does the Company not consider itself responsible for the financial consequences of juridical acts entered into by a Sister without the previous written approval of the competent authority? It is a question of safeguarding the patrimony of the Company because ultimately this is the patrimony of the poor and the Company simply administers this patrimony. The financial transactions that Sisters enter into should be sufficiently endorsed by the competent authority, precisely in order to avoid mismanagement. Saint Vincent insisted that we are simply the administrators of goods and that we will be answerable before God for their good use and management.<sup>8</sup> Administration, today, is so complicated that we cannot take too many precautions.

**c) Submitting accounts and giving information** (cf. C.95; St. 75). The accounts of administration at general level are submitted once a year to the Superior General (cf. St. 44, 50b); the accounts of Provincial administration are given at least once a year to the Superioress General, and the accounts of local administration are sent to the Visitatrice by the Sister Servant at least once a year. In the Constitutions of 2004, the following paragraph has been added. *“During the year, the Superioress General receives regularly from the Treasurer General a report on the administration of the goods of the Company.”*(C. 95a, cf. C.66d). This proposal seems logical since the Treasurer General administers the temporal goods under the direction of the Superioress General with her Council (cf. C.69a). So it is necessary to give frequent reports. The need to present accounts is not confined to matters relating to the goods of the community. Sisters who are in charge of a work or who work with some outside organisation, have to present regular accounts to their Sister Servants. Once again, the reason for this is to be found in the vow of poverty.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. XI, 723, Recommendations to the Fathers in the chapter, *“Do not waste the goods of the community. Zeal for the spiritual needs of the neighbour.”*

Giving information makes people responsible and more disposed to collaborate. That is why the Constitutions require those in Provincial administration to give clear information to local communities every year about their management of temporal goods. In the same way, the Sister Servants give their Sisters an account of what was spent during the year. There was no mention of this in the 1983 Constitutions; it has very fittingly been added to the Constitutions of 2004 (cf. St.75b).

St. 75a adds this new guideline: *“the accounts of a work entrusted to the community are kept separate from those of the community.”* Accounting, by its very nature, demands clarity. It is not possible to mix different accounts.

### **III. QUESTIONS TO HELP PERSONAL REFLECTION AND COMMUNITY SHARING (OR INTER-COMMUNITY OR PROVINCIAL SHARING)**

- Compare the present Constitutions with those of 1983. Check out the changes introduced into the articles mentioned in this document.
- Pinpoint something that has particularly caught your attention concerning temporal goods – something in the actual text of the Constitutions or in this explanatory document.
- The Constitutions state that every Sister is responsible for temporal goods. Responsibilities vary according to the office and the circumstances of each Sister. What is your responsibility in this matter?
- As far as you can tell, do you think that local administration is carried out well from a Vincentian point of view?
- Is there a good and serious level of information sharing about the administration of temporal goods in your Province and in your local community?

### **IV. SUPPLEMENTARY READING TO HELP US TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS 12<sup>TH</sup> DOCUMENT**

- Instructions on the vows of the Daughters of Charity, Chapter IV: “The poverty of the Daughter of Charity”, pp. 61-73
- Guide for the Provincial Treasurer of the Daughters of Charity, pp. 9-34

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

**PHOTO**

*I received many letters and good wishes for my feast day and at Christmas and New Year. Thank you for your kindness. I would like to be able to answer each one personally but it just isn't possible. So I will use this page of the "Echoes" to thank you for all those letters and for wishing me peace and happiness in the New Year.*

*My own wish is that the Infant God will bless you and each of your communities. In the coming year may you have the strength you need to serve those who are poor as our Founders wished us to do. With the assurance of my prayers always,*

*Your affectionate brother in Saint Vincent,  
Father Javier Alvarez, CM*

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Guidelines for the Monthly Retreat

**“The glorious freedom of the children of God”**

(Rm. 8: 21)

Freedom is a concept that is becoming increasingly valued in society and in the Church. In the past, it was quite common for Christians to be somewhat suspicious about the idea of freedom, as if it were not compatible with Gospel teachings. These days, the Church recognises and openly teaches that freedom is every person's inalienable right. Seen from the perspective of faith, freedom is a gift from God. According to Pauline theology, freedom is an essential prerequisite for the development of the Christian life. The Second Vatican Council even dedicated 44 paragraphs specifically to this concept of freedom.

What is freedom? It is the capability that individuals have to act for themselves in seeking their own good. When we speak of human freedom, we are referring to interior freedom, spiritual freedom, free will that is rooted in understanding and volition and through which a human being can come to know and desire that which is true and good. Human freedom, true freedom, must be related to what is good, rather than evil and sin, even though the latter is always an available option for a person to choose. A car, for example, is devised and designed so that the owners can drive wherever they wish, in comfort and security. Its purpose is for good, even though we know that unfortunately cars can cause accidents. The purpose of freedom, then, is to lead to good. That is how a person becomes fully human. God does not wish humans to exercise their freedom in the cause of evil, even though this is always an option. [Giovanni Pico della Mirandola](#), a humanist in the XVth

century, expressed in a beautiful way the possibilities that freedom offers to human beings. After creating Adam, God said: *"We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine."* (Oration on the Dignity of Man)

#### **JESUS: ONE WHO IS FREE AND WHO SETS US FREE**

In the Gospels, Jesus is presented as someone who is completely free, who always acts out of love and from his personal convictions. Jesus' freedom, however, is not independence, but rather obedience and humility before God his Father. For Saint Vincent, Jesus is above all else Adorer of the Father, Servant of his loving plan and Evangelizer of those who are poor. The words *"abba"* and *"amen"* could be used to sum up his life: on the one hand, Jesus' trusting, childlike abandonment before God, his own divine identity and the greatness of his mission; on the other hand, docility, obedience, mission, service and dependence.

Jesus inculcated in his disciples the spirit of docility to the Father and service of their brothers and sisters. Everything is to be done out of love. *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."* (Mt. 7:21) After washing his disciples' feet, he said to them: *"If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet."* (Jn. 13:14). As he died on the cross, he declared, *"It is finished."* (Jn. 19:29) and this could be a summary of his life.

Even more than being free himself, Jesus is one who sets others free. He openly declared to the Jews who believed in him: *"If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (Jn. 8:31) Jesus was anointed and sent to *"proclaim liberty to captives... to let the oppressed go free"* (Lk. 4:18). Saint Paul spoke to the Romans of *"the glorious freedom of the children of God"* (Rm. 8:21), and reminded the Galatians that *"when Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free"*, at the same time warning them that *"you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence; rather, serve one another through love."* (Gal. 5:1, 13) Paul often presented himself as a servant and even a slave of the community. (cf. Rm. 1:1; Gal. 1:10)

#### **FACTORS THAT PROMOTE INTERIOR FREEDOM**

##### **\* Humility.**

Humility is truth, as Saint Teresa affirmed. Truth is always liberating. Saint Vincent's thinking was quite similar to that of this Spanish saint. Those who become involved in lying are not free because they pretend to be more or

different from what they are; they become trapped. This causes distressing and enslaving situations; it leads to a form of tension, for such people cannot breathe deeply and freely; they are afraid of not measuring up. We need to be liberated, set free from all these lies. The Vincentian virtue of humility frees us from what ensnares us internally.

**\* Truth.**

*"The truth will set you free"*, Jesus tells us in the Gospel. (Jn. 8: 31) Perhaps this is the most profound form of liberation. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent is presented as a liar, which is why the Gospel says that the devil, when telling lies, is being true to his own nature. (cf. Jn. 8:44) Through a lie, the first man and woman, who were tempted in the Garden of Eden, became slaves to concupiscence or greed. Whoever seeks truth, then, finds freedom.

**\*Love.**

True love means that one no longer thinks of self. In this sense, love causes one to be freed of self. The person who loves is liberated from everything except love. Love is the only bond that is liberating, because it is the truth of being. All that is not love is slavery.

**CONSEQUENCES OF FREEDOM**

**\* Peace and serenity.**

When we feel loved by the Father, we are automatically filled with the glorious freedom of God's beloved children. Love frees all that it touches. It brings freedom from fear, from lack of acceptance, from failure and death. Fear is the greatest enemy of the human heart. The love of the Father does not free anyone from misunderstanding, but rather those who experience the Father's love feel so free and safe that nothing can defeat them. Failures, illness and death will still come. Love cannot prevent these happening, but love will make the beloved a mighty fortress.

**\* Community relationships.**

As human beings, we are free when we are interiorly liberated from self interest, possessions and personal desires. In this case, God and God's kingdom can be present within us without any difficulty. On the other hand, insofar as we are filled with selfishness, we will not have room for the kingdom of God, because the space is already occupied. This can help us more easily understand how the first commandment is identified with the first beatitude: the more we are poor, detached and unselfish, the more God is God in us. The more we are our own "god," the less God can be God in us. The way is very clear: *"He must increase; I must decrease."* (Jn. 3: 30) How is this lived out in community? If Sisters are wrapped up in themselves and their own interests, dissensions will arise and community life will be weakened. What is the way to safeguard community? It is through freedom understood as spiritual poverty which makes us embrace all the qualities found in the Sermon on the Mount.

**\*Human maturity,**

This is indicated by emotional stability. When people are full of themselves and absorbed in their own concerns, they can be greatly disturbed by good fortune or adverse events that either elate them or cast them down. They lack stability because they are not free, but rather are attached to their own interests and possessions. On the other hand, there are those who are liberated from interior bonds and have advanced in the poverty and humility of Jesus Christ. The first thing they attain is objectivity (all things are relative). These individuals, shaped by the Vincentian spirit that complements the beatitudes, are full of peacefulness, strength, patience, gentleness and balance. The poor persons of the Gospel are spiritual aristocrats. Nothing and no one can disturb their interior peace and serenity because it is impossible to lose what they do not possess. Interior freedom thus makes people mature, balanced and stable in their reactions and emotions, exemplary human beings of high calibre.

**FOR PERSONAL PRAYER AND SHARING**

- Meditatively read the Sermon on the Mount, c.f. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew's Gospel.
- Do I consider myself sufficiently free interiorly?
- How can I grow in interior freedom?

Father Javier Álvarez,  
*Director General*

VISITATRICES' ENCOUNTER

Province of Congo

**Living amid situations of violence**

Over the years, Congo Kinshasa has been a place of conflict between communist and capitalist countries. Although the country is rich in resources both on its land and underground (diamonds, gold, uranium, tin, etc.), 60 million Congolese are poor, and a large proportion of the population lives in destitution.

From 1998 onward, terrible conflicts have taken place between Congo and several countries and unstable groups. The northern part of the country is controlled by Uganda, the east by Rwanda, and the West and South by the government. By order of the military (who themselves obey orders from businessmen in the country or



abroad), the people are obliged to work at mineral extraction or logging precious timber.

Despite the presence of the United Nations, insecurity and violence are widespread in the country:

- arbitrary arrests and mass executions.
- raping of women, girls and the very young, accompanied by torture, wounding, mutilation and death. The consequences are even worse: fear of contracting HIV, mental illness, rejection by their husband and family, etc. In the rural areas, it is primarily the women who work in the fields and support the family. Many of them have abandoned their work out of fear of being attacked. This leads to widespread malnutrition, etc.
- cruel treatment and assassinations of persons who dare to speak out against these forms of exploitation.
- pillaging, destruction of infrastructure (hospitals and schools), as well as churches and houses. On June 25, 2005, in the city of Mbandaka where the Provincial House is located, the military launched rifle fire non-stop for 7 hours, looting homes and killing anyone who dared to resist them. That same day, they raided our medical supplies intended for the communities along the river. One of the churches in Kinshasa was ransacked in an attempt to discourage the bishops who were involved in raising awareness among the people.
- extortions and robbery at gunpoint.

During the night of January 24th, 2006, members of the military entered the Provincial House in Mbandaka, threatening to kill us if we did not give them money. Since then, our three houses in the capital have been guarded by soldiers.

In spite of these dangerous situations, the Sisters always take the side of those who are poor, never wanting to give up. Every day, they ask the Lord to sustain them in their continued efforts at forming young people in friendship and peace. Saint Vincent would say to us today: *“You must be ready to serve those who are poor wherever you are sent: with the army, as you did when you were called there, with poor criminals and, generally speaking, wherever you can assist poor persons, since that is your purpose”* ... and today, in situations of grave violence.

Sister Suzanne ILOKO  
*Visitatrice of the Province of Congo*

### PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

## **Migration and inter-religious dialogue** Perspectives and challenges

**175 MILLION MIGRANTS**

According to the latest report of a United Nations' Commission, the number of migrants in the world is about 175 million persons. This figure includes:

- refugees and asylum seekers, who in some cases have been forcibly expelled from lands to which they hope to return,

- those who have been displaced by war or have fled situations of violence and injustice in the form of genocide, oppression, or discrimination,

- economic migrants, who travel abroad, sometimes at personal expense and danger, seeking a new life and livelihood elsewhere to escape the endemic poverty of their homelands,

- others who have relocated due to factors connected with global mobility (new professions connected with economic globalisation).

- migrants who are internally displaced in their own country and whose number reaches almost 30 million. Because of violence, natural disaster, or human rights violations, these people must flee their homes, farms, and occupations for other parts of their home country, often finding themselves in squalid camps. Although the plight of internally displaced persons is often less publicised and visible than that of international migrants, the rights and living situations of such migrants are not protected by international law; hence their suffering is often greater and is marked by famine and minimal or non-existent health care.

#### **MOST MIGRANTS ARE NON-CHRISTIANS**

Although there are no accurate statistics related to the religious affiliation of migrants, one can safely estimate that the vast majority are non-Christians or followers of other religions. Even if all other factors were equal, Christians make up about 20% of the population of the world, which means that about 80% adhere to another religion or to no religion.

Moreover, in today's world it is often the predominantly non-Christian countries where poverty, war, and oppression are significant factors, that encourage migration towards traditionally Christian countries that have now become the "host" or receiving countries. According to United Nations' estimates, 60% of migrants are now living in the "developed" countries of Western Europe, North America, and Australia.

#### **THE VIRTUE OF HOSPITALITY**

The current situation of almost 200 million migrants underlines the importance of the virtue of hospitality. It is worth noting how often the practice of hospitality is urged by the New Testament:

- Paul says: "make hospitality your special concern" (Rom. 12: 13)

- Peter advises: "offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." (1 Pet. 4:9)

- Timothy calls to mind the impressive hospitality of a widow (1 Tim. 5: 10)

- the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes that in offering hospitality we may be entertaining angels without knowing it (Heb.13: 2), as Abraham did (Gn. 18:2).

For the first Christians, the practice of offering hospitality to refugees and newcomers was not just a pastime. Today, it should be one of the characteristics of

the Christian community worldwide. All foreigners, displaced and uprooted people who are in need should benefit from our hospitality.

Hospitality consists first of all in meeting people's urgent needs: food, water, shelter, health care. Migrants also need to be welcomed, to find others who can help them to adjust to the socio-economic aspects of their new culture of insertion. Language training, literacy classes, and preparing and accompanying migrants through the complexity of documentation and procedures required for living in modern societies - residence cards, work permits, drivers' licences, school registration, insurance, social security etc. – these are all ways of expressing the virtue of hospitality in modern times.

Immigrants leave behind all they know and love, and they may have experienced the trauma of war and its consequences: the death of loved ones, violence, looting and rape. They are subjected to oppression, humiliation, suspicion, indifference, and the uncompromising attitudes of some persons in authority. These people who have experienced the worst in life have a desperate need to be accepted, understood and valued. Hospitality, therefore, requires us to make an effort to respect the dignity of migrants, to listen to and sympathise with their problems, to make them comfortable in their new surroundings, to take seriously what is important to them, to accept them for who they are, without feeling compelled to remake them according to our own ideas.

#### **DIALOGUE WITH MIGRANTS**

Most migrants are believers and follow one of the major religions of the world, even though they may be less than perfect in the practice of their faith and their religious understanding might lack theological depth and consistency. Nevertheless, in many cases it is their religious faith that has enabled them to survive the traumas of violence and hunger, to sustain hope in situations that must have often seemed hopeless, to have a vision of a future for their children, to find the courage and patience needed at every stage of their journey and, most of all, to have the awareness that they are not alone in their plight and misery.

On many occasions I have personally encountered the faith of migrants - Christian, Islamic, Buddhist etc. - and I am always greatly impressed. Where do these people find the ability to believe, to keep on believing, in spite of all they have suffered? I think that our first reaction to the faith of migrants must be that of standing in reverential awe. We must remain humble in the presence of what God's Spirit has done again and again among simple, ordinary people. The teachings of the Church about migrants are quite challenging, and are, in fact, far ahead of our popular consciousness. The Magisterium calls on us to go beyond basic Christian charity and hospitality and even to go beyond respect for the other as "other". Church teachings call us to dialogue with migrants of other faiths. Let us listen to the words of the late Pope John Paul II spoken on the World Day of Migration in 2001, and then try to analyse what the Pope wants to tell us in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*:

"I called to mind the task of the Church with respect to non-Christian migrants, emphasising that by their presence they create new occasions for contacts and cultural exchanges. These urge the Christian community to welcome, to dialogue,

to help and to build fraternity. This presupposes a deeper awareness of the importance of the Catholic doctrine on non-Christian religions (cf. Declaration *Nostra Aetate*), so as to be able to undertake an attentive, constant and respectful interreligious dialogue as a means of mutual knowledge and enrichment.” (no. 55)

Rather than regarding migrants primarily as “a problem to be solved,” John Paul II sees their presence in the host country as something positive, as “new opportunities” for growth and cultural interchange.

How should Christians respond? The Pope repeats the four elements of hospitality touched upon above: *welcome* migrants, *help* them and attend to their needs, *enter into dialogue* and *create positive relationships* with them. In order to do this, the Christian must understand better the open and accepting attitude of the Church as expressed in documents like the Vatican Council declaration *Nostra Aetate*. And what goal do we hope to achieve? That we dare to join with migrants of other beliefs in an inter-religious dialogue that is:

- *attentive*, paying attention to what is important to them, what gives their life meaning and value,
- *continual*, a patient, ongoing, long-term commitment,
- *respectful*, seeing beyond the migrants’ material poverty, recognising their faith in God,
- *filled with a spirit of faith*, knowing how to discover the presence of God’s Spirit acting in their lives.

The Pope explains what we can expect from this dialogue:

- improved understanding so that we can overcome prejudices, stereotypes, superficialities, and half-truths
- mutual enrichment so that both parties grow in authenticity and faith, something that has nothing to do with proselytism.

As Mother Teresa repeatedly said, in this way we will become better Christians and they will become better Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists etc.

#### **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “DIALOGUE”?**

Many people who befriend, serve and associate with migrants hesitate to enter into true dialogue, due to a lack of understanding. They think that dialogue essentially means starting religious discussions with others. Christians working with migrants might feel insufficiently prepared in their own Christian faith to enter into a theological discussion with others. In addition, it is sometimes assumed that in the case of migrants who in the past have been mistreated, manipulated, and marginalised, it is better to avoid raising religious issues that would make the migrant feel uneasy or alienated. I believe that in most cases it is neither necessary nor appropriate to engage migrants in religious discussions. Rather, we should always be open to any questions or discussions that the migrant might initiate.

When we look at Church teachings, we see that dialogue does not mean talking about religion. By “dialogue”, the Church instead proposes a new approach to the reality of those who follow other religious traditions. In his encyclical

Redemptoris Missio, Pope John Paul II indicated the breadth of the meaning of dialogue.

*“A vast field lies open to dialogue, which can assume many forms and expressions: from exchanges between experts in religious traditions or official representatives of those traditions to cooperation for integral development and the safeguarding of religious values; and from a sharing of their respective spiritual experiences to the so-called “dialogue of life,” through which believers of different religions bear witness before each other in daily life to their own human and spiritual values, and help each other to live according to those values in order to build a more just and fraternal society.” (RM 57)*

These forms or expressions of dialogue have been generally developed in Church documents as four types of interreligious encounter: the dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange and the sharing of religious experience. Emphasis is on various dimensions of our life as Christians, the way that we as Christians live with others, a way that involves interaction at the levels of being, doing, thinking, and reflecting on one’s experience of the Divine. From the Church’s perspective, and one that is also shared by other Christians and members of other religions, conversation, discussion and exchange play an important role in all human life. However, discussion or debate does not mean dominating. Moreover, the life that is shared, what we call “dialogue” must not be limited to formal occasions or restricted only to official representatives.

#### **PRIORITY GIVEN TO “DIALOGUE OF LIFE”**

In 1979, the Asian bishops were already trying to put the emphasis on the quality relationships that ordinary Christian housewives, labourers, and students have with their neighbors of other faiths. They called this “the dialogue of life,” the most essential aspect of dialogue which occurs when *“each gives witness to the other concerning the values they have found in their faith, and through the daily practice of brotherhood, helpfulness, open-heartedness and hospitality, each show themselves to be a God-fearing neighbour. True Christians and neighbours of another faith offer to a busy world values arising from God’s message when they revere the elderly, conscientiously rear the young, care for the sick and the poor in their midst, and work together for social justice, welfare, and human rights.”*

The bishops here do not see dialogue solely on the level of “talking or discussing” but also as a way “of living together.” Dialogue is no longer reserved only for scholars and religious leaders but rather it is the responsibility of ordinary believers. Dialogue is no longer an activity of the elite but instead the duty of all Christians towards their neighbours.

Over time, the documents from Rome have incorporated the essential idea that *“each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practise dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way...For most, “this will be through what is called ‘the dialogue of life’” (Redemptoris Missio 56-57).*

Did the Pope say that each Christian and every Christian community should be involved in dialogue? Yes, this statement is quite firm. The Pope is not referring to theological discussions, but about the way that Christians live with others.

I once gave a talk about dialogue in a parish in Indonesia. In the question and answer period, a woman raised her hand and said, "Father, I am a housewife and mother of four children; we live in a neighbourhood where most people are Muslims, but there are also some Buddhists. I never had the opportunity to enjoy formal education. How can I possibly enter into dialogue with others? I would make many mistakes in explaining my religion." I said, "You don't have to do that. That's not what the Church is asking of you. What you can do is to teach your children, by word and example, from the time they are small, that God also loves Muslims and Buddhists. You can make yourself available to take care of your neighbours' children if they have an emergency in the family. You can help them cook the traditional foods for their Islamic or Buddhist feast days. And when you do these things, you are giving a witness to what Christian faith is all about. That is dialogue."

#### **"DIALOGUE *VERSUS* PROCLAMATION" OR "DIALOGUE *WITH* PROCLAMATION?"**

Once we understand that interreligious dialogue is simply the way that Christians should share life with people of other faiths, the debate about "dialogue or proclamation" becomes clearer. When dialogue is mainly understood as conversation between Christians and the followers of other faiths, the question arises: should Christians devote their efforts to preaching the Gospel or should they deepen their own faith and seek to discover the faith of others? Should Christians try to discover what they have in common with other believers, or should they seek opportunities to proclaim those doctrinal elements which characterise and distinguish Christian faith from that of others? The debate has gone on, with inconclusive results, for 40 years since the publication of *Nostra Aetate*.

However, if dialogue is understood as the sharing of life at all levels among believers of various faiths, the issue is easier to resolve. Christians are called to share that life, which means more than simply living together in harmony or working for reconciliation after conflicts. It also involves coming to the aid of the weakest and neediest in our midst, working together in solidarity with and in the defence of the poor and victims of injustice, and sharing with one another our deepest motivation for living the way we do. *"This motivation is the personal encounter of each person with the Divine, whether it is imagined and expressed as doing God's will, coming into harmony with the eternal Tao, realising the Buddha-nature in oneself, or discovering one's identity with Brahman who exists beyond all attributes and images"*.

The crucial question is not whether the Church should proclaim the Gospel or engage in dialogue, but rather whether Christians are actually sharing life with others. The basic choice is not between a Church in dialogue or one proclaiming the Gospel. Instead, it is about being a Church that is following the Spirit's lead to experience life in a real way with others - and thus to constantly engage in dialogue, witness, and proclamation. If this does not happen, the Church will be existing in a self-imposed ghetto with little concern for and involvement with people of other faiths with whom Christians share culture, history, citizenship, and a common human destiny.

When people of different faiths truly live together (not simply inhabiting the same town) the question of dialogue is not a priority. When men and women, as brothers and sisters, work, study, struggle, celebrate, mourn together and face the universal crises of injustice, illness, and death, they don't have time to spend talking about "doctrine". Their focus is on immediate concerns of survival, taking care of the sick and needy, communicating cherished values to new generations, resolving problems and tensions in productive rather than in destructive ways, reconciling after conflicts, seeking to build more just, humane, and dignified societies. When believers actively cooperate in such activities, at certain rare but privileged moments, they also express what is deepest in their lives and hearts, that is, their respective faiths, the source of strength and inspiration that drives and guides all their activities.

## **ISSUES IN DIALOGUE WITH MIGRANTS**

When we try to live out the teaching of the Church in relation to migrants, we must not forget that interreligious encounters often begin with the concrete issues that migrants and those of every form of belief face daily in our pluralistic societies. I will mention only a few points for your consideration.

### **a. Sensitivity to religious sentiments**

Just as we do, Muslims, Hindus and others love their religion. It is the most precious thing they have and it gives them their identity. A thoughtless attack on their religion, even an unintended slight, can arouse profound reactions. As an example, we can look at the universal reaction in the Muslim world to the desecration of the Koran by the American military guarding the Muslim prisoners in Guantanamo. The American military had been mistreating the prisoners, transporting them blindfolded halfway across the world, subjecting them to humiliating interrogation, putting them in cages - all with very little reaction from Muslims. But once the military guards desecrated the Koran - the sacred text, the very Word of God - the reaction was swift and dramatic, with angry demonstrations in every Muslim country.

Through dialogue, we must learn to respect others' sensitivities, but we must not allow fear of mistakes to paralyse us. It is natural and probably inevitable that we will make mistakes, but others will forgive us if they see us to be sincere and ready to learn. Everyone is sensitive, but very few people are hypersensitive. We must not exaggerate other people's sensitivities, just as we must not ignore them.

### **b. Friendship with migrants**

Migrant women generally suffer the miseries of dislocation more than men do. Women are more vulnerable, more subject to cultural restrictions on their mobility and activities, because of their limited opportunities for education and restricted earning power, and the difficulties of child rearing in transient circumstances. When food is scarce, women migrants are more likely to be malnourished than their male counterparts, and the former are more likely to lack the necessary medical attention.

In most traditional cultures, particularly among migrants, there is a distinct separation between the world of women and that of men. This means that if Christians hope to live in productive dialogue with migrant women, it is an apostolate that must

be carried out by Christian women. In fact, in the context of today's realities, the dialogue of life with migrant women must be considered as one of the pressing needs of our time. Friendship between Christian women and migrant women of other faiths is living proof of God's deep love and concern for migrant women.

### **c. Advocacy for the reuniting of families.**

A key element in our dialogue with migrants is the commitment to support their just causes. It is in dialogue with migrants that we are able to understand their real problems and needs. Those who share life with migrants find themselves working to increase the host populations' awareness of the migrants' plight. In this area, the question of family reunification is a central issue for Christians and others for whom the family is the primary locus of God's love and grace.

In the case of "economic" migrants who seek to break out of the cycle of poverty in their home countries, it is usually a single family member who migrates. In the past, the most common pattern was that of a single male or a husband/father whose family remained in the homeland and whom he supported by sending home regular funds. Due to the increased demand for domestics or factory workers, the more recent pattern is for the wife/mother of the family to migrate and financially support the family in the homeland.

Recent Popes and other religious leaders have decried an economic order that separates families, with the consequent isolation and disruption of normal family life and education of children. However, many governments in the developed world are opposed in principle to family unification. They want to profit from the labours of the single or unattached foreign worker, but they oppose the policy of allowing the workers' families to join them. In that way, the host government need not take responsibility for providing education and health care for the worker's family. Given the pattern of advancing age in populations in many societies in the developed world, it seems increasingly probable that young workers coming from third-world countries will be involved in working for the aging persons in the first world. In this situation, it seems that the duty of Christians is to advocate for decent human conditions for guest workers, beginning with the right to live united with their families.

### **d. Education of host populations.**

Perhaps the most necessary social task today with regard to migrants is the education of the general public in host countries. People in the economically prosperous countries of Western Europe, North America, and East Asia are very conscious of the changes in their societies that result from the influx of migrants. They may be offended by the customs of some migrants, and they may feel that the way of life that they had known for many years is threatened by the newcomers. They are often guilty of prejudices and generalisations, stereotyping the migrants as, for example, dangerous, lazy, untrustworthy, .....

One of the ways to accompany and assist migrants is to educate the people of the host countries. To this end, interreligious dialogue with migrants permits everyone to be better informed and to move beyond prejudices.



### PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

Testimony from the Province of France-North

#### **A pathway of solidarity and trust**

I left my homeland, Martinique, and arrived in metropolitan France when I was two years old. At first I lived in Loiret and later in the Paris region. I am now retired and would like to share with you the beautiful experience of my friend Francoise, who also comes from Martinique. She arrived in France at 18 years of age, promising her parents that she would find a good job. This is what happened to her:

When she came to the capital in 1962 at the age of 18, Francoise stayed with some relatives, but the situation soon took a turn for the worse because she could not get a job and they began to blame her for this. Nevertheless, when she wrote to her parents, she did not tell them of her difficulties, saying only that she was in good health and had no worries! Finally, she managed to find a room to rent on the sixth floor of a building with a bathroom on the floor above. In order to pay her rent, she took on all sorts of odd jobs: caring for children, sick or elderly persons, doing housekeeping, shopping, etc. But most of all she wanted to find a real job that could provide for her needs as well as assist her parents who had remained in her home country.

With only a very basic education, she passed the examinations at her level. She made the acquaintance of other people from her homeland and these encouraged her and introduced her to Associations and organisations that could help her. In this way, she enrolled in evening classes to finish her education. She passed her examinations, was hired one month later as a trainee in a business firm and then given a permanent position after three months. She continued to take additional examinations in order to obtain a higher salary and to pay for better lodgings in the department of Hauts de Seine. She then invited her parents to come for a few days' visit.

At the regional Chaplain's office for the West Indies, she felt welcomed and listened to and met others from her homeland and who were active members. She participated in various activities, debates, conferences, outings, etc. Even more, she had the joy of experiencing liturgical celebrations like those of her homeland, and this warmed her heart.

She very quickly became involved in her parish as part of the animation team and the diocesan pastoral council. She encouraged others from her native country to also become involved in various services such as catechism, liturgy, choirs, welcoming, etc.

In conclusion, I can say that even though migration took Francoise far from her culture and roots, it allowed her to achieve fulfilment at a personal and professional level by giving her the opportunity to overcome numerous challenges.

Madame Huguette MOGARDE

### PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

Testimony from the Province of San Sebastian

#### Inter-congregational project “Atalaya”

The inter-congregational project “Atalaya” is an initiative created by four religious congregations who have come together to collaborate in ministry with migrants. The Society of Jesus, the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Religious of Mary Immaculate and the Daughters of Charity are working in association with other public and private organisations that also provide services to migrants. The goal is to respond to the most specific needs of migrants and to help create a society that will gradually integrate cultural diversity. The Daughters of Charity are most directly involved in the service of welcoming migrants.

This project came about as a result of a study done in Burgos on the current phenomenon of immigration. After noting what is already being done, we focused on the question of the closing of borders, knowing that migrants nevertheless continue to attempt to cross them to escape famine, violence and death.

This inter-congregational ministry is for us a sign of the unity of the Church which strives to respect the dignity of persons and to recognise their citizenship despite certain laws contrary to this. Moreover, there seems to be an urgent need to rethink our social actions by supporting cross-country policies, being open to differences and letting ourselves be enriched by them. That is why we seek to accompany undocumented persons and to promote their integration into society and our communities, from the perspective of their particular centres of interest. Migrants are our brothers and sisters. We offer them a place where their circumstances and needs can be recognised.

Atalaya is a project with a Catholic identity, based on the notion of Christian humanism that affirms the unity of the human being, solidarity, brotherhood and sisterhood.

In order to help migrants to become integrated in the society they have chosen, Atalaya offers:

- opportunities for gatherings among different cultures and religions: Islam, Orthodox Christians, etc.,
- a vision of a world that is more person-focused as opposed to a globalised economy and a market economy,
- a common seeking to understand one another better and to relate to the realities of the host country, without losing a sense of one’s roots.

Atalaya provides:

- Assistance: places for listening, housing, health cards, meals, etc
- Promotion: educational support, Spanish classes, formation workshops, etc.
- Services: administrative processes, mediation with employers, business networks, etc.
- Spiritual domain: intercultural celebrations, etc.

In spite of its difficulties, this is an exciting ministry. We believe that it is possible to consider this phenomenon of migration from a perspective that is different from that of the rest of the world, by overcoming barriers and transforming swords into ploughshares (Is. 2:4). Atalaya is for me a place where there is meaning in the little things in life and this invites us to greater love.

Sister Isabel OLAZAGOITIA  
*Daughter of Charity*

### PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

Testimony from the Province of the Philippines

#### **The Migrants' Bureau**

The Philippines, also known as the “Pearl of the East”, is the world’s second largest archipelago. Bordered by the Pacific Ocean on the east, Celebes Sea on the south and South China Sea on the west and north, the Philippines comprise 7,107 islands and islets which are clustered into three geographical groups - Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.

The only Christian country in Asia, its present population is largely of Malayan descent (over 90%). Philippine culture is a product of centuries of colonisation and is an interesting mix of Indonesian, Spanish, American, Japanese and Chinese influences.

#### **A MIGRANTS' BUREAU**

In 1990, the Philippines Province created a **Justice, Peace and Social Concerns Bureau**. In 1996, the Province named the service and care of migrant and overseas Filipino workers a priority ministry and in 2001 created the **Migrants' Bureau**. In 2003, a Sister began to work with the Episcopal Commission for Migration and Itinerant Peoples (ECMI).

#### **THE FILIPINO MIGRANT SITUATION**

##### **Profile of Overseas Filipino Workers**

In 2001, there were more than 7 million Filipinos living abroad, nearly 10% of the country’s population. Three million are overseas Filipino workers, 2.5 million are permanent residents and 1.5 million are classified as undocumented. Their destinations are generally Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Japan,

Taiwan, and United Arab Emirates. For emigrants who are permanent residents (including fiancés/spouses of foreign nationals) the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom are their principal host countries. Reasons for migration include poverty, the rate of unemployment and the cost of living. Working conditions and salaries in the Philippines are very inadequate. The ordinary worker does not earn enough for daily subsistence, for health needs and for the education of children.

### **The effects of immigration on the families of immigrants**

Immigration creates dysfunction in the normal life and relationships of the Filipino family. Those who leave and those who are left behind, are all put to the test.

Those who leave the country find themselves in debt because of travel expenses and the placement fees needed to get a job in the country they are going to. They rely on overtime work to repay their debts. As a result of pushing their bodies to the limit, they are susceptible to illness and occupational hazards, and they can no longer tolerate their living conditions (loneliness, exploitation, discrimination, language barriers, immorality....)

The family members left behind suffer from a loss of a sense of identity and belonging, and they feel very insecure. However, they need to keep in mind the sacrifice made by the person who has left and they have to keep in contact with him so that he won't feel a "stranger" when he returns home. They also have to be careful to bring up the children properly, manage their finances in a sensible way and avoid the many problems that can occur when the father comes back. That is why accompanying migrants' families is a priority in this ministry.

### **THE COMMITMENTS MADE BY THE PROVINCE**

The Province of the Philippines is committed to:

#### **Sending Sisters to work with Filipino migrants abroad**

In response to requests from several Visitatrices, the Province has sent Sisters to work with Filipino migrants in Lebanon, Greece, Australia, Libya, Canada and other areas to provide assistance for these migrants.

#### **Creating a Migrants' Bureau affiliated to the Justice, Peace and Social Concerns Bureau**

A Sister who is a Social Worker visits the homes of migrants' families, accompanies them and puts them in touch with government agencies that can assist them in their legal and financial difficulties. In 2003, one Sister began to work part-time with the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People. This became a full-time ministry in 2004. The Sister's work involves para-legal and advocacy work related to overseas Filipino workers cases, attending court hearings, visiting government agencies and other works. She also goes to parishes and dioceses to organise Migrants' Bureau programmes and train pastoral workers for para-legal work with migrants.

The Migrants' Bureau networks with:

- \* The Episcopal Commission for Migration and Itinerant Peoples to provide legal assistance,
- \* Government agencies such as the Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration, Department of Foreign Affairs, employment agencies, Philippines Overseas Employment Administration, Department of Assistance for Repatriated Workers,
- \* Hospitals,
- \* Daughters of Charity Institutions for temporary shelter and crisis intervention.

The purpose of the Migrants' Bureau is to assist migrants in legal matters, to provide information, social services and spiritual support, to educate the public and to influence government policy making.

### **Networking with Sisters in other countries who are in migrant ministry**

Assistance offered to overseas workers as well as to those who have returned and to their families, is facilitated by the direct link between the Sisters serving in the Philippines and by the Sisters in the country that receives the migrants.

The Migrants' Bureau works to defend the rights of overseas workers and their families left behind. In spite of all the difficulties that beset us, we continue our mission to migrants, convinced that they deserve "the sweat of our brow and the strength of our arms."

Sister Teresita M. Laguna  
*Daughter of Charity*

## PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

Testimony of the Province of Curitiba

### **Saint John the Baptist Home**

Saint John the Baptist Home which was founded on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1954, is a non-profit making social services establishment that welcomes people with all forms of illness or those who are homeless and who come from various States in Brazil or from neighbouring countries. Nearly 60% of the residents suffer from cancer or AIDS, or are awaiting organ transplants, etc. Because of the economic poverty of the country of Brazil, many people are obliged to come to major cities such as Curitiba that have hospital centres for medical consultations. Some people travel over 3,000 kilometres in order to reach the Saint John the Baptist Home. The residence can house 110 sick people. At times, the numbers exceed capacity. The Home takes in approximately 5,000 persons annually.

Saint John the Baptist Home works in partnership with the Social Service Foundation of the mayor's office. Social service educators encounter many people who live on the streets or who are dependent on drugs, etc. Social workers send them, as well as people seeking medical treatment, to Saint John the Baptist Home. The Sisters and their collaborators offer not only medical assistance (care, medication), nourishment and leisure activities but also spiritual accompaniment. Administrative procedures are carried out in order to help them sort out their legal or social situation and various preventative resources are provided for them, such as hygiene, illness prevention, nutrition, citizens' rights, etc.

The Home has to face a variety of difficulties: lack of space, large numbers of people who are drug dependent, those who lack family support, etc. Efforts to promote awareness among public organisations dealing with the situation of homeless people are underway, as well as building enlargement projects in order to welcome the increasing numbers of poor people in need of care and accompaniment.

Sister Vilma GEOPATO  
*Daughter of Charity*

#### VISIT BY SUPERIORS

Sister Evelyne Franc  
**Province of Mozambique**  
19<sup>th</sup>–24<sup>th</sup> August 2006

On August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, and Sister Wivine Kisu, General Councillor, arrived at the Provincial House in Mozambique in the afternoon. After a song of welcome, the “*hoyo-hoyo*,” and greetings given by Sister Therezinha Madureira, the Visitatrice, the visit began with a Eucharistic celebration presided over by the Provincial Director and animated by joyous dancing and singing.

The following day, Sister Evelyne met the Provincial Council, and then the Sister Servants, reminding them that their principal responsibility was that of spiritual animation. In her meeting with the 13 young Sisters of the Province, Sister Evelyne emphasised the need for open dialogue in local communities and the importance of formation. Afterwards, at a gathering of all the Sisters at the Provincial House, she shared with them news of the Company.

On August 21<sup>st</sup>, Sister Evelyne met the Seminary Sisters: these three young women told their vocation stories and spoke about their experiences within the Seminary community. They expressed their appreciation for Sister Evelyne's visit during this stage of their formation, a special grace for their lives as Daughters of Charity. The day ended with Mass concelebrated by five Vincentian priests.

The next day, Sister Evelyne and Sister Wivine set out with the Visitatrice and the Provincial Assistant for Limpopo where 4 houses are located. On the way, they visited:

PHOTO

- **Saint Rita Community** in Xinavane: which serves children in difficult situations,

- **Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal Community** in Chokwe: with a school for young children and a residence for elderly persons, in collaboration with the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

- **Sacred Heart Community**: serving sick persons, particularly those with AIDS in a hospital. Here, the Sisters have been collaborating in the DREAM Project with the Saint Egidio Community since 2002. After the visit, the patients presented Sister Evelyne with some Mozambican artwork. She was welcomed by the Sisters, the hospital chaplain, children with AIDS and hospital personnel. A power-point presentation showed the activities carried out within and outside of the hospital, and the DREAM Project, an important aspect of the Sisters' ministry. After this, Sister Evelyne visited the patients.

**Saint Joseph Community**: Sister Evelyne participated in the parish Eucharistic Liturgy with members of various branches of the Vincentian family. The pastor emphasised the importance of this visit as a source of strength and revitalisation of the Vincentian charism.

- **Saint Vincent de Paul School**: The students and teachers presented for Sister Evelyne songs, dances and work done by the children.

- **Saint Louise Community** in Chalucuanne: Sister Evelyne visited the health centre where she spoke to the sick people and the staff.

On August 24<sup>th</sup>, after the Provincial Council meeting, the Provincial Director presided over the closing Mass, during which we expressed to the Lord our gratitude for this visit of Sister Evelyne, whose words have strengthened our lives as Daughters of Charity in the service of persons who are poor.

Sister Elsa UASSIQUETE  
*Echoes Correspondent*

### TESTIMONIES GIVEN BY THE SISTERS

Province of Switzerland -Turkey

Will he come?...or....wont he?

For weeks, the media alternated between hot and cold: he was going to come...he was not going to come. "He" of course was the Pope. Everyone in the media was involved, especially in trying to portray the Turkish people as intolerant. Certainly, there were demonstrations protesting against the Papal visit, but what are one hundred thousand in comparison with a total population of 76 million? Why do we always want to focus on the negative?

At the Apostolic Nunciature in Istanbul, none of this seemed to be of much concern for Bishop Georges Marovitch, chancellor to the Bishop and spokesperson for the diocese, as he occupied himself with preparing the boxes of invitations for the protocol personnel, the priests, women and men religious, the laity, those who would receive communion from the Holy Father, the members of various choirs, etc. The boxes were colour-coded to indicate the door through which each person was to enter the cathedral, etc. The cathedral was able to accommodate 1100 people. The security service provided by the government deserves special mention as well as our appreciation of it.

On **November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006**, the feast of Saint Catherine Labouré, Benedict XVI set foot on Turkish soil, in Ankara. The afternoon and evening were dedicated to visits with **government officials**. This day was challenging because of its clearly political nature and due to the Pope's recent doctoral address in September at the University of Ratisbonne that had been manipulated by the media. Although the Islamist leader had predicted that the visit would be disrupted by huge protests, none of that occurred.

In Ankara, during his meeting with the Prime Minister, Benedict XVI encouraged Turkey in its dialogue with different religions and revealed his great willingness to journey with others, saying: *"May we come to know one another better, strengthening the bonds of affection between us in our common wish to live together in harmony, peace and mutual trust."* His interview with the President of the Republic lasted longer than had been planned, and this probably suggests that they talked quite specifically about the rights of minorities.

In the early afternoon, Benedict XVI made his way to the Mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk to visit the tomb of the founder and first President of the Republic of Turkey, known as the "Father of the Turks." Afterwards, the Pope met the Religious Affairs Directorate within the Turkish government. Their discussion gave rise to a televised exchange on the importance of interreligious dialogue. Finally, in his address to the diplomats, Benedict XVI reminded them that religious liberty is not being requested for Christians only, but for all religious communities of believers.

**November 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>**: We followed the Pope's pilgrimage to **Ephesus** by watching it on television. One of the Christians who attended the Eucharistic celebration and pilgrimage of Benedict XVI to Meryem Ana, said to me: *"It was beautiful, marvellous! The Pope is humble but he says what he thinks needs to be said!"* Afterwards, the Pope returned to **Istanbul** to meet **the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I**, and to pray and share together. Benedict XVI's efforts continued the process that Pope Paul IV had undertaken with the Patriarch Athenagoras.

#### PHOTO

The two spiritual leaders met once again for the entire morning of November 30<sup>th</sup>, the feast of St. Andrew, patron of the Patriarchate, and signed a Joint Declaration: *"This fraternal encounter which brings us together, Pope Benedict XVI of Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, is God's work, and, in a certain sense, his gift. We give thanks to the Author of all that is good, who allows us once*



*again, in prayer and in dialogue, to express the joy we feel as brothers and to renew our commitment to move towards full communion...Our traditions represent for us a patrimony which must be continually shared, proclaimed and interpreted anew. This is why we must strengthen our cooperation and our common witness before the world."*

The liturgy with our Orthodox brothers and sisters was viewed in a very positive way and the Declaration is a step forward in the process of ecumenical dialogue.

What can we say about the visit to the ancient basilica **Saint Sophia**, which has become a museum and the prayers with the Mufti at **Sultanahmet, the Blue Mosque**? These events were closely followed by the Turkish people. According to our employees, this latter visit made a very favourable impression. The newspaper accounts said: "The head of Catholics prays with our Mufti." Cardinal Etchegaray likened Benedict XVI's visit to the mosque to that of John Paul II to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

Yes, our Pope was able to promote trust, mutual understanding and reciprocal respect by his attitude, gestures and words. With his visit, Benedict XVI has contributed to increasing dialogue between us and our Muslim sisters and brothers. As an elderly man in Anatolia observed: "*Let us look at what unites us before seeing what separates us.*"

However, November 30<sup>th</sup> was not yet over. A surprise was waiting for me. Late in the morning, the pastor of the Cathedral telephoned:

- Sister, do you have a pass to come for the photo?
- What pass? What photo?
- The photo with the Pope this afternoon or evening, or tomorrow morning.
- I don't know anything about any pass or photo.
- Oh, did they forget to tell you about it? You are part of the group that will be photographed with the Pope. You need a pass for it.
- Fine, I'll come and get it or send one of our employees.
- You can't do that! The security service won't allow anyone to enter. I'll send Father F. over to give you the pass!

Not longer afterwards, Father F. arrived with the pass. He handed it to a Sister, saying: "Sister Jeanne-Marie needs to be there at 5:30 p.m." The Sister was so overcome she didn't even ask where "there" was!

So I set out at 4:30 p.m., still not understanding what was meant by "photo with the group." What group was it? Religious? The URT committee or the Parish Council? With these questions still in mind, I arrived at the security checkpoint: presented the pass and passport, went through a security search, and then headed for the Cathedral which seemed to me to be the "there". Women and men were arriving from nearby streets. I was going to find out why we were there. "It was our pastor, on behalf of our bishop, who nominated us!" Each group of Christians (Roman, Armenian, Chaldan and Syrian) would be photographed with its bishop and with the Pope. I was part of the group of "Romans"!

6:45 p.m.: The Pope arrived amid cries of joy and welcome, and never ending applause. The Pope was there, so close. He took the time to shake hands with each person, but soon the team of attendants asked us to “pose” for the photo. The Pope seemed to me to be extremely simply and extremely humble!

**December 1<sup>st</sup>: Mass in the Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Istanbul.** Our group of 6 Sisters and 2 lay people from the Hospital of Peace left there at 6:15 a.m. (2 Sisters who were on duty stayed at the hospital). At 6:45 a.m., we passed through security and came near to the cathedral. Each one checked for the umpteenth time the door they had been assigned for entering the cathedral. Sister Josephine, whose name had been randomly chosen by the Community, had a place in the first row for she was to receive Communion from the hands of the Holy Father.

Before working our way into the cathedral, we stopped to admire the imposing statue of Benedict XV, restored through the efforts of the head mayor of Istanbul, and still covered, a statue of Blessed John XXIII created by an Italian artist. These two statues were to be blessed by Benedict XVI before the Eucharistic Liturgy. Later, the statue of Blessed John XXIII would be placed in the church of Saint Anthony, according to the wishes of the artist, for it was a place much loved by Pope John XXIII.

Another very symbolic gesture on the part of our Holy Father marked this morning’s events. Mayor Belediye, our mayor of Sisli, presented 4 doves to the Holy Father. One after another, he set them free to fly as symbols of peace for Turkey and the whole world. The dove is also the symbol of the Holy Spirit, and our cathedral is dedicated to the Holy Spirit.

Accompanied by cries of “Benedetto, Benedetto” and applause that grew louder and louder, Benedict XVI processed into the cathedral, welcomed by His Holiness Bartholomew I, and our Bishop Louis Pelatre. The Papal Nuncio, the bishops and priests of Turkey lead the procession: about 60 priests (the majority of whom are religious), along with other priests coming from Italy, Bulgaria, Turkmenistan, etc. As the Holy Father blessed each row of the faithful, the applause redoubled in intensity. The Roman choir alternated with Chaldean, German and Syrian choirs. This morning the Holy Father could see that within this diversity, Christianity was of one heart and one soul.

The Pope opened the celebration of the Eucharist with the Sign of the Cross and the customary greeting given in the Turkish language. The Mass included various languages; the Ordinary was prayed alternately in French and Latin. The readings, songs and intercessory prayers were said in Turkish, French, Italian, English, Arabic and Armenian. It was not Babel, however, but rather Pentecost. The presence of members of other Christian churches and Catholics of other rites, the joy shared by all, the peace greeting given by the Pope to the non-Catholic Patriarchs, the final blessing as a conclusion of the journey, given in Greek by Bartholomew and in Latin by Benedict XVI, these were among the many symbols of the East and West blessing the Christian people and the world. It was quite moving to see the two Church Patriarchs offering their blessing together on the balcony of the Patriarchate, joining hands with one another. The shouts of acclamation as the Pope and the Patriarch left showed how keenly the people of God wanted to go further along the path of unity.

After the Eucharist, a group of 8 Turkmen-speaking women, accompanied by their pastor, went into the sacristy to see the Holy Father and present him with the gift of a carpet that is a specialty of their country. It was beautiful to see the joy on these women's faces. They had been staying with us for the previous 6 days, while their pastor, (who is also the representative of the Nuncio in Ashgabat) stayed with the Salesians. He would often come to pray in our chapel in the Hospital of Peace, a beautiful testimony that we will not forget.

What we will remember most about the visit of the Holy Father is that he is a man of God and very humble. He knew how to win the hearts of many Turkish people, as well as ours, of course. We have been much encouraged in our mission here, and have also come to better understand our responsibility to engage in dialogue as well as our duty to pray for the Holy Father.

In conclusion, I would add that the proverbial welcome offered by the Turkish people has once again been much in evidence.

Sister Jeanne-Marie ROSTOUCHER  
Daughter of Charity

#### SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

##### Provinces of Asia

3<sup>rd</sup> Asian Vincentian Institute in the Motherhouse (Paris)  
(AVI 3-Paris)

### **Sinking deep our roots...spreading wide our branches**

*“Deepen your vocation by opening yourself to the Holy Spirit... this is our goal for these three months.”* With these words, Sr. Evelyne Franc officially opened the 3<sup>rd</sup> Asian Vincentian Institute (AVI 3) at the Mother House held from September 11<sup>th</sup> to December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006. The 8 Provinces of Asia (Chinese Province, Provinces of North and South India, Provinces of Thailand, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam) named 27 Sisters to participate in this historic journey, organised for the most part by Sr. Julma Neo. While the Institute itself ended on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006, Sr. Evelyne stressed that the process is life-long and that these three months are simply an occasion for the Sisters to strengthen their commitment to following this path.

#### **THE OBJECTIVES**

The fact that it was held in Paris, where the Company was born, made this particular Institute different from the two others previously held in the Philippines. This third Asian Vincentian Institute was a journey back to the roots, to the heart of the Company in order to:

1. Develop among the Sisters a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Founders, their life, charism and their spirituality, so as to facilitate their rereading in the Asian context today.
2. Explore the possibility of having teams of Sisters who could contribute to Vincentian formation and research on Vincentian themes.
3. Deepen the Sisters' sense of belonging to and appreciation of the Company as an international community.
4. Provide the Sisters with an opportunity to experience living in a multicultural community and responding to its challenges.

#### **THE METHOD AND THE CONTENT**

Unlike the first two Institutes, AVI 3-Paris focused on our Vincentian roots and assumed that the participants would have sufficient knowledge of today's world. So the methodology used was different. It consisted of at least two days of personal study and research on a paper prepared by the resource person, followed by small group discussions. The resource person, on the third day, discussed the topic and explored in depth what had been researched and reflected on and discussed in groups. We were enormously helped throughout the process by our chief resource person, Fr. Jaime Corera, who taught us the hermeneutical approach to understanding our Founders.

Like the first two Institutes, AVI 3-Paris challenged us to sink deeper our roots. We travelled back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century with Fr. Jean-Pierre Renouard, Fr. Luigi Nuovo, Fr. Santiago Azcarate and Fr. Celestino Fernandez. Their deep knowledge of the world of Vincent and Louise, the world of the poor and of great men and women of that century, helped us to appreciate better the context of our Founders and the circumstances that gave birth to the Company. Finally understanding better the time, the place and the events of the *Grand Siecle*, (the Great Century) Fr. Renouard and Sr. Elisabeth Charpy painted with and for us the portraits of Vincent and Louise as human beings and saints. They were a symphony in a cacophony of injustice, misery and despair. To root ourselves in their charisms will teach us the "what" and the "how" of responding faithfully today.

Sr. Elisabeth Charpy went on to tell the story of Louise and Vincent in the history of our Company... from the lives of our first Sisters up to our lives today. In a story-telling style, she gave us glimpses of the humanness of our Sisters and of the Company, that moved us to laughter and to tears. But since it is God who weaves the thread of history, we are where we are today and who we are today, because those who came before us are living testaments of God's unending love and fidelity. What matters finally is not what we do or have done but our struggle to faithfully love those whom He loves: those who are poor.

Through his article on "From Life to Rules", Fr. John Rybolt helped us trace the development of our Constitutions, a treasure that can urge us towards the

perfection of charity (CDC 731 No. 2)...towards faithfulness... towards holiness. What we have is not something that came from an idea but from a life already lived, for we saw that Louise, with the first Sisters, first lived as Daughters of Charity before putting into writing a rule of life.

To challenge us to make a link between Louise and our Constitutions, Sr. Evelyne Franc carefully chose for us letters of Louise that helped us to sift through those essentials which have been lived out since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We saw added glimpses of Louise's own journey from being a woman with some obvious human limitations to being the co-foundress, the formator and the guiding spirit of the Company.

Fr. Gregory Gay shared with us some ways to nurture our vocation and to deepen our understanding of the charism: the Constitutions, the community, the service of the Poor, the fact that we have models such as Rosalie Rendu and that we are members of the Church.

Our gift of self to God is confirmed by the Vows we make and these help us to be truly free to serve Christ in persons who are poor. Fr. Corera helped us deepen this aspect of our life. He further insisted that we are sent to serve the poor by those who have authority in the Company and who also are servants and leaders. So we go in the name of the Company.

We continued to deepen our spirituality. Fr. Javier Alvarez, Fr. Fernando Quintano, and Fr. Hugh O'Donnell emphasised the essential features of our lives: our identity as Daughters of Charity, the identity of the Company in the Church, our spirit, our prayer and our discernment. Mary Immaculate, the servant of God, the Mother of Jesus and Mother of mercy, Mother of the Church and the only Mother of the Company, will intercede for us whom she loves. Her role in the life of Vincent and therefore in our lives, too, was developed by Fr. Renouard.

To link the past and the present with an eye to the future, Sr. Julma Neo developed the theme "Inculturation of the Charism". Every human life, including ours, is always lived within a specific culture. So, for the charism to become truly "living" and ever new, it needs to be brought up to date and expressed in our given cultures today. This is what inculturating the charism means. Sr. Julma developed this further through her deep sharing and through group work on the Conferences of St. Vincent and on Asian values. Creative fidelity to the charism impels us to take inculturation of the charism seriously.

#### **VARIOUS CULTURES.... ONE COMPANY**

The best place to know our own culture better is one where we live with people who have different cultures from our own... and that would be the Mother House, with Sisters of more than 25 nationalities. Through language and beyond the barriers this creates, each one of us tried to reach out to others... each one tried to know others, each one respected the other person. In our Eucharistic celebrations; we sang, danced and prayed in ways that expressed our various cultures. For many of us, the richness of cultures and the meaning of the internationality of our Company have never been more appreciated than during these three months. And we marvelled at the

unity that calls us in our diversity... one vocation, one call, one God. For us, there are no longer just particular countries ... there are only Daughters of Charity living and serving in different places of the world.

#### **TREADING THE PATH “THEY” FIRST TROD**

Our journey to the heart of the Company was graced with pilgrimages to places that Vincent, Louise, our first Sisters and saints in our Company have trod. To walk the paths of the Berceau and the dusty roads of Fain les Moutiers was a gift that we thought we could only dream about. To visit the churches where Louise was married, where the first Sisters went for Mass, where Vincent preached, etc. was indeed a spiritual experience. To have seen where Rosalie Rendu and Catherine Labouré worked, Louise’s house where the Sisters must have first gathered together, Chartres where the Company was placed under Mary’s protection ... from the Berceau to Paris. to Folleville, to Fain les Moutiers, to Chartres, to Rue du Bac... all these places left the imprint of love. Only in prayer can we deepen the truth they revealed to us and the witness they gave to us of lives - *totally given to God in community for the service of Christ in persons who are poor, in humility, simplicity and charity.*

#### **DEEPER ROOTS... WIDER BRANCHES**

From the “cradle” of the Company where we were nourished, from the well where we drank, from the roads where we traced the well-tested path of our founders that was trodden by our first Sisters, we shall continue to sink deep our roots so we can spread wide our branches for our Sisters, for poor persons, for the Church and for the world. Sr. Evelyne Franc reminded us that the gifts we received freely should be given back freely to the Poor.... At the closing Eucharist, she sent us on mission, an experience that encouraged and inspired us. We have been gifted by the Holy Spirit... we have deepened our love for our vocation these past three months.

Sr. Marie Annabelle Escoto, Daughter of Charity  
*Participant, AVI 3 Paris*

#### Testimonies Given by the Sisters

Province of Warsaw

### **Gathering of Provincial Councils of the Slavic Countries in Czestochowa (Poland)**

18th-22nd October 2006

From October 18<sup>th</sup> -22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006, the five Provincial Councils of the Slavic Provinces: Poland (3 Provinces), Slovakia, Slovenia and the Region of Albania, met in Czestochowa at the house of pilgrimage that belongs to the Province of Warsaw. In this privileged place where the motherly heart of Mary hears the prayers of her children, in an atmosphere of prayer and reflection we gathered together with Sister

Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, Father Javier Alvarez, Director General, Sister Rita Ferri, Treasurer General, and Sister Zofia Daniscakova, General Councillor.

On the first evening, Sister Stanisława Kokosza, Visitatrice of the Province of Warsaw, warmly welcomed all the members who were assembled in a room equipped with translation booths for four languages: Slovak, Slovenian, Polish and French. At this point the participants introduced themselves.

The following day, we began with the Eucharist presided over by the Director General with the five Provincial Directors con-celebrating. In his homily, Father Alvarez invited us to reflect on the specific mission of the Provincial Council: to help the Sisters and the local communities to create unity in their life totally given to God. The Council forms a community of faith in the service of the Province, with its own spirit and mission.

Afterwards, Sister Evelyne opened the encounter with the theme: ***The Visitatrice and her Council.*** Among other topics, she emphasised the importance of formation for the community of the Council and the necessity of having a project (as do the local communities) in order to balance their life of prayer, community life and life of service. She stressed the importance of mutual openness and dialogue. Good planning of well-organised meeting times helps promote the mission of the entire Province.

On the same day, the Councils met in language groups to share their spiritual and missionary experiences.

On Friday, October 20<sup>th</sup>, the Director General presented the theme: ***Animation of the Province by the Provincial Council.*** With the Visitatrice, the members of the Council are called to put co-responsibility into practice more and more, in order to promote the spirit and mission of the Province. Their understanding of the Sisters and their works is necessary to help the Province to grow on a spiritual level. Administrative affairs will be carried out effectively if the Council meetings take place in an atmosphere of freedom, trust and respect for different opinions. Each matter must be dealt with in view of the service of poor persons and our lifestyle. In the afternoon, the participants had the opportunity to learn about the history of the painting of the Black Madonna as well as that of the monastery of Jasna Gora in Czestochowa where the painting has been venerated for over 600 years. For many years, pilgrims travelling on foot arrive not just from all over Poland, but also from other countries, to ask Our Lady, Queen of Poland, for graces or to give thanks for graces received. After a visit to the Sanctuary, the Provincial Councils attended a Eucharistic celebration in the chapel of Our Lady for the intentions of the Company and of those who are poor.

On Saturday, October 21<sup>st</sup>, Sister Barbara Selih, Visitatrice of the Province of Slovenia, presented the theme: ***Secularism and Spiritual Life.*** Conscious of the influence of secularism on us and on young people who enter the Company, we need to witness to the primary place that God has in our lives: a community life based on dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation. Following this, the Director General spoke about the ***Mission of the Provincial Director according to the new Directory.*** Among other topics, he discussed the development of this ministry over time. Here it began

with Father Guillaume Desdames, CM, the first Director named by Saint Vincent for the Sisters sent to Poland in 1652. This pastoral service included animation and accompaniment of the Sisters and local communities, the essential element of the mission of the Director as desired by the Founders from the beginning. He has an indispensable role in the area of initial and ongoing formation. As representative of the Superior General, he has the role of granting poverty permissions for the Sisters' personal goods. In the afternoon, the participants visited a home where social assistance is given to elderly persons and which is located near the Sanctuary. This momentous event was the occasion for a magnificent meal for the residents, the staff and the local community. The same day, Sister Anna Blehowa, Provincial Secretary for the Province of Slovakia and member of the Commission to revise the Guide for Provincial Secretaries, presented the modifications made in that document.

On Sunday, October 22<sup>nd</sup>, Sister Rita, Treasurer General, presented the topic: *Creativity in the service of administration of goods*. Sister Rita emphasised such ideas as the need for a spirit of sharing within the Provincial Council. A broad perspective allows us to understand the needs of the General Curia, other Provinces, each local community, the Sisters, their families, all of this always in the spirit of a better service of persons who are poor. In order for our balance sheets to benefit those who are poor, we must frequently carry out community and personal reviews. Sister Rita encouraged the Treasurers to dialogue with the local communities and to develop their relationships with the Sister Servants. These relationships help in evaluating and balancing the standards of living in the local communities in the Provinces, being careful not to accumulate goods and to trust in Divine Providence.

Sister Zofia, General Councillor, the initiator of this gathering, animated the final meeting, the purpose of which was to evaluate these days together and future projects. Everyone appreciated the location, the times of prayer that allowed everyone to experience more intensely their sisterly union, as well as the diversity of languages, cultures and mentalities that enriched our celebrations. As members of the Provincial Councils, we are grateful to the Superiors of the Company for their interest in formation and for their availability. This gathering has provided us with insights, and we would like to share our reflections in order to grow spiritually as Vincentian communities. We would also like to express our desire to continue such sessions in order to strengthen the connections among the Provinces, to share our experiences and our projects in view of a better service of Christ in persons who are poor. With the Superiors of the Province of Warsaw, Father Javier visited one of the establishments for the education of children in Ignacow.

On October 22<sup>nd</sup> -23<sup>rd</sup>, the Sister Servants in the Province of Warsaw, who had come together for two days of formation at the Provincial House, benefited from the presence of the Superiors. Father Javier presented the theme: *Spiritual accompaniment, one of the roles of the Sister Servant*. Through spiritual accompaniment, the Sister Servant has the mission of helping her companions to joyfully live their life of self-giving, to overcome difficulties and to grow in the vocation that God has given them. Father Javier encouraged the Sister Servants to take this accompaniment very seriously. He quoted Saint Vincent in saying that good Sister Servants are the "treasures" of the Company. In her presentation to the Sister Servants, Sister Rita, Treasurer General, highlighted the creativity of the Daughter of Charity in her service of poor persons. This includes loving poor persons with all our



heart, allowing ourselves to be touched by their circumstances, opting for a simple life style, being attentive to the problems of those around us and knowing that poor people are our masters.

This gathering allowed the Sister Servants to have a better understanding of the importance of their role in the Community and to commit themselves to experiencing each day “the passion for what is possible,” trusting in the Lord, the guide for our path and the light for our way.

Sister Katarzyna SKUPIEN  
*Daughter of Charity*

TESTIMONIES GIVEN BY THE SISTERS

Province of Fortaleza

**Charity transforms the Province  
Golden Jubilee 1957-2007**

The Province of Fortaleza, which comprises the states of Maranhão, Piauí and Ceará, is preparing for its Golden Jubilee.

Fifty years ago, the Province in the North of Brazil was created on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1957, when it separated from the Province of Rio de Janeiro. Today, 137 Sisters in 28 local communities, serve people who are poor and spread the fire of charity: 50 years of “comings and goings”! The path taken by the Sisters and poor persons, lending one another a hand, kept the “farandole” dance of life going over the years, and so this was the symbol chosen for the Jubilee.

**JANUARY 31<sup>st</sup>, 2006: OPENING OF THE JUBILEE YEAR FOR THE PROVINCE OF FORTALEZA**

On January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2006, the Jubilee Year opened with a Eucharistic celebration presided over by Bishop Benedito Albuquerque at the College of the Immaculate Conception, the first foundation of the Province. Afterwards, Sister Corina Bastos, Visitatrice, solemnly proclaimed the opening of this Golden Jubilee Year: *“Jubilee means celebration, joy, conversion and praise. For us, to experience the Jubilee means to recognise our need to follow a path of holiness, being open to conversion and evaluating our personal and community life in terms of the quality of our service and, above all, of our spiritual life.”*

After the solemn enthronement of the Word of God, accompanied by dance and song, a passage from the book of Leviticus was proclaimed to introduce us into the mystery of Jubilee:

*“You will sound the trumpet throughout the land. You will declare this fiftieth year to be sacred and proclaim the liberation of all the country's inhabitants. You will keep this as a jubilee” (Lev. 25: 9-11).*

The Gospel on the call of the first disciples was an invitation for us to follow Jesus more closely. (Mk. 1: 14-20).

At the end of the Eucharistic celebration, we received torches and banners inviting us to review our lives and begin a new page in the history of our Province. This year would be a Holy Year for the entire Province, divided into three successive special periods of time:

1. A time of repentance and conversion
2. A time of thanksgiving
3. A time of commitment.

#### **JANUARY 31<sup>st</sup> – JUNE 10<sup>th</sup> 2006: TIME OF REPENTANCE AND CONVERSION**

Taking part in this Jubilee invites us to conversion. This is what we experienced in the months preceding “the penitential celebration” of our Jubilee year scheduled for June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

There were two aspects to this time of conversion:

- *In the local community:* acknowledgement of what was lacking on a personal and community level, based on a well-prepared process developed by the Province
- *With our collaborators, teachers and students in the schools of the Province:* a survey to learn what the lay people think about our vocation as servants, their perception of this.

#### **10<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2006: PENITENTIAL CELEBRATION FOR THE PROVINCE**

On June 10<sup>th</sup> 2006, approximately 100 Sisters and a large group of friends set out from all parts of the Province for the city of Sao Benedito to celebrate the first penitential and conversion service held during the course of a Eucharistic celebration at Maria Luisa School.

The refrain at the beginning of the celebration helped us enter into the joy of this first part of the Jubilee. Then, with a torch dance, the college students helped us to relive the **journey of Moses and the chosen people in the desert** and Moses’ discovery of the **burning bush** which revealed the presence of Yahweh to the people. Afterwards, the reading from the prophet Amos invited us to seek forgiveness. Guided by the psalmist (Psalm 51), **the Province publicly acknowledged its areas of negligence during the past 50 years:** inconsistencies, lack of generosity and lack of commitment to its early options, straying from the charism, etc. I am convinced that each Daughter of Charity felt the weight of her poverty and her littleness as well as an awareness of what was needed for our conversion. A simple, conscious and joyful acceptance of what we are can lead us to the true conversion required of us. We need to be convinced of the importance of changing, there must be a real “metanoia” in order to grow in all aspects of our personality. **The Water Ritual**, especially the washing of the feet, was an impressive moment for us. The words of the prophet

Ezekiel will become a reality in the life of the Province: *“I shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your filth and of all your foul idols. I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead.”* (Ezek. 36:25-26) Yes! A Province that experiences the grace of forgiveness is capable of adopting a lasting attitude of servant, in washing the feet of our sisters and brothers. **The washing of the feet** was the culminating part of the celebration. The entire event continued as an act of “great praise to the God of fire that warms, illuminates, transforms and transfigures, to the God of water that purifies, quenches thirst and gives life, to the God of the Covenant.”

#### **THE JUBILEE YEAR CONTINUES!**

We have now just completed the second part of the Jubilee: Thanksgiving celebrated together at Aracati on October 28<sup>th</sup>. The Commitment stage will be celebrated at the beginning of 2007.

Sister Dijesu PINTO  
*Echoes Correspondent*

#### TESTIMONY GIVEN BY THE SISTERS

Province of Rio de Janeiro

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Award for Excellence in Education 2006 given by the Iberian-American Council to the Father Chico Institute for the Blind

The Father Chico Institute for the Blind in the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil, has had the honour of receiving the 2006 Third Iberian-American Award for its services to people who are visually impaired. In the document sent to the Director of the Institute announcing the award, the evaluation committee of the Council declared: *“We have decided to bestow this prestigious award on your institution after evaluating the high quality results that your establishment achieves through its educational methods.”* These distinctions (*Trophy for excellence in education, title of honorary doctorate and decoration of honour, medal of honour for education*) represent our recognition of this institution’s efforts as well as its success in this work of education that is so valuable for the country.

Expressing her appreciation for the award given by the Iberian-American Council, Sister Helena Mariano, the current director of the Institute, recalled the people who made this achievement possible, especially the Sisters, who for their 77 years of ministry in the institution have given their lives in service to the visually impaired. She then presented a brief history of the Institute. In 1927, during the neuro-

ophthalmology week for the Society of Medicine and Surgery in Sao Paulo, the ophthalmologist Jose Pereira Gomes launched an appeal to benefit visually impaired people who need assistance. The Society of Saint Paul responded immediately to the request made by the Archbishop of Sao Paulo. In 1929, the Father Chico Institute for the Blind was begun, its management and functioning being entrusted to the Daughters of Charity. In addition to basic education, the Institute offers classes related to daily life activities, such as computers, management, sports, dance, singing, and music, as well as human, Christian and Vincentian formation. From the first Sisters missioned to this Institute to those who serve there today, each one has been aware that “in serving poor persons she serves Jesus Christ.” And as we are to give God only what is good, each one strives to give the best of herself. In making good use of scientific progress, the Sisters strive to promote among the young people the skills and values that will allow them to become integrated into society and to flourish there.

Sister Jeny Borges da SILVA  
*Visitatrice*

#### SOURCES AND UPDATES

### **Montmirail and Saint Vincent**

How did the city of Montmirail come to be favoured in having Vincent de Paul? Some historians reckon that it was his presence that gave Montmirail its greatest claim to fame.

*“It is perhaps the greatest honour to have been the setting for the marvellous works of one of the greatest saints, to have heard his voice, to have been enlightened by his teachings, edified by his example and favoured by one of his most striking miracles. This is an unequalled privilege. Saint Vincent de Paul is the centre, and, as it were, the soul of his century.”<sup>9</sup>*

#### **MONSIEUR VINCENT’S PRESENCE IN MONTMIRAIL**

Francoise-Marguerite de Silly had inherited the estate of Montmirail from her father. Because of this she was known as “Lady of Montmirail” and in 1609 held the rank of third lord. She possessed great wealth and this was matched by her great charity. About the year 1610, she married Emmanuel de Gondi. Theirs was a happy marriage and they had three children. Pierre, the eldest, became Duke of Retz; Henri became Marquis of the Golden Isles; Jean-Francois Paul, became first of all the famous coadjutor of his uncle, the archbishop of Paris, and later Cardinal de Retz.

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<sup>9</sup> Histoire de Montmirail en Brie by Boitel (1882)

The description given of this couple is that Emmanuel de Gondi was a man of rare piety and that his wife, Marguerite de Silly, was one of the most accomplished women of her century. She carried out all her duties with great exactitude but considered the education of her children to be her most important responsibility. She believed that it was more important to make them saints for heaven than important personages on earth.

She asked M.de Berulle to find a tutor for her sons. He cast his eyes on Vincent de Paul who at that time was parish priest in Clichy.

In 1613 Vincent de Paul entered the de Gondi household, "*a house as resplendent as the Court*", he said in one of his letters describing his arrival at this house. From the outset he displayed courage. M. de Gondi challenged an important man at court to a duel. Vincent heard of this. Immediately after celebrating Mass, he fell on his knees before M. de Gondi and said to him, "*My lord, I know that you are going to fight a duel: I have to tell you, in the name of our Saviour whom you and I have just adored in the mysterious bread of the Eucharist, that if you do not abandon this evil plan you have made, God will rage against you and all your posterity.*" M. de Gondi was moved by these words, his resentment calmed down and he gave up the idea of a duel.

Vincent de Paul devoted himself completely to the children confided to him: he opened their young minds to the truths of faith and their hearts to piety. He had the complete support of Madame de Gondi.

But Vincent was inflamed with ardent zeal and his concern was not just for these three children. He devoted all his spare time to teaching the people, comforting those in sorrow, teaching the children to be God-fearing and inflaming them with the fire of His love.

In Montmirail, with the permission of the Bishop of Soissons and the consent of the parish priest, Vincent preached and catechised. He gave the people of Montmirail everything that a gentle, vigilant and active pastor can give to his flock.

Tradition tells us about the strange method he used to gather the people together quickly. He would hurry through the town with a bell in his hand and in this way assemble a large crowd in the town square in front of the Town Hall. Then he would climb up onto the huge stone near the steps of the Town Hall where the bailiff used to see justice done and where he proclaimed edicts. Here, he spoke to the people in fiery language, consoled the afflicted, thundered against sinners and encouraged the just.

Madame de Gondi used to seek Vincent's advice on matters that troubled her conscience. He did not always find this task easy but it is thanks to this lady that Vincent discovered his personal vocation, the evangelisation of the poor, in particular the poor peasant people, and he fulfilled this vocation by giving missions to the people.

Telling his confreres about the mission in Folleville, Vincent de Paul began to speak about the state of the clergy in this area and he ended by saying: "*The lady I*

*mentioned went to her pastor one day for confession and she noticed that he did not give her absolution: he muttered something under his breath and did the same on other occasions when she went to him for confession: this caused her concern so one day she asked a monk to write out for her the formula of absolution, which he did. When this good lady went to confession again, she asked the said pastor to pronounce for her the words of absolution written on the paper: he did this. She continued to do the same thing when she went to confession, giving him this paper because he was so ignorant that he did not know the words he should use. After she told me this, I was careful to pay more attention to those to whom I confessed and I found that this was indeed true. Several priests did not know the words of absolution.”<sup>10</sup>*

#### **THE CONVERSION OF A HERETIC IN MARCHAIS**

Monsieur Vincent had a special gift for converting heretics. Madame de Gondy also directed Huguenots to him and he instructed these in Catholic doctrine for two hours a day in the chateau of Montmirail itself. One of the Huguenots asked him to receive his formal abjuration but always managed to find new reasons for not renouncing his practices. Vincent answered his objections but the heretic refused to convert. The following year, Vincent de Paul and some other priests were giving a mission in Marchais near Montmirail. Seeing the zeal of the missionaries, their patience and the trouble they took to be available to everyone, the Huguenot was very impressed: *“the Catholic faith is the true religion and I want to be part of it.”* Vincent de Paul then arranged to receive his abjuration of his former religion the following Sunday in the church in Marchais.

On the morning of that day, our heretic caught sight of a rather crudely made statue of the Blessed Virgin and began to have doubts in his mind. Vincent de Paul responded by telling him that even children could explain to him about statues. Calling over one of the brightest children he asked him, *“What must we believe with regard to holy images?”* The child replied, *“It is good to have them and we should pay them the honour that is their due....These silent figures exhort us to follow them in their faith and in their good works.”* The neophyte recognised the soundness of this answer. However, in order to give the man more time to strengthen his convictions, Vincent de Paul delayed the abjuration for some days. The new convert remained firm in the faith.

#### **ANOTHER FACTOR: HIS DEVOTION TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN**

Vincent de Paul had found an unfailing means of ensuring the success of his works: devotion to the Mother of God. His confidence in her was boundless. In order to be successful in the good he planned to do in Montmirail, and to consolidate these works, he encouraged the people to have a great devotion to Mary, persuading them to consecrate themselves to her in 1618, having a statue of Our Lady erected above the four gates of the town and establishing the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary in the church of Saint Etienne.

Realising more and more the inestimable value of devotion to the Blessed Virgin, Vincent de Paul wanted to inculcate this devotion in children. According to Abelly, after speaking about the devotion that all Christians should have for Mary, he

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<sup>10</sup> Histoire de Montmirail en Brie by Boitel (1882)

began to have the children **sing a solemn anthem** in her honour every Saturday and, according to Abelly, that devotion continued. The practice of singing this hymn by the children continued from 1620 until the Revolution in 1792 abolished all public worship in France.

#### **THE CONFRATERNITY OF THE LADIES OF CHARITY**

Vincent de Paul established in Montmirail a Confraternity of Charity for Ladies who would devote themselves to helping poor people because it seemed to him that the charity practised by individuals was inadequate for dealing with the dire poverty that abounded on all sides.

The first of these Confraternities was founded at Chatillon-les-Dombes and the fourth one at Montmirail. Vincent de Paul gave the Ladies a wonderful set of Rules. The written manuscript signed by his hand is preserved in the Hotel-Dieu. According to an old register, on the third Sunday of every month, at the end of Compline the litanies of the Holy Name of Jesus were sung in the chapel of Saint Nicolas in the church of Saint Etienne. The Confraternity of Charity continued this practice for a very long time in Montmirail.

#### **THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY IN MONTMIRAIL**

Vincent de Paul sent Daughters of Charity to Montmirail and they arrived on Wednesday, 26th October, 1650. A manuscript document of 1882 records the following entry:

*“In 1650, the Daughters of Charity were established in Montmirail to work in association with the Priests of the Mission who had been established there in 1644. M. Vincent had a house built for them there and even to this day it is an honour for the whole town. It was there that Mlle Le Gras came on more than one occasion to visit the Sisters. Impressed by the good work they were doing, she told Vincent de Paul about all the good that the Sisters were able to do, not only by looking after the poor and sick people but also by teaching the children.*

*So we can be certain that M. Vincent accompanied the de Gondi family to Villepreux, Folleville and Joigny but his principal connection was with their main residence, their chateau in Montmirail. This is where he drew up a twofold plan; it was here that he tried out his ministry to the poor country people; here that he initiated his new works, travelling throughout the region with his missionaries; here that he found a worthy friend (M. de Gondi) who gave him Martin Husson and whom he arranged to be appointed Consul in Tunisia in order to give support to the famous missionary Father Le Vacher who worked among the infidels. The archives of the Hotel-Dieu still contain records of this outstanding testimony in praise of the Priests of the Mission.”*

*“Without envying other places the glory and happiness of having possessed this saint and having inherited part of the legacy of his zeal, Montmirail can rightly claim, with a certain pride, the title of honour bestowed on it by contemporary history, that of being the birthplace of the greatest works of this apostle of Charity in modern times.*

*May this small town preserve the precious faith that he rekindled there and this flame of charity that he inspired in generous hearts! His spirit still hovers over its walls, the foundations are still there and it is comforting for us to feel his protection over us and over our works!"*

*Signed: Quittat  
Montmirail, 7th October 1882*

#### SAINT VINCENT'S MIRACLE

Everyone knows that Montmirail, which was part of the estates of the Lords de Gondi, witnessed the zeal that the holy tutor had for the children of that family. He must have had a special affection for that city because it was in Montmirail that he worked a miracle for a nun and this miracle led to his canonisation. The following is an account of what happened: ***“August 23rd, 1735: examination of the miracles required for the canonisation of Vincent de Paul*** It is common knowledge that in order to confer the decree of canonisation, the Church requires two further miracles effected after the time of beatification. Seven miracles were presented for the canonisation of Vincent de Paul and two of them stood up to all arguments put forward by theology and medicine. Here is one of them: *“Sister Saint Basil, a Benedictine nun at Montmirail, suffered an attack of apoplexy (stroke) which left her paralysed and caused severe ulcers with swelling over nearly all her body so that she could not sleep and this further weakened her constitution. She had been in this state for 10 years until the beatification of Vincent de Paul was celebrated in Montmirail. The relic of this Blessed was brought to her and she kissed it reverently and prayed for healing. Her prayer was answered. The ulcers immediately disappeared, along with the swelling; only the paralysis remained. She made a novena and on the third day found herself completely cured. The entire convent and the whole town were witnesses to this marvel.”*<sup>11</sup>

Let us end with some words of Saint Vincent *“Let us love God, my Brethren, but let us love Him with all our strength and in the sweat of our brow. For very often, many acts of the love of God, of readiness to do His will, of kindness and similar sentiments and interior practices of a loving heart, although very good and much to be desired, are nevertheless suspect when they do not lead to the practice of effective love.”*<sup>12</sup>

Sister Claire Herrmann  
Archives Services

#### Sources

<sup>11</sup> Histoire de Montmirail en Brie by Boitel (1882)

<sup>12</sup> Coste XI, 40



- Archives of the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity
- Collected works of Pierre Coste, CM
- A manuscript from the Archives
- Histoire de Montmirail en Brie, by Boitel- 1882

#### SOURCES AND UPDATES

Province of France South

### **The cultural heritage of the Company**

*Following on from the reflection on “heritage” at the Visitatrices’ Encounter in Rome in 2000, here is a reflection on the cultural heritage of the Company that the Sister Servant of Montolieu gave at a celebration for Sister jubilarians. Inviting St. Vincent to speak, she celebrated the fidelity of our Sisters, who for so many years have protected the treasure that has been confided to them: their vocation to serve the poor.*

*Are not they themselves the treasures of the Company - our predecessors who are as much loved as precious antiques are? And why not, since they are works of art that the Lord has fashioned, each unique and one of a kind, who with age have increased in value? Let us listen to this “imaginary” conference by our Sisters and give the floor to Saint Vincent to hear what he has to say about heritage.*

My dear sisters, the subject of this conference is heritage. This is a topic that is much discussed these days. The world is moving at such speed that people cling on to a past that no longer changes.

First of all, we will see what heritage is. Then I will tell you what kinds of heritage there are. And finally, we will see how we can be part of the community heritage of the Little Company.

So, here we are, my Sisters, in the process of reflecting on a rather scholarly word, but one, it seems to me, you are familiar with. Today we speak a great deal about heritage days, heritage weeks, heritage years and other events relating to heritage. People organise symposiums, seminars, and meetings on preserving and managing heritage. We speak about family, regional, national, world and many other kinds of heritage, which I will not mention so as not to prolong our conference. I must give you some explanations, my Sisters.

All families preserve some furniture, paintings, photographs, books, writings, statues, or even a house, which hold memories and which call to mind the past, family lineage, relatives or famous ancestors. Heritage suggests the past. We have received it and we watch over it, as one would a treasure. It belongs to the family.

In the world there are buildings and very ancient structures that are preserved so that everyone can admire them. This is the patrimony of the world. In all countries, as you know, there are museums and libraries where works of art such as paintings and sculpture are preserved and people come from far away to admire them. Do you know that people come from the ends of the earth to admire Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa and they wait in line for half an hour in order to look at it for half a minute? If you have had the happiness of visiting Paris, you will have been able to admire innumerable masterpieces of all sorts. Even without going to Paris, you have Carcassonne, a much-visited city dating from the Middle Ages. This is the patrimony of France. It belongs to the whole world, yet it is no one's property.

My Sisters, heritage is a richness that is intangible. It is the testimony of the past. This is because the past, my Daughters, is like the foundation of a house. We do not see it, but it supports the entire house. We no longer see the past, but that is what has prepared the day where you are right now. The Company's past has shaped the Community. It has made it what it is today. Do you understand what I am explaining to you?

Let us now proceed to the second point of our conference. There are several kinds of heritage. Artistic heritage includes all works of art created by artists: painting, sculpture, architecture, literature or music. There is also the heritage of ancient and precious books or writings. Some of these are written on parchment.

I must also tell you that there exists a patrimony of our holy Church. While Our Lord Jesus willed to be born in a stable like a homeless person, Christians did not want him, present in the Sacred Host, to be housed in a poor dwelling. That is why they built churches and cathedrals. Have you never admired the spires or the windows of the Cathedral of Chartres where Mademoiselle went on pilgrimage to consecrate the Little Company to the Blessed Virgin, its only mother? Or the towers of Notre Dame of Paris where the great preachers taught? Ah, well, my Sisters, these cathedrals, these basilicas, churches of all countries are, or were, the patrimony of our Holy Mother Church. Nothing was too beautiful to hold Our Lord, and those who built these wonderful monuments painstakingly and selflessly gave of themselves. France has seen the birth of hundreds of bell towers and majestic cathedrals that sing the glory of God. This is religious patrimony. You can be proud, my Sisters, to belong to a country that built such beautiful houses for its Lord.

I am not going to dwell on national patrimony, but do you know that your house is part of the patrimony of the Company? This great, magnificent building, whose foundation dates from the ninth century, was constructed under Charlemagne, to house the Benedictine monks. For nine centuries prayer rose from these walls, hallowed by holy religious men who were imbued with the glory of God. Since all works of God, however, stir up the devil, this abbey knew persecution, pillage, fire, war and invasions. Our good monks rebuilt it after each catastrophe and their prayer did not cease rising to the heavens until the day they were driven out by the Revolution. And now, this monastery, this house so full of history, is the patrimony of the Company. It is a family estate. This holy dwelling conceals precious treasures, which have been preserved. With great exactitude and love, our Provincial Secretary has indexed them. Rummaging in all corners of the house, she has fortunately uncovered books, documents, paintings, relics and other things. She truly has a

particular fondness for the vestiges of the past. Let us thank God for all these blessings.

My Sisters, I am now going to talk about another kind of patrimony: community and spiritual patrimony. Works of art, monuments, all these are magnificent, but I must tell you that the real patrimony of the Company is the Daughters of Charity who have faithfully lived out their vocation. They are the family treasures. O, my Saviour! What a treasure it is that all these Daughters have served the poor and remained faithful to their commitments. They have inherited this from our first Sisters, those who were part of the humble beginnings and whom Mademoiselle formed to be servants of the poor. Ah, well, do you not believe that Mademoiselle is part of our patrimony with all those who followed her? As for me, poor that I am, I am not worthy of such an honour. It is not I who have handed on the heritage of the Company because I never thought of it. It is God who has done everything. Give him thanks, my Daughters, for all that he has given you. Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good...

What a beautiful heritage is our spirit of humility, simplicity and charity! It is necessary to preserve it, my Sisters, to make it grow in order to leave it to those who will follow you, just as your predecessors handed it on to you. But you will ask me, what must we do to preserve this beautiful heritage?

And now we are coming to the third point of our conference. It will be shorter because time is running out. My Sisters, we have just said what it is: fidelity to vocation is the necessary condition for handing on to those who follow, our spirit and our little rules to live like simple village girls without boastfulness and in poverty, because if poverty is lost, we would have to say adieu to the patrimony of the Company. If we are not careful it would disappear, as if an inherited fortune had been squandered. You know, too, that in order to be faithful to your vocation, the best way to preserve this community patrimony is by prayer. It is guaranteed to be very effective. I recommend it to you.

It is getting late. I am going to end this conference here. Let us thank our Good God for all that he has given us. Before leaving you, my Daughters, I would like to tell you about a dream that I had a few days ago.

One evening, at dusk, just as night was beginning to fall, I was taking a walk here at your house, in the cloister, in the garden and in Guardian Angel courtyard. I saw Sisters who were going and coming into the house that had fallen silent. Each one went to her room because it was time to go to bed. They were limping, dragging their legs a little, some to the right, some to the left, bending forward or backward, leaning on a stick or holding their back, which seemed to be giving them pain. I was tired, I began to doze, and sleep overtook me. I went to sleep and was transported in a dream. Surprise! The Sisters that I had seen hobbling along, I suddenly saw as spry as gazelles, strong, as in their youth, serving the poor. They were going and coming, hurrying through the streets, going up stairs, getting into their small cars to go and care for the poor. They would go at full speed to the bedside of a sick person. They would rush to care for them in their homes. I saw others in the hospitals with the dying and those who had had surgery. I saw some, who with such great tenderness, were watching over the vulnerable elderly. Some were with children, caring for them

as their mothers. Others were educating and teaching young people. What a beautiful sight! In the distance I saw white cornettes and blue veils. It was an immense crowd from every race. They were all over the world. I said to myself that poverty is a plant that grows everywhere, in all latitudes, all seasons and all eras, and that the Daughters of Charity are Sisters for all places and situations, to fight against poverty.

I suddenly woke up in the middle of the night and found myself here in Montolieu, in the cloister of your house, which was fast asleep. I was thinking of those Sisters, who were dragging their legs because they had hurried to take care of the unfortunate, those who were a little hard of hearing through listening to the pains of others, those who had poor eyesight through deciphering prescriptions, checking medication or correcting schoolwork. I was thinking about those Sisters whose backs were stooped through leaning over sickbeds, those whose hands were deformed by arthritis through working so hard. I said to myself: If eyesight grows weak, vision remains keen, meaning seeing those who are disfigured, is to see the face of God. If hands are shaking, they can still be folded in prayer or be kept busy with little community tasks. If legs can no longer run, they can walk to the chapel or to the rooms of the sick to pay them a visit. If the ears are a little deaf, they are more alert to listen to what is not said and what comes from the heart.

I was now fully awake. What a beautiful sight I had just seen! My Daughters, those of yesteryear, those of today and those of tomorrow, these are the patrimony of the Company. Please God it may not be lost! This is the grace I wish for you. *In nomine Domini...* And now we will conclude this conference on all these wonders.

The Sisters of Montolieu  
*Province of France South*

### **ALL OUR BEST WISHES!**

To  
everyone in the  
Company!  
This Christmas, we  
have created a beautiful tree in  
our hearts, and in place of gifts,  
we have decorated it with  
the names of all our Sisters;  
those far away and those near, the oldest  
and the youngest, those we see every day and those we  
rarely see, those we don't often think about and those we  
sometimes forget, those we've known from difficult times  
and those from happy times, those whom we know  
well and those we hardly know at all, those who owe us  
something and those to whom we owe a great deal, and the names

of all those no longer present in our life. This tree has very deep roots  
so that all these names remain forever in our hearts, and its branches are

so wide that  
there is room  
for new names  
coming from  
everywhere  
in the world  
to join the  
names of those  
already here.  
Happy New Year!

From everyone involved in the production of this magazine