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SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of 2nd February 2007

Dear Sisters

The Liturgy of Light that is part of the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple ends with this blessing: "*O God, fountain and principle of every light... guide us along the road of good, until we reach the light without end...*" This seems to be an appropriate way to begin this letter of February 2nd since our renewal of vows is rooted in the One who is Light, who each year rekindles the fire of charity in our hearts.

When I met our Superior General, Father Gregory, in Rome, you were all very much in my thoughts and prayers as I presented our request to renew our vows. I described to him the succession of dialogues that begins with the communications with the Sister Servants of each local community. I emphasised how important these times of sharing are for all of us, real opportunities to "*examine ourselves on our efforts to be faithful to the demands of the life and mission of a Daughter of Charity*" (cf. C. 36 b).

I also talked to Father Gregory about our desire to go even farther, sharing with him our joy in serving our sisters and brothers who are poor. I asked forgiveness in my own name and also on the part of all of us, for our failings and our half-heartedness. Our Superior General granted us the grace of renewing our vows on March 26th, the feast of the Annunciation this year. Now is the time for us to intensify our prayer and reflection in order to prepare ourselves for this occasion, which is as important as it is simple. It offers us the opportunity to renew ourselves in our vocation and to reaffirm our desire to live according to the Constitutions and Statutes (cf. C. 96 a). In this way we can reanimate and rekindle the flame of our gift to God in community for the service of Christ in those who are poor.

In 2004, on the occasion of this letter of February 2nd, I began the practice of offering a commentary on the Action Lines which now brings us to the fourth one, the internationality of the Company. How can we address this subject within the framework of preparing to renew our vows? After much hesitation, I have decided to approach it from a particular angle, that of single-heartedness and unity of hearts. The concept of single-heartedness is also the measure of our belonging to the Company, the ability to be totally centred on the Lord and to give our all to Him because He has given us the grace of our vocation in the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

In the following paragraphs we will look at how we might grow in our sense of internationality, communion, union of hearts and resources today in the Company, so that we can recapture new energy to be "*solicitous for the development of every person in all the aspects of their being*" (cf. C. 24 e).

1. INTERNATIONALITY, A DIMENSION OF THE CHARISM

Consecrated life derives from the mystery of the Church. It is a gift that the Church receives from the Lord in order to witness in various ways to the very love of God. Consecrated life, therefore, carries the mark, the imprint of universality:

“Consecrated persons are called to be a leaven of communion at the service of the mission of the universal Church by the very fact that the manifold charisms of their respective Institutes are granted by the Holy Spirit for the good of the entire Mystical Body, whose upbuilding they must serve (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-11)... This, precisely, is the scope of the particular bond of communion which the different Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life have ... they are also at the service of cooperation between the particular Churches, since they can effectively promote an “exchange of gifts” among them, and thus contribute to an inculturation of the Gospel which purifies, strengthens and ennobles the treasures found in the cultures of all peoples. Today too, the flowering of vocations to the consecrated life in the younger Churches demonstrates the ability of the consecrated life to make present in Catholic unity the needs of different peoples and cultures” (Vita Consecrata, n. 47).

The Constitutions express this idea in the same way:

“The Company participates in the Church’s universal mission of salvation, according to the charism of its Founders, Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac.” (C. 1 a)

Constitution 6 addresses the internationality of the Company very specifically:

“The Company is international. The charism is incarnated and made visible in various cultures and countries throughout the world:

- *by its life,*
- *by its membership,*
- *by its organisation and representation,*
- *by communion, collaboration, and sharing among the Provinces.*

In the words of Saint Vincent, it is God

“who desired this Company of young women from various regions and wanted all of them to be of one heart!” (Coste IX, page 195).

In the Conference of February 13th, 1646, which contains the words *“So then, God is the one who willed this Company of Sisters from different regions and wanted all of them to be of one heart.”*, Saint Vincent presents to the Sisters what we would today call a sense of belonging to the Company as the basis for its internationality.

In this remarkable conference, which I encourage you to include in your prayer leading up to March 26th, is a description of the origins of the Company. Saint Vincent explains how it comes forth from the hand of God as he calls to mind the establishment of the first Confraternities of Charity beginning in Châtillon les Dombes, then at Villepreux, and thirdly in the parish of Saint Sauveur in Paris itself. He then mentions the difficulties the Ladies encountered in their service, and with tenderness he tells the story of the arrival of Marguerite Naseau, a poor village

woman, and the beginnings of the Company with Saint Louise in the parish of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet. Saint Vincent marvels at the designs of God who

“has willed that one Sister should come from Lorraine, another from Sedan, another from Angers, and others from elsewhere, and this is the place of which He said, ‘I will call you from all the nations of the earth.’ So then, He is the one who willed this Company of Sisters from different regions and wanted all of them to be of one heart.” (Coste IX, 195)

It is important to note that our charism contained the seeds of this internationality from its origins. As we well know, when Saint Vincent used the expression “*Sisters from different regions*” he was not referring to nationalities of our first Sisters in the strict sense of the term, but rather to their various towns of origin, with their different dialects, forms of dress and cultures. He was insisting that they make a personal effort to overcome themselves and be detached and that their minds and hearts be open in order to create authentic community. He wanted them to be solidly anchored in the spirit of the Company. Today we would say that Saint Vincent wanted to strengthen their sense of belonging.

2. INTERNATIONALITY AND THE SENSE OF BELONGING

As we know, some forms of belonging are taken for granted, such as our family, our race. These can of course condition us. Other forms of belonging are temporary links, for example with a certain organisation. There are also ways of belonging which involve one’s whole being and are a result of faith and vocational choice. This is the case with our membership of the Church through baptism and our belonging to the Company.

This sense of belonging is based on an invitation (Mk. 3: 13-14). We have been called to be Daughters of Charity in the Company; we have been invited to live out this vocation with other persons who likewise have been called by the Lord. Our response to God’s call is an essential characteristic for each one of us in the Company into which we have requested to be admitted.

I know that we are aware how precious our vocation is, this freely-given gift from God. It is a good idea, though, before we renew our vows, to reflect on the quality of our belonging. This is important because *“Faced with the vast number of memberships and pressures making demands on them, the Daughters of Charity must affirm their belonging to the Company”* (Instructions on the Vows, page 95).

This belonging is manifested by:

- awareness of acting as members of the Company, in a community of prayer and faith, and being sent forth by the Company (cf. C. 5, S. 8) ;
- availability that helps all the Sisters to transcend their own opinions and interests for the common good and enables the Company to provide the services entrusted to it (cf. C. 31, c).

Living with this attitude of availability allows us to lighten the load that would otherwise prevent us from hastening to where the Spirit calls us to go. In order to possess this availability, agility and mobility, we must be clothed with the Spirit of Jesus, with sandals on our feet, as the Gospels say.

- participation and co-responsibility, so that regardless of age, duty, or ministry, each Sister is aware of her responsibility to contribute with all the wealth of her personality and culture to the common mission (cf. C. 35 a) ;
- consistency of our life with the Constitutions and Statutes, freeing us to love and inviting us to transform everything into love (cf. C. 96 a);
- service carried out in the name of the Company which makes the Company visible (cf. S. 8 a);
- joy and unconditional response to the Lord who strengthens the fidelity of each of us (cf. C. 59).

We pass through various stages in our vocation: periods of joy and peace followed by times of doubt, discouragement, etc. At times we struggle with the temptation of only understanding fidelity as a personal relationship with the Lord or as a commitment to a particular service to poor persons. On other occasions, instead of building community, we remain in a consumeristic attitude. And in a certain sense, “community consumerism” is just as, if not more dangerous than economic consumerism, because little by little, it risks stifling our sense of belonging.

If the bond that connects us to the Company is weakened or is broken, attitudes tainted by subjectivism or individualism may soon follow. Conflicts relating to identity manifest themselves as difficulties at the level of belonging, such as fatigue, sadness or lack of motivation. In addition, our lives are subject to being adversely influenced by a world in which much is fleeting and of a transient nature. Sociologists speak of permeable, weak membership which lacks solidity and total commitment of the person.

On the other hand, it is the experience of the Spirit uniting the Father and the Son that **gives life** to our belonging, making it deeper and more solid. This Spirit gives us a taste of the immense joy of having been called and gathered in the Company for the service of those who are poor. This experience is the fruit of listening to the Word of God, celebrating the Eucharist each day as the centre of our life and mission, deepening our understanding of the writings of our Founders and the Constitutions, taking time for personal formation and for reflection together on the events of daily life.

The annual renewal of our vows, a free act of the will inspired always by love, allows us to strengthen our determination to be faithful to our vocation, while it assures the stability of our service of Christ in persons who are poor. It helps us to deepen and strengthen our radical sense of total belonging to the Lord, in the Company, for the service of our brothers and sisters who are poor (cf. C. 28 d).

*“Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; **give me an undivided heart** to revere your name. I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever. For great is your steadfast love toward me” (Psalm 86: 11-13).*

3. INTERNATIONALITY LIVED OUT IN COMMUNION AND SHARING

♦ Living in communion

“The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the

ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue in charity... Communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony... International Institutes can achieve this effectively, inasmuch as they have to face in a creative way the challenge of inculturation, while at the same time preserving their identity.” (Vita Consecrata, n. 51)

It almost seems as if this passage of the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* was written specifically for the Daughters of Charity!

For Saint Vincent, living in communion meant participating *“in the good that is done by all!”* (Conference of July 31st, 1634, Coste IX, page 2). He adds that we are *“Sisters whom Jesus Christ has united by the bond of His love”* (Conference of July 19th 1640, Coste IX, page 19)

Our Constitutions interpret the idea of communion within the framework of community life in view of the mission. It involves building this communion day after day, in respect and trust, with a faith vision that accepts diversity (cf. C. 32). In the articles relating to the mission *Ad Gentes* (C. 25 and S. 13), the idea of communion in internationality is very clear. Let us cite in particular Statute 13 d:

“All Daughters of Charity are closely united with those who, through obedience and faith, have left family and country. They help them by their prayers, their sacrifices, their sisterly and moral support, and in every other way they can. They show an interest in the specific problems of the mission Ad Gentes and share in its hopes.”

In a certain sense, this Statute could be applied to communion among all of us, the union of hearts and resources among all the Provinces of the Company.

The General Councillors and I are impressed by your keen interest in the news of the Company; during our visits you ask us about all parts of the world, from Magadan to Haiti, by way of China and the Motherhouse all the way to the Cook Islands... I know that you also appreciate the family news, the Echoes, the web site, etc. I think we can go even further as a Company in this communion and communication. We could take greater advantage of our internationality in order to know one another better. I know that in your Provinces you experience mutual support in a very powerful way. The elderly Sisters take very seriously their responsibility to pray for a certain local community of the Province or a certain Sister. Why not extend this important initiative, this service that is so precious to us? It is not up to me to suggest a method to you, but it seems to me that the strong spiritual bonds that exist among us could be broadened to include all the Provinces, to make them more tangible in creative ways, to give them faces and names...

♦ **Experiencing sharing**

Putting everything in common was a specific characteristic of the first Christian communities. It is also a very clear sign of the vitality and the quality of a Vincentian community. We already have a rich tradition in the Company in the matter of collaboration and sharing, for example, with the Sisters who have been sent and continue to be sent to the Mission *Ad Gentes*, along with the generosity of their Provinces of origin. We can also call to mind the very substantial sharing of finances that occurs in the framework of Constitution 90 and Statutes 72 and 73. I think we can go even further in this domain as well.

In a world in which inequalities have become scandalous, where we see and know that there are so many people who lack the basic necessities, we cannot let ourselves be taken up by material well-being and comfort, the idols of our society, or reason like “narrow-minded” people.

Here again, it is not up to me to indicate to you the concrete steps to take, but it seems important that we continually discern our decisions regarding poverty on a personal level, in our local communities and in our Provinces, all within the broader framework of the Company.

I also believe that we need to do more to prepare the ground for collaboration among ourselves, with the Vincentian family and other partners on the side of those who are poor. Our consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations will be a means of sharing information and propositions for the integral promotion of those who are most destitute, those whom our world forgets or chooses not to see. In uniting our hearts and our resources, we can establish a network of charity to provide more effective aid for a refugees and migrants and defend the rights of women and children who are exploited and treated like objects.

There is some special news to share with you on this day dedicated to members of Consecrated Life, when we are invited to celebrate together the marvels that the Lord has accomplished for us, as Pope John Paul II phrased it when he began the tradition ten years ago. I have the joy of officially announcing the beatification of Sister Lindalva Justo de Oliveira from Salvador-Bahia in the Province of Recife Brazil, on November 25th, 2007. Sister Lindalva is a witness for us of belonging to the very end, in the simplicity of her service of Christ in those who are poor. The circumstances of her death reveal her unconditional devotion to the Lord who called her to the Company. We can meditate on what this says to us and journey with this new experience of the beatification of one of our contemporaries. Her companions from the Seminary, her Sister Servants and her mother and family will be present for the ceremony.

Allow me, in finishing this letter, to borrow the following words from Saint Louise that are touching in both their humility and radicality:

“Trusting in the infinite mercy of my God... I irrevocably resolve to love and serve Him with greater fidelity...” (Spiritual Writings, A.3, page 694).

Let us pray together that the approaching renewal of our vows will give new impetus to our spiritual life; that our Domestic Assemblies will likewise be a time of grace and an experience of God in view of our mission of service of Christ in persons who are poor.

May Mary, who was totally humble and self-giving, accompany us on the journey. She will watch over the Company that she loves!

I told Father Gregory how grateful we are for his spiritual animation and his visits to the Provinces. I also thank Father Javier for his Vincentian accompaniment and his assistance with formation. We continue to remember in our prayers Father Richard McCullen, Father Robert Maloney and Father Quintano, as well as Mother Duzan and Mother Elizondo.

Devotedly and affectionately, and with the assurance of my prayers for each one of you,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

FATHER GREGORY GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Lent 2007

To the members of the Company of the Daughters of Charity

Dear Sisters,

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

As we begin this most holy season of Lent, I pray that it may be a time of dying and rising for each and everyone of you, my beloved Daughters of Charity. When reflecting upon Lent, perhaps one of the Scripture passages that most comes to mind and helps me to see what the Lord asks of us, is the passage about the grain of wheat: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (John 12:24). Let this Lenten season be a time when we die to ourselves, individually and communally, in order that we might live more fully in the Lord Jesus, whose passion, death and resurrection is the integral focal point of Lent.

Might I suggest for your meditation this Lenten season, in order to live more fully the Passover of the Lord and experience once again the newness of life that comes in the Resurrection, that you focus on your own identity as a member of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. I propose an examination of how you live out the characteristic virtues that Saint Vincent spelled out for you.

The characteristic virtues help you to stand strong before whatever obstacle it is that hinders you from living out fully the vocation to which you have been called. As we know, the characteristic virtues are those gospel values that Saint Vincent "particularly admired in Jesus Christ." They are virtues that he lacked and yet ones that he strove to live out, to understand and to put into practice in his own life.

Here are some brief reflections on each of the characteristic virtues. I ask you to take to heart what you reflect on and may God's grace help you in the process.

SIMPLICITY

Saint Vincent said, "it is the virtue I love most" (SV I, 284; English I, 265), so much so "that I call it my Gospel" (SV IX 606; English IX, 476). "I have special devotion and consolation in saying things as they are" (*ibid*). These words can help us to identify simplicity in its real meaning as truth, sincerity, transparency. Living out

simplicity helps us to avoid being two-faced, saying one thing and meaning another, or saying one thing to the face of a person and another thing behind his or her back. We are called to be simple, to say things as they are, but, might I add, always with charity toward the other. As Saint Vincent tells us, it is the freedom to speak to another “with full confidence, without concealing or disguising anything” (SV I, 284; English I, 264-265).

There are certain situations that call for the true living out of simplicity; for example, when friends sit down and speak to friends, even about difficult issues. Another example would be the relationship between the Sister Servant and the members of the house, when the Constitutions call for communication, which should be carried out in utter simplicity. Simplicity must also be present in the “neophytes” seeking to commit themselves to following Jesus Christ in the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Sincerity is called for on the part of your members in formation, especially in the way they relate to their formators and their spiritual directors.

HUMILITY

Saint Vincent called it “the characteristic virtue of the mission. Oh holy virtue, how beautiful you are. O little Company, how lovable you will be if God grants you this grace” (SV XII, 204). Then Saint Vincent again called humility “the virtue of Jesus Christ, ... of his holy mother, ... of the greatest of the saints, ... it is the virtue of missionaries” (SV XI, 56-57).

Humility is the virtue that enables us to recognise and admit our weaknesses and limitations, creating the possibility of trusting more in God and less in ourselves. At the same time, humility enables us to recognise our giftedness, a giftedness which is to be put at the service of others. It is the virtue that allows the poor to draw close to us. It is the virtue that helps us to see that all are equal in God’s sight. At the same time, it enables us to draw close to the poor.

The opposite of the humble are certainly those who are proud hearted, with an attitude of “I am better than the other,” who look down on people from a place on high. Humility is a virtue which enables missionaries to inculturate, in other words, to become one with others, especially one with the poor. As Saint Vincent says in another place, it is a “perfect abandonment of all that you are and can be” (SV III, 279; English III, 279) with confidence in the one who is our Lord alone, Jesus Christ. Again, if you establish yourselves in humility, you will make the Company a paradise and people will remark how happy you are” (cf. SV X, 439; English X, 353).

For the Congregation of the Mission, Saint Vincent had three more characteristic virtues: meekness, mortification and zeal for souls. Certainly Saint Vincent spoke of these virtues to the Daughters of Charity and Mademoiselle Le Gras on different occasions. If we look at them carefully, we might consider them to be different or specific ways of expressing the essence of the third characteristic virtue established for the Daughters of Charity: charity itself. So, I ask you, my dear sisters, to see in the following three virtues, different expressions of charity itself, applying them in meditation in relationship to yourself, to those with whom you share your life in community and to those to whom you give yourselves generously in service.

MEEKNESS

I call meekness the vocational virtue, or as Saint Vincent himself says, “an amiable manner wins hearts and attracts them” (SV XII, 189). And again, “if a man cannot be won over by gentleness and patience, it will be difficult to find any other way of doing it.” (SV VII, 226; English, VII, 241). Other words that we would use today concerning the word, meekness, would be gentle, gracious, amiable, friendly. In one sense it is related to humility in that it is the virtue that allows the poor to approach us. It is the virtue that make us approachable.

Meekness is not aggressive, angry, or loud-mouthed. It certainly is a key virtue in community. It is the virtue that helps build up the confidence others have in us, because when we are gentle, those who are shy will open up to us. Saint Vincent says “there are no persons more constant and firm in doing good than those who are meek and gracious” (SV XI, 65).

A subject related to that of meekness is hospitality, which is a characteristic that should distinguish any Daughter of Charity: someone who is welcoming; who is attentive to the needs of others, and especially attentive to those who have come from afar.

MORTIFICATION

This is the virtue of Lent. We are called to die to ourselves. It is the virtue that calls us to give ourselves, to think first of others, especially to think first of the poor, before ourselves. As Saint Vincent says, “the saints are saints because they walk in [the] footsteps [of Jesus Christ], renounce themselves, and mortify themselves in all things” (SV XII, 227). As he also said, prayer and mortification “are two sisters so closely united that one is never found without the other” (SV IX, 427; English IX, 336).

The time of Lent is a time of prayer and fasting. Fasting means much more than simply refraining from eating. It is that traditional Christian practice, which helps us die to ourselves. One of the dangers we easily face is to want to go easy on ourselves, being unwilling, at times, even to make some small sacrifices for the other person. Another danger is thinking first of my needs, my routine and, therefore, my comfort. In that, there is the danger of being unwilling to go the extra mile for the other. As Saint Vincent said, the gift of mortification “is acquired only by repeated acts” (SV V, 436; English V, 443). So let this Lent be a time for us to practise the art of mortification.

ZEAL FOR SOULS

(or, as I would call it, passion for humanity). Saint Vincent said that “if love of God is the fire, zeal is its flame” (SV XII, 307-308). It is the consequence of a truly compassionate heart. It is all about passion for Christ, passion for humanity, and passion especially for the poor. Zeal is a true missionary virtue. It is expressed in availability, the disposition to serve and to evangelize even when old and infirm. As Saint Vincent said, “I myself, old and infirm as I am, should not cease to be ready, yes, even to set out for the Indies to win souls for Christ” (SV XI, 402).

Connected with zeal is the sense of enthusiasm, which calls for action. As Saint Vincent also said, “Let us love God, my brothers, ... but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows” (SV XI, 40). We can understand zeal as a concrete expression of effective love, which is motivated by compassion or,

in other words, affective love. As Saint Vincent said, "Imagine then that there are millions of souls stretching out their hands to you" and calling you by name" (cf. SV I, 252; English I, 245).

"The evangelical virtues of humility, simplicity and charity are the path along which the Daughters of Charity allow themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit. The sisters contemplate in Christ those dispositions which will draw them close to the most deprived, endeavouring to make them a part of their own lives" (C 13).

Lent is a time of special grace. Let it be a special grace for you to help you be who you are called to be, members of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, faithful to following Jesus Christ, Servant of the Poor.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

FATHER GREGORY GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Happy feast of Saint Louise!

14th March 2007

Dear Sister Evelyne,

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

On this vigil of the Feast of Saint Louise de Marillac, I would like to extend to you, and to all the Daughters of Charity throughout the world, my sincerest gratitude for your living out of the spirit of Saint Louise de Marillac today. We know that times have changed greatly since Louise's day, but your expression of faith and ever-living witness of the Gospel is needed now, more than ever, in our world.

I would like to offer you some reflections based on Moses as he is depicted in the Book of Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15. Moses was a very simple man, who tended sheep, who came face-to-face with the mystery of God. Deeply aware of his own weakness, he hid his face from God. Nonetheless, God shared with him his story, the plight of his poor. Moses humbly listened, as God told him he would be chosen to be an instrument to set God's people free.

PHOTO

We can say the same about Louise de Marillac. She was a simple, ordinary woman, with a passionate desire to know God, to meet him face-to-face. Yet, fully aware of her own weaknesses, she humbly listened to God's story about the plight of the poor in France. She was chosen as an instrument of God's charity to set the people free.

I pray that this may be the story that will always be told of each and every Daughter of Charity throughout the world. In simplicity, humility and charity, may they continue to serve God in serving God's people, the poor. May Saint Louise's passion to know

God more deeply and her service of the poor, as well as her encouraging others, that is, the sisters of her Company, to do the same, inspire you as you celebrate her feast. As Saint Louise so desired, I pray that as Saint Louise wished, we may remain united, that is, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, together with the rest of the Vincentian Family, as we strive to serve, affectively and effectively, our Lords and Masters, the poor. God bless!

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

FATHER GREGORY GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

LET GO and LET GOD

I was in Japan recently and one of the first things I did was to go on a pilgrimage to Hiroshima with the Visitatrice, the Director and the Provincial Secretary. It was a very moving experience, to say the least. First of all, it was striking to see the devastation that human beings can bring about through their "creativity" with just one bomb by means of which 200,000 people had their lives abruptly ended. But, even more so, it was impressive to see the efforts that Hiroshima and its people, and others from around the world, are making to create a culture of peace. The world situation today is even more volatile than in 1945. Tensions among nations are high and the risk of war, which could be even more destructive, is quite possible. More than ever, the world in which we live must develop a culture of peace so that humanity may survive. Attitudes among individuals must change and relations among nations must be healed.

In preparation for this conference, as I was reflecting on what I might share with you on this wonderful day of the Renovation of Vows, I asked myself: As followers of Jesus Christ, as Daughters of Charity, who have a great love for the charism of our Founders, what might you do, or better still, what are you doing, to promote attitudes that will speak out against whatever destroys, and will promote the life that God has given to all his children?

You renew your vows every year in order that you may be faithful to your mission of serving the poor. The poor are, above all, those members of God's Kingdom to whom you are called to witness and whom you accompany in the development and growth of Christian attitudes.

As I said, the world in which we live is quite unstable. Peoples and nations attempt to pursue a very human, basic reality, which we call security. People look for that security, first and foremost, in the material. They cling to things, hold on to things, big or small. It gives them a sense of security. In the famous cartoon *Peanuts*, one of the characters is Linus. He carries around with him, all the time, a blanket. This is his security blanket, as the author makes quite clear. Yet, as followers of Jesus Christ in the Vincentian charism, we believe that security is not found in material possessions. It is through the **vow of poverty** that we receive the grace to let go of material things in order to let God be our security. Yet we are

products of our society, influenced by every means of modern communication that exists and even duped by the commercialism and consumerism that the global society promotes. It is good, therefore, that we take this day to reaffirm our commitment to God, promising to let go of things and let God be our security.

In our world today, the need for security is even more evident in the desire to dominate: persons dominating persons and nations dominating nations. Here the dynamic is more one of control, through power, to the point where the one dominated is paralysed. As an example of this, we see how paralysed the countries of Lebanon and Iraq have become. They are hindered from progressing and developing because there was no serious attempt at dialogue to bring about understanding. There is the incessant human need to crush the other in order that "I" might survive, "I" might be secure. Yet we see how volatile and unstable such security really is.

It is my contention that the **vow of chastity** is a gift from God so that we may establish equal relations among peoples of good will. When we feel the need to dominate, control or manipulate others or, vice versa, the need to be dominated, controlled or manipulated, we are, in a sense, looking for security. Chastity allows us to let go of that need to dominate or be dominated, to let go of power, to become powerless. It is the dynamic of the cross. Jesus became powerless in order that we might have life. Jesus let go and let his heavenly Father bring him to new life not through the need to dominate, but through the ability to love freely.

In the world in which we live, one of the principal attitudes is: "I did it my way." This expresses an obsessive need to have "my" way about things, to cling to "my" ideas, "my" reputation, "my" image and "my" certainties. Through such an attitude, we establish our identity and, in this, we find our security. We are saying very clearly: "*my* will be done." Yet we are called, as followers of Jesus Christ, to let go of my way, of my ideas, of my will and let God's will be done. This demands that we listen. To listen to God means to be obedient to him. The challenge we face is to let go of our ideas, even to let go of our certainties. This is threatening. It creates insecurity and anxiety. Letting go requires self-discipline. God gives us that ability through the **vow of obedience**.

As Daughters of Charity, the letting go of possessions, persons, and even our own ideas and certainties, makes us free to serve unconditionally those whom God has entrusted to us. The vows liberate us from possessions, persons, ideas and certainties in order to be free for God in equal loving relationships. Letting go is a freeing experience and yet we are often afraid to let go. We may cling to things. We may cling to others. We may cling to our own ideas. In saying "yes" to God through our vows, we receive the grace of this liberating experience. We find our security in God. In God we trust. It is not a question of clinging to God, but rather a surrendering of ourselves to him, as Jesus did when he gave himself completely, his letting go of everything and everyone, in total surrender. "Father, into your hands, I surrender my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

As we grow closer to God in growing closer to the poor, we learn that it is through unconditional loving **service of the poor** that God sets us free, radically free. In renewing your vows, sisters, you are making a commitment to one another, to the poor and to God. This living testimony of our actions and our lives can help create new attitudes in those whom we serve, in those with whom we live, as well as in ourselves. The fruits of such new attitudes are peace, joy, freedom, understanding, compassion, forgiveness and love..

Congratulations, sisters, on renewing your vows. It is a wonderful opportunity, through the unconditional and free grace of the vows that God has graciously offered you, to challenge yourselves, one another and the world in which we live. All we have to keep doing, is to let go and let God. Then there will be peace on earth.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

FATHER JAVIER ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Reinforcing a sense of belonging

(Acts. 4:32-35)

(Conference given at the Mother House
in preparation for Renovation 2007)

*“The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had”. (Ac 4, 32-35). The issue of belonging is one of the concerns addressed by recent General Assemblies. We may recall the Assembly of 1985 which declared: “Faced with the multiplicity of allegiances and pressures which make claims on us in the actual context of life around us, we reaffirm our belonging to the **Company**”¹ For its part, the General Assembly document of 1991 recalled that “the Community is our primary place of **belonging**”² We find the same idea, stated in almost identical words, in C. 34: “The local community is the primary place of belonging for the Daughters of Charity”. The Church’s thinking is in line with that of the Company. We may quote, for example, the document *Fraternal Life in Community*: “It is therefore necessary to promote an institute’s charismatic identity in order to avoid a kind of ‘genericism’ which is a real threat to the vitality of a religious community....Several factors have been identified as causing suffering for religious communities in recent years, and in some cases, continue to cause it. Among these dangers it mentions “a certain kind of involvement in ecclesial movements which exposes individual religious to the ambiguous phenomenon of dual **membership**.”³*

Why do we need to bring up the topic of belonging these days? With the arrival of modernity, and then post modernity, the human person has taken on a greater importance than ever, in relation to society and its institutions. As a consequence, the individual person is reappraised in a subjective way , individuality and uniqueness are more greatly valued and respected than at any previous time. No one doubts that this change has been enormously positive from both a human and a Christian viewpoint. It is sufficient to recall the biblical statement that “*The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath*” (Mk 2:28). However, it is not always easy to balance the institution and the individual person. As those responsible for the government of the Provinces, you are very familiar with

¹ 1985 General Assembly, *At the Crossroads* p.7

² 1991 General Assembly: *At Jacob’s Well* p.10

³ Congregation for Institutes of Religious Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal life in community*, no. 46

this difficulty. This topic of “belonging to the Company”, therefore, can help you to maintain the desirable, though difficult, balance. We need to add that some thinkers say that present-day culture fosters individualism, selectivity, syncretism and lack of commitment. These are only some characteristics of our culture, but they can affect belonging insofar as they leave the door open to a partial adherence to the global mission of the Company.

THE VALUES THAT UNDERPIN BELONGING

We can speak of belonging in terms of identifying with the Company and with the mission that God has confided to it. Since that identification can be to a greater or lesser degree, there can be different levels of belonging. On the other hand, belonging is not an isolated value, but is closely related to many others. We can say that belonging or a lack of it, is a result of an overall lifestyle: those who have cultivated the elements of our community life will have a sense of belonging, and those who have neglected them will lack it. If we try to visualise this last idea we could think of the relationship between a house and its foundation: the house is like the sense of belonging, and it cannot stand unless it has a solid base. The foundations of belonging are the fundamental values of our spirit. Let us look at several of these values which, if we work at them, guarantee a sense of belonging:

1. The value of vocation and of being called “with others”

Some years ago, God called you to the Company, purely out of love. God set you on the best of paths: following Christ in the service of those who have a privileged place in the Kingdom, persons who are poor. God chose you to continue the life and mission of his Son. God made you a daughter of Love, a daughter of God’s own Goodness, a Daughter of Charity. All these events in your life have necessarily left their mark on you. It is not possible that you could have lived them superficially. Recalling the ways they have influenced us will reinforce our sense of belonging. So there is a close link between our experience of vocation up to now, and our sense of belonging.

From vocation to being called “with others”. It is important to re-live the theological experience of being called, assembled and sent by the Lord. Mark 3:13-15 sums up the whole vocation process. In our own case, it is important that this experience should move beyond the psychological and social levels to become a theological experience, that is to say, an experience related to God and his Kingdom. This progression must, of course, be closely linked to prayer and to an informed conscience. When my experience reaches the theological level, I cannot help but see that the women who live with me and who form part of the Company, called by God just as I have been, are convoked (called with) me to carry out the concrete mission of caring for the little ones in the Kingdom of God.

This theological experience is sufficiently dynamic to guarantee love and respect for one’s companions. Moreover, such an experience is meant to be translated into a current of loving “sympathy” that flows through the entire body of the community, even passing through the barriers of time and space. Many others have been called before I was, and Sisters who have died now form part of the Company triumphant. For us, they are the intercessors to whom we can and must have recourse. We must keep alive their memory; we owe them thanks and need to pray for them, as is natural in any family. The experience of being called is closely connected to belonging to a group of which I am a part, but which also transcends me. Also, being aware of the value of vocation which includes among other things, living together in community, helps to strengthen our sense of belonging, something

that continues even after death, as is explained so well in article 35c of the Constitutions. That is why it is good to think of the deceased Sisters of our Province and ask them to pray for us. Asking them to intercede for us is yet another way of strengthening the idea of family. We should not forget, either, the many Sisters who are saints even though they will never be officially canonised by the Church. Provinces and local communities should pray to Sisters who have died for these are the Company triumphant

2. THE VALUE OF THE COMPANY THAT WAS WILLED BY GOD

Saint Vincent couldn't have been more convinced of this. He spoke of it more than ten times in his conferences to the Sisters: *"Who would have ever thought there would have been Daughters of Charity!"* he says. *"God thought of it...We can say, Sisters, that He's the Author of your Company..."*⁴. Saint Louise held this same conviction; she spoke about it several times, for example when she said that God can do wonders by making use of little things and sometimes using nothing at all. The Company's mission, as part of its vocation, has also been the work of God. *"Why did God institute the Company?"* Saint Vincent asked. And he answers his own question: *"to honour Our Lord Jesus Christ, serving Him in those who are poor..."*⁵.

When you think back over your life, you have to say, with deep gratitude, that the place where the Lord has touched me, where I have most known and followed Christ, has been in the Company founded by Saint Vincent, that is to say, in this united group of women and of structures which from the times of the Founders until the present day has striven to become a fitting instrument in God's hands for bringing about God's Reign in all its fullness. We could say that from the hand of the Company we have come to discover the Kingdom of God, the "hidden treasure" and the "pearl without price". How could you not love and feel connected to this "body" that "mediates" for you? I have frequently heard many Sisters express this same gratitude to the Company because they realise that they have received so much from it. Clearly, God and the Kingdom are absolutes. Everything else, including the Church and the Company, are simply mediations of God's Reign. What happens is that one realises that the Kingdom of God and its specific mediation (the Company) are so closely intertwined that one feels totally involved in the Company and makes the firm decision to become part of it for a lifetime. The mediation (the Company) is still a mediation, but it is experienced as the grace-filled place of encounter with the absolute (God's Reign). It is not a grace-filled place in the abstract, but a real and specific experience of grace.

But the Company is not only a place that gives us a sense of identity and belonging. Since its foundation the Company has also received a mission from God; a mission that has been carried out through time and space until the present day. The Company receives this mission and hands it on to the various local communities and individuals. What gives the Daughters of Charity their identity and helps them to grow in their sense of belonging is that their mission is the same, although it is carried out in different ways. This common horizon of holistic service to those who are poor gives the Company an awareness, a sensitivity, a way of doing things and some common characteristics that are not shared by other institutions which have different aims. .

3. THE VALUE OF FIDELITY

⁴ Coste IX p. 113-114, Conference of 14th June 1643 on explaining the Rules

⁵ Coste IX p. 127, Conference of 18th October 1655, on the end of the Company

It can be said that fidelity creates a sense of belonging and purifies our motives. But, in order for this to happen, we have to understand that fidelity is not merely a habit that comes from repeatedly doing something, nor does it mean being filled with enthusiasm for an idea or a project and then obstinately sticking to it. According to the General Assembly document *At Jacob's Well*, fidelity must be modified by these two adjectives: "creative" and "audacious". So fidelity looks more to the future than to the past. If it looks to the past it is to see a plan of God that you adopted in your own life. And if it looks to the future it is because that plan should be lived in a way that is concrete, demanding and realistic. In this latter sense, fidelity is openness and submission to the voice of the Spirit and the voice of one's sisters and brothers.

I would go still further, because fidelity, rather than being a programme of action, is a contemplative exercise. In fact, when we speak of fidelity we immediately think of our inconsistencies and our obligations but we do not often stop to contemplate God's fidelity toward us, even though we may be unfaithful. God's faithfulness is much more important than our own infidelity. Again, if we are able to live in some degree of fidelity this will not be due mainly or exclusively to our own efforts, but to God's fidelity, which together with God's grace makes our own fidelity possible. That is to say, we can establish our own fidelity on the strong fabric of God's fidelity. When we consider fidelity in this way, it becomes the linchpin of our life. It cleanses our past and at the same time creatively opens us up to the future, helping us to see the present moment as an opportunity. In this way fidelity strengthens and reaffirms the sense of belonging to a plan, to a lifestyle and to a social group.

***Fidelity to service in the past.**

When fidelity keeps faith with the past, it always ends up by purifying it. It isn't unusual that in the journey of our life little imperfections or deviations occur which are in need of repair or re-direction. In the Song of Songs (2,15) there is a beautiful image which points in this direction: the owner of the vineyard was delighted with his flourishing vineyard. But when he returned after a harsh winter, he found that foxes had broken into the vineyard and damaged it. The damage was not great, just a slight deterioration. What are the flaws we notice when we look at our past? Perhaps we have wounds from our past that remain unhealed, resulting in bitterness in the present. It could be that nostalgia makes us look back to times past, not to learn from them but to remain set in stone, as happened to Lot's wife when she was fleeing Sodom. Or there can be a certain narrowness of mind which makes us more and more monotonous and repetitious, more trapped in our own customs, more incapable of opening ourselves to newness and wonder. It could be that these flaws are products of an increasing gap between what we say and what we are. It is this inconsistency which, when it seeps into our life, causes us disillusionment and suffering.

What should we do when we recognise this deterioration? The owner of the vineyard knew immediately what he had to do: he had to hunt down the invading foxes and put them out of the vineyard. (cf. Song 2:15) How do we do this? First of all, by seeing the wisdom of using memories of the past to evoke feelings of gratitude. Remembering the past makes us realise that God's fidelity is much greater and more powerful than any lack of faithfulness on our part. This characteristic of God is evident all through Sacred Scripture. Isn't it God who re-builds ruins? (cf. Amos 9:15); who heals infidelities? (cf. Hosea 14:5); who mends broken vessels? (cf. Jer. 18); who gathers together those who are scattered? (cf. Is. 43:5); who gives life to dry bones? (cf. Ez. 37)...God knows how to write straight with crooked lines even

when these represent sin. *“Oh happy fault, that merited such a redeemer,”* we sing on Holy Saturday night. However, the first thing our fidelity requires of us is to believe we can be healed and renewed. God is able to make a new creature out of the rubble of our past. In other words: when we reflect on fidelity in our life, rather than concentrating on our infidelities we need to think about God’s faithfulness. This will bring us peace.

Fidelity makes us view the present as opportunity.

When we have coped with the past because we are reconciled with it, we find ourselves centered and able to welcome the present as opportunity. An opportunity for what? For recognising how God has touched our life and doing everything in our power to promote the welfare of those who are poor. The discouragement felt by the disciples on the road to Emmaus was only dispelled by their ultimate discovery of the real presence of the Lord (cf. Luke 24: 13:35). We have the opportunity to share, in the here and now, everything we have, with the people God has placed in our path. Things are not kept aside for better times, for that ideal community which you know does not exist, or for that mission of your dreams. Creative and audacious fidelity speaks to us about taking advantage of the possibilities that the present moment offers us, investing ourselves in the here and now, without nostalgia or escape into fantasy. Understood in this way, fidelity gives hands and eyes to our belonging.

Fidelity makes us view the future with confidence

None of us knows what the future holds, and the unknown can cause anxiety if we see ourselves as having to face it on our own. If we understand and feel that we will not be alone in the future, but in the hollow of God’s hand, the future will no longer cause us fear and anxiety, but bring serenity and peace. *“Do not worry about tomorrow...Your heavenly Father knows all that you need”*, assures Jesus in the Gospel (cf. Mt. 6:34) On what must we base trust in our future? God’s fidelity in our past becomes a guarantee for our trust in the future. When we put God’s fidelity into our future, we are able to give our life and our belonging a level of serenity that helps us face with some serenity all that might happen to us **unexpectedly.**⁶

4. THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY LIFE

You must *“...live in great cordiality and charity with one another. Persons chosen for the same ministry must also be united in everything. These Sisters have been chosen for the fulfilment of a plan, but the building won’t last if you don’t cherish one another, and this bond will prevent its destruction.”*(IX, 10) This text of Saint Vincent is a good introduction for us to this fourth value which sustains the sense of belonging. And perhaps this community aspect might be the most decisive value in guaranteeing both affective and effective belonging to the Company, since it is in community where its spirit and purpose is lived or not lived. Belonging is, to a greater or lesser degree, found and expressed in these three aspects of community:

WITH REGARD TO THE COMPANY AS A WHOLE

The entire Company is found present in, and is supported by, each local community which carries out the shared mission. The entire Company is represented in each local community. Therefore, each community and each Sister must feel that they are members of the body of the Company, participants in its mission, and united by the same spirit. Love and esteem for what the Company is,

⁶ Cf. Maria Dolores Aleixandre, *Cercle dans l’eau. La vie alteree par la Parole*, Sal Terrae, Santander 1993, 107-110

for its priorities and the direction in which it is moving, for what is happening within it, and at the same time concern and zeal for what it could be, are some of the signs which indicate a greater or lesser sense of belonging to the Company. These values foster a sense of belonging.

WITH REGARD TO THE PROVINCE

What we have just said applies also to the Provinces. We should add that “belonging” presupposes being available to take on different services and offices, and being in tune with Provincial priorities, concerns and trends, as expressed in the Provincial Plan. We should not forget that the plans and projects of the Province are not the responsibility just of the Council, but of all the Sisters. Sharing more information and allowing for more participation fosters in the Sisters and in local communities, a greater sense of co-responsibility and belonging.

WITH REGARD TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The local community has to feel it is an integral part of the Province, and commissioned by it to fulfill a specific mission. And, the local community, according to a favourite expression of Saint Vincent, must be like a mother who appreciates, supports, and integrates all her members. The different aspects of the Sisters’ life and mission are energised by the Common Plan. It is important that this plan should incorporate places and times for communication and discernment, which are always essential. The Sister Servant has an important role. Using all the means provided by the community, she can contribute in a very efficacious way to cultivating among the Sisters the seeds of belonging to the Company, the Province, and therefore, the local community. On the other hand, passivity and indifference to everything concerning the life and mission of the community can never be positive signs of belonging.

FRUITS OF BELONGING

Belonging is a tree with both roots and fruit. Up to now we have spoken about the roots, that is to say, those foundations which make belonging possible. Now it is time to speak about the fruits that belonging yields when it is properly nourished.

1. UNITY IN MISSION

First of all, a word of explanation: when we speak of mission in reference to the Company, we are thinking of its purpose, which is none other than the service of Jesus Christ in those who are poor. This word “mission” embraces all the concrete but unspecified forms of service, referring to them in a generic way.

When this awareness of belonging to the Company exists, when it has been nourished by basic fundamental values such as those we presented earlier, the persons who make up a community or a Province are united in mission. The mission holds together the local community or Province. There is a mutually enriching interchange between mission and community: the mission promotes community and the community gives Sisters strength to carry out the mission. The same text from the Acts of the Apostles that serves as the heading for this topic, and the apostolic vitality that Jesus’ disciples showed throughout the Acts, is proof of what we are saying. Isn’t it true that the apostolic vitality of that first community was due in great part to the fact that among themselves *“they were of one heart and one mind.* (Acts 4:32) The explanation for this union of mind and heart is not to be sought in compatibility of personalities, or of people being of a similar age, or similar

formation, but rather in the person of Jesus Christ who acts as the driving force and cohesive power of the community. Jesus Christ was in the minds and hearts of all his disciples, and so the text says that all “were of one heart and mind.”

We know that unity in mission is lived out in a plurality of tasks. If the needs of those who are poor are many and varied, forms of service must be so too. However, the sense of belonging, in this aspect of unity in diversity in mission, helps us to live in a correct and balanced way, provided that the following three conditions are fulfilled.

1. Every form of service carried out by a Daughter of Charity is undertaken on behalf of the Company, the Province and the local community which has first practised discernment with regard to the work. Any service undertaken without the backing of the local community will be more of a personal project than a common mission, because the Company is not behind this service, only the individual.

2. The Province and the local community are well aware of the difficulties of carrying out service today competently and effectively. Our times require Daughters of Charity to identify with their vocation and to have professional training. The institute must take care to provide this training and to discern the capabilities of each Sister to render effective service in a particular work. (Not all Sisters can offer all types of service.)

3. Balance between unity and diversity in service, is not achieved by “dividing up” the mission with barriers that separate. Obviously there are as many forms of service and as many duties as there are Sisters. But this does not mean that there has to be a “closed shop”. The Sisters speak about their work and take an interest in each other’s service so as to have a common mission or unity in mission. Unity in mission has to be achieved within the specific services that a community carries out. But this unity must exist both before and after service.

- Before service, through preparation and apostolic discernment because mission does not come about spontaneously. It is necessary to discern, plan, and seek strategies that are effective as well as Vincentian. The whole community must take part in this search, because discernment is already part of the mission. And after the mission, comes evaluation. This must also be done in common, because evaluation, too, is part of the mission.

2. UNION OF HEARTS

Here we have the other dimension of community; the relationship that exists between belonging to the Company and sisterly love. Anyone with a deep sense of family expresses that love to parents and brothers and sisters.

No one doubts that community is for mission. We have much documentation to support this statement. But, just by way of example, I will quote from the final document of the 1991 General Assembly. Speaking of community life, it states: “*We do not live community life ‘only for the sake of being together’ but rather, to find strength there for service.”*⁷ The key phrase is “takes strength from.” It’s an obvious fact and one that does not need proving, that strength is needed to carry out the mission or service with which one has been entrusted. This has always been the case but it is even more so in our time, given that now there is less support from society. And if support is not found outside the community, it must come from within

⁷ General Assembly, 1991, *At Jacob’s Well*, p. 10

it. Where do we find the “strength of community”? It comes from several sources, one of which is the spiritual life. Who would presume to doubt that the community is a privileged space where the Holy Spirit acts? But, for the moment let us pause to dwell on the human and fraternal aspect. It is enough that each Sister contribute with openness, optimism and joy to realising the potential of the community which can encourage people to live their vocation joyfully; a potential that can restore or renew Sisters’ energies that may be depleted by the fatigue brought on by their life or mission, by age and its limitations. On the other hand, if attitudes of anxiety, mistrust, suspicion and rivalry prevail, the community atmosphere becomes stifling, and this does not help anybody. Investing in creating communities of genuine human warmth is one of the wisest things we can do from a Vincentian point of view. A good community always results in the poor being served well and at the same time it guarantees the well-being of its members. Where there is understanding and union of hearts it is easy for the Sisters to see the community as their place of reference. I have often heard many Sisters recall happy memories of communities where they were assigned in the past. These communities became true “beacons” helping them to continue on their vocation journey. On the other hand, if the community does not cultivate these feelings of appreciation, esteem and mutual interest, it will cease to be the central point of reference and other things will take its place and Sisters will lose the sense of belonging.

Union of hearts is necessary in the narrower sphere of the local community, but it must also extend to the wider spheres of the Province and the Company. The sense of belonging makes this sisterly love possible, and this in its turn reinforces the sense of belonging.. St. Vincent used to say to the first Sisters: You must love the Company, because it is “*your mother ... She’s bleary-eyed, but you must love her*”⁸ Faith, vocation and response to God’s call are all lived out in the Company which forms you, cares for you and nourishes you. It is your mother. To criticise it would show a lack of esteem and little sense of belonging to the Company. Constructive criticism, however, is certainly not a sign of disparagement nor does it suggest a person lacks a sense of belonging. If a Domestic, Provincial or General Assembly makes a critical analysis of the way Sisters are living in fidelity to the spirit of the Company and serving the Company in the local community, the Province, or at general level, this can only be a good thing. Revising the works according to the criterion of being with the poor, or serving them with boldness and creativity, can only be a good thing. Opening up new pathways knowing that “*love is infinitely inventive*” and taking risks to introduce novel ways of doing things instead of saying, “*we’ve always done it that way*”, can only be a good thing.

CONCLUSION

THE POOR STRENGTHEN OUR SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE COMPANY.

This point has been adequately dealt with throughout this talk because the sole aim of the Company and of belonging to it, is to serve those who are poor. The previous paragraph explains how belonging to the Company promotes the service of the poor through our living together in community. Looking back over the history of the Company we can see how much the poor have helped it to renew itself and will continue to influence every aspect of its life, including the sense of belonging. Closeness to the poor can give a renewed freshness to our notion of belonging because it might happen that belonging could be linked to the institution. In this case there is a danger that Sisters might feel somewhat superior in serving poor people

⁸ Coste X, p. 373-374. Conference given to the Sisters on 18th November

and keep a certain distance from them. I am convinced that closeness to the poor will always be a breath of fresh air for the Company, the Province and local communities. Poor people help us to maintain the flexibility we need if we are not to be tied up in structures that are too complex, and they teach us to be humble in responding to their needs.

PHOTO

FATHER JAVIER ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Guidelines for the monthly retreat

The dimensions of the Spirit

(cf. Ep 3, 18-19)

The Church needs the active presence of the Holy Spirit. The Company, for its part, celebrates the feast of Pentecost with great solemnity because she recognises that it is the Holy Spirit who is constantly renewing and vivifying her. If we look back in history we would have to recall Pentecost 1623, a decisive date for Saint Louise. In fact it will be difficult for us to understand the history of the Company if we do not have in mind the ways that the Holy Spirit worked in her and in individual Sisters.

Pentecost is closely associated with the Resurrection; in the Christian calendar, 50 days separate the two feasts. Pentecost is rather like putting Easter into the heart of every Christian, personalising the Resurrection of Jesus in a way that reaches to the deepest level of human life and clothing with Easter the whole life of every believer. Pentecost is a way of democratising the Incarnation. The Spirit is the divine waiter who brings to all those gathered at table, the very essence of the menu of salvation. Saint Anastasius gives the reason for this: *“by participating in the Spirit,”* he says, *“we all become more closely linked to the divinity.”*

There is a passage from St. Paul’s writings that speaks about the four dimensions of the Spirit. So that *“you may grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth and know the love of Christ”* (Ep3. 18-19). We realise that it is useless to try and measure God; impossible to calculate even approximately the measurements of the Spirit. God is vast. But we need in some way to see God within our own frames of reference in order to have even some small idea of his divine nature. Breadth, length, height and depth are the dimensions of our geography. How does the Holy Spirit work within these dimensions in order to enhance the soul of every believer? We find these dimensions referred to, in some way, in the special *Sequence* for Pentecost.

BREADTH

One of the noblest works of the Spirit is to expand the boundaries and the capacities for charity: to expand the walls of his own dwelling place. Almost without realising it, we can fall into a certain narrowness of outlook. We can become so used to our surroundings, our problems, our communities and our works, that we find it almost impossible to look beyond our own little world. So where is our open and wide outlook, our universal and ecumenical view of things?

It is the Spirit who moves us to come out of ourselves and reach out to others, to approach the wounded person on the wayside, to hasten towards those most in need, and to do this in another spirit, the Vincentian spirit. For those who are ready to learn, the Spirit teaches them to open up pathways, set up bridges, multiply ways of communicating, healing divisions, sowing the seeds of reconciliation, and living in community in a spirit of union, within the resistant and always incomplete framework of solidarity and fraternity. The *Action Lines* invite us to go “a step further” in every aspect of our lives. Surely this is the Holy Spirit urging us to go beyond the measures dictated by excessive human prudence. The breadth of the Spirit is the

breadth of a love that does not recognise the limits of exclusion, division or bitterness.

All powerful Holy Spirit, give us a new and a wider heart (cf. Ez 36, 24-28) one that will hear the echoes of every single need and aspiration of the human person and all the needs and plans of humankind. The wide spread arms of Jesus on the Cross represent the breadth of the Spirit.

*“Heal our wounds,; our strength renew;
On our dryness pour thy dew,
Wash the stains of guilt away;
Melt the frozen, warm the chill.”*

LENGTH

At times the promptings of the Vincentian charism make us anxiously aware of our limitations and the fact that we cannot reach out to everyone or respond to so many urgent calls. We would like to come close to these people we love and be present in places on this earth where there is so much suffering. We would like to be good Samaritans and draw close to all the wounded ones, all those who have fallen by the wayside.

It is the Holy Spirit who gives us this desire to extend our presence since it is He who can reach the depths of the heart. Distance is not a difficulty for him. Like the old pilgrim in the Himalayas who was able to reach the summit in the harshest days of winter “because his heart had got there first.” So it is with the Holy Spirit: he is always the one who arrives first and we then find it easy to follow him. He can help us to go to the furthest parts of heaven and earth. This capacity of the Spirit to go so far is called love.

*“Holy Spirit, Lord of light,
Come, thou Father of the poor,
Come with treasures which endure,
Come thou light of all who live.
Thou of all consolers best.”*

HEIGHT

The human person is made to fly like the birds, not to crawl like worms. To do this the Holy Spirit strives to raise and uplift us in order to transcend ourselves. Height represents personalisation, dignity and freedom. When people rise and stand erect, they start to become a person. The Holy Spirit is the great “personaliser”. You breathe on them and they are created, you give them life, you make them grow, over time you make them develop, you kindle in them the desire to surpass themselves and move towards the transcendent.

Height also indicates freedom. The Spirit raises us up so that we can be free. He does not want us to be tied down, bent low, crushed or enslaved. Where the Spirit is present there is liberty, dignity, nobility and personhood. The winds of the Spirit are always liberating, like the winds of the Exodus, Easter or Pentecost. When the disciples experienced at Pentecost the wind of the Spirit, they were able to overcome their fears and attachments, and their spirituality was greatly enhanced. Today the Holy Spirit continues to blow on us in order to raise us above our sinfulness and our sorrows. And we know that if we are lifted up we can lift others up

too, because as Lesuer said, *“the one who raises himself up raises the world”* or the community, or the brother or sister.

*“Thou on those who ever more
Thee confess and Thee adore,
in Thy sevenfold gifts descend.
Give them comfort when they die,
give them life with Thee on high,
give them joys that never end.”*

DEPTH

We have to admit that there is a degree of superficiality about the way we live; our relationships are often rather shallow, we fail to grasp the mystery of things and we cannot see the meaning of events even though we have a great teacher in this matter, Saint Vincent. Our culture or our life style lead us to concentrate on externals, to be constantly surrounded by noise, always seeking to satisfy some need and being content to live in a superficial way.

In this situation, it is very important to remember that the Holy Spirit comes to our aid, drawing us towards a more interior life and focusing our minds on the deeper realities of existence. *“The Spirit reaches the depth of everything, even the depths of God. The depths of a man can only be known by his own spirit, not by any other man, and in the same way the depths of God can only be known by the spirit of God.”* (1 Cor 2, 10-11).

God is in the depths of everything. God is not so much the Most High as the Most Profound. It is the Spirit who enables us to penetrate the depths of this interior central force, where everything has its origin. He helps us to understand the meaning of everything, including things that are most difficult to comprehend, like the Cross. He helps us to know the secrets of our being because there are deep places within us that we do not allow anyone to enter. The Spirit brings us into the mystery of God and the mystery of ourselves.

*“Light immortal, light divine, visit thou these hearts of thine
and our inmost being fill.
If thou take thy grace away nothing pure in man will stay,
all his good is turned to ill.”*

FOR PERSONAL PRAYER AND SHARING

*Read and meditate on Acts of the Apostles 2, 1-18

*Of the four dimensions towards which the Spirit moves us (breadth= love of our brothers and sisters; length = commitment to service; height= conscious, worthy, liberated and responsible living; depth= discovering God in life) which one do you think the Spirit wishes to lead you to this feast of Pentecost?

Father Javier Alvarez, CM
Director General

APPOINTMENTS

Appointment of Provincial Directors

PROVINCE OF WARSAW: Father Kazimierz MALZENSKI was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity, 28th March 2007

PROVINCE OF GREAT BRITAIN: Father Fergus KELLY was reappointed Director of the Daughters of Charity for three years, 29th March 2007

TESTIMONIES GIVEN BY THE SISTERS

Province of the Philippines

The Anislag Housing Construction Project: “A Passage”

When typhoon Reming (international code name Dorian)) descended on the people living in the foothills of the beautiful and majestic Mayon Volcano in the mid-eastern part of the Philippines, last November 29th 2006, life literally stopped and “darkness came upon the earth.” Where there was once lush green countryside, there are now only black rocks, black sand, black muddy waters. Where there was laughter and sharing and warmth, characteristic features of rural communities, there is now only the silence of death. Thousands were buried but some bodies would never be recovered. Where once there were villages and homes and simple possessions, now there is only memory. The desolation was so great it didn't seem possible for hope ever to return.

In the frantic efforts of rescue work, crisis intervention, and later rehabilitation, the Daughters of Charity took responsibility for a little community (Malobago) of 330 families living right in the foothills and who, while losing only one life, lost everything else: homes, farms, produce, land. From the time of the tragedy until now, the Daughters have served at the Evacuation Centre where the residents are housed in classrooms and tents. This very temporary housing - crowded, miserable, unsanitary, unfamiliar, and lacking privacy, only added to the people's sense of unreality and shock, and added to their uncertainty about the future. PHOTO

Confident of assistance from the Motherhouse, inter-Provincial aid, the resources of the Province, and the contributions that poured in from our different schools and institutions, friends and benefactors, the Province decided to commit itself to the **Programme for housing construction** for the 330 families of Malobago. A team of Sisters was released from their present mission and set to work – a work that was quite ambitious in that we had no previous experience of undertaking the building of houses ourselves. Actually, our actions were met with scepticism from many people: “How can a group of women, particularly “nuns”, really think they can do this?”

A blueprint for the house was made by our Sister-architect; a Memorandum of Agreement for the use of the land was pursued relentlessly and persistently with the legal assistance of kind-hearted lawyers who have become our partners; unexpected help and advice, sought and unsought came from all sides. And the villagers

themselves became the decisive factor. They promised to participate all the way in building the houses. We laid the foundations of the very first house on February 7th, Feast of Blessed Rosalie Rendu, and completed it in 10 days. Fr. Gregory, Superior General, blessed it on February 17th, 2007 when he visited the site.

That first house is a symbol of new life and new beginnings for the residents of Malobago.

PHOTO

For us Daughters of Charity, taking on the task of building new homes for the Malobago residents is the ***first passage***.

- We are passing from timidity to audacity. Our only weapon was the certainty that this is what God wants and the conviction that this decision is FOR the poor, the homeless and the hopeless.

- We are passing from ignorance to a little more astuteness, and better judgment. We have to. Dealing with government and non-governmental groups, with contractors and business dealers sharpened our common sense and capacity to bargain and negotiate.

- We are passing from feeling comfortable working among ourselves to real collaboration and critical partnership with national and international groups (International Organisation of Migration, World Food Programme, UNICEF, OXFAM, National Housing Authority, local government units and rural health units), working through differences of outlook, values, and processes towards a common goal: shelter for the homeless.

For the residents of Malobago, full participation in building their new homes is the ***second passage***.

- They passed from a sense of futility and hopelessness to real hope. They will have new homes. They will rebuild the village they lost. It will be different, but there are new possibilities. They participate in any way they can. They are no longer helpless.

- They passed from being victims to being real survivors of the devastation. They continue to carry in their hearts, and in their faces, memories of the tragedy and their losses, but the best in the Filipino comes to the fore: faith in Providence, love of family, capacity to do anything and everything when the occasion demands, and fortitude in the face of suffering.

- They passed from being receivers of aid and support to active and responsible participants in recreating their lives and shaping their futures. Everybody – including even incapacitated people, found something to do at the site. They are recovering their community. They are making plans for the future.

Anislag, the relocation site, is our **place of passage**. It is witness to our decision to leave the “Egypt” of despair and powerlessness and crossover to the Promised Land of new beginnings, new partnerships, and a real and attainable tomorrow.

Sister Maria Teresa Mueda
Daughter of Charity

TESTIMONIES GIVEN BY THE SISTERS

Province of Nigeria

Visit of the Superior General, Father Gregory Gay,
and Father Carl Pieber, CM

On **8th January 2007**, Father Gregory Gay, Superior General, accompanied by Father Carl Pieber, coordinator of the International Development Office of the Congregation of the Mission, arrived at the Provincial House in Eleme (in the southern region of Nigeria). The Sisters of the House, along with Father Michael Ngoka and Father Eamon Raftery, joyfully welcomed the guests and introduced them to the country through a video and photo presentation.

This was followed by a time for welcoming, directed by Sister Olivia Umoh. The Visitatrice, Sister Francesca Edet, expressed the gratitude of the entire Province for this visit and outlined the history of the Province, including the places where the Sisters serve and the apostolates in which they are involved. She emphasised the efforts of the Sisters to collaborate with the other branches of the Vincentian family.

In his reply, Father Gregory stressed three important aspects of our Vincentian service:

- being close to those who are poor and reaching out to them in the various circumstances of their lives,
- listening to them and sharing their experiences,
- being voice for the voiceless, while at the same time encouraging these people to speak for themselves.

He also reminded us that service must be carried out with love, gentleness and compassion. Finally, he encouraged the Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Congregation of the Mission to be aware of the other branches of the Vincentian family and to collaborate with them. This presentation ended with a spontaneous dialogue between Father Gregory and the Sisters.

After evening prayer prepared by the Seminary Sisters, and a festive meal, everyone gathered for a time of recreation and entertainment: cultural dances, a drama called "Imitation that kills the monkey", etc. For the finale, the Superior General, dressed in very elegant African attire, led the group in a joyful dance. The evening ended with a hymn in honour of the Blessed Virgin, and a blessing by Father Gregory.

PHOTO

On January 9th, during the Eucharistic celebration, the Superior General gave a homily on the gospel of Mark that speaks about the authority of Jesus: "*He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*" Father Gregory then asked the question: "*How does authority in the Church follow the example of Christ in his mission of being Good News for those who are poor?*" "*In our mission,*" he continued, "*consistency between our words and our actions gives credibility to our mission. We must not dominate or consider ourselves superior to others, but rather as servants of others.*" Finally, he developed the idea that with all authority there is power. Jesus exercised this power to command unclean spirits, and he used it with love. In the same way, we are called to be persons in authority following the way of

Jesus and not the way of the world. Love alone can conquer evil. In the Eucharist, we find the strength and the courage to live like Jesus.

After the Eucharistic celebration, we gathered in the hall where members of each branch of the Vincentian family (Ladies of Charity, Vincentian Marian Youth, Saint Vincent de Paul Society) introduced themselves to the Superior General and shared their experiences of serving poor persons by visiting them in their homes, ministry in the streets and hospitals, etc.

PHOTO

We thank God for this memorable time spent with the Superior General who, with great simplicity, showed us that he is our brother.

Sisters Anastasia EZEDIMBU and Bernadette ONUOHA
Daughters of Charity

TESTIMONIES GIVEN BY THE SISTERS

Province of Switzerland – Turkey

The Province celebrates 50 years!

Fribourg, March 19th, 2007: great joy on this day when the Daughters of Charity celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of their Province!

It was, in fact, on February 5th, 1957, that Mother Lepicard came to the Provincial House of Fribourg to erect the 46th Province of the Company. The new Province had at that time 18 houses and 144 Sisters.

A brief history

The Daughters of Charity have been present in the Geneva region since the 18th century. In the reign of Napoleon, Geneva, a free city, was occupied by a contingent of the French army. In 1801, the Concordat reestablished freedom of religion, and Napoleon imposed a pastor on “Protestant Rome” to begin the rebirth of Catholicism. One of the first initiatives of the exuberant Fr. Vuarin was to request Daughters of Charity, “real ones from the rue du Bac” for his new parish. He succeeded, not without some difficulty, and they arrived in Geneva in 1810. The first Sister Servant came from Noyon, the birthplace of Calvin!

The Sisters were to open a small school for girls and visit sick Catholics in their homes; up to then it was only sick Protestants who had the right to medical care. Later on they would found a small hospital but the Sisters and their patients were expelled from there at the time of the Kulturkampf. They returned to Geneva in 1929, wearing their cornettes in spite of the ban on religious dress.

Three Sisters expelled from Geneva came to Fribourg (1858) to open a small orphanage and to visit the poor. From there, they spread to all French-speaking Switzerland over the course of nearly a century: country hospitals, hospices, major and smaller schools (especially in predominately Protestant regions), day-care centres etc, and, later, various activities in parishes, catechism, chaplains in hospitals, working with refugees, medical care in prisons, presence and accompaniment of those on the margins of society...always being careful to live our Vincentian charism: "to go to wherever they are."

An autonomous Province

1957: In a circular dated January 11th, Father Slattery, Superior General, erected the new Province of French-speaking Switzerland, with its Council.

In the space of 50 years

On Swiss "territory", 15 houses were opened in addition to the original 18, and 23 were closed: mobility and availability...

In 1970, a door opened to Cameroon: four Sisters went there under the leadership of our first Visitatrice at the end of her mandate. The mission quickly expanded and five houses were opened. Vocations came from the native people, and Cameroon soon became a region of the Quasi-Province in 1986, then an autonomous Province in 2001.

In 1991, for the 400th anniversary of the birth of St. Louise, we decided to celebrate in an original fashion by bringing together all the Daughters of Charity of Switzerland in the Provincial house: the Sisters living near Fribourg in the Province of Cologne, the Spanish Sisters from the Provinces of Pamplona and Madrid- Saint Vincent, working in the five Spanish missions in Switzerland, the Sisters of the four communities of the Province of Turin located in Tessin, and our 16 communities of French-speaking Switzerland.

For its 40th anniversary in 1997, the Province received as a gift, the four houses of Istanbul and became the Province of Switzerland-Turkey.

Today

For this day of celebration, we had the joy of welcoming Sister Marie-Bernard Giffard, General Councillor, and our former Provincial Director, Father Augustin Martinez. Two Sisters represented Cameroon: Sister Marie-Agathe Pillet, the first and last Swiss Sister still living there, and Sister Céline Tsono, the first vocation from Cameroon! Six Sisters came to us from Istanbul (Peace Hospital and St. Benedict High School). Two "Swiss Sisters from France" were present, as well as our postulant, Margarita. What joyful reunions!

An audiovisual presentation retraced the history of these 50 years. The Sisters did not fail to add their personal memories, and these caused much laughter!

During a festive meal where many experiences were exchanged, we heard with emotion a great number of fraternal messages sent for the occasion. Sister Marie-Bernard addressed us and then came affectionate greetings from Sister Evelyne, telling us of her joy at this important time for our Province, and sending her

wishes for the future...**choose to live!** Father Martinez spoke of his enduring affection for Switzerland.

Then we looked toward the future: we thought about the paths we were to follow, in particular the emphasis to be given to the pastoral care of those around us, and a “network” service, now that we have put all our institutions into other hands.

To Him be praise and glory

At last, everything culminated in the act of thanksgiving during the Eucharist celebrated by our current Provincial Director, Father Alain Perez, in the company of his confreres, Fathers Larrieu and Martines. In his homily, Father took up the words of the prophet Isaiah (43, 18): *“The Lord said to his people: “No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See, I am doing a new deed; even now it comes to light; can you not see it?”*

Finally, the Visitatrice, Sister Madeleine Saillard, brought this wonderful day to a close by giving each of us a previously unpublished picture with these words from Saint Vincent on 26th August 1657: *“God be blessed for having willed that everything in this world should be uncertain and perishable so that we might seek in Him alone, the solidity of our designs and enterprises, for in doing this we will find that things will turn out well for us.”*

Sister Bernadette Porte
Echoes correspondent

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Italian Vincentian Family Congress

“Love is possible” the Encyclical *Deus Caritas est*

From January 20th-21st, 2007, the Vincentian Family in Italy gathered in Rome for a Vincentian Congress on the theme “Love is possible”, for the purpose of studying the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* and renewing our adherence to the teaching of Benedict XVI. This Congress brought together about 650 people (Vincentian Fathers, Daughters of Charity, and lay people from the various branches of the Vincentian Family) from all parts of Italy, even regions as far away as Sicily and Sardinia. Out of all those who organised the event, special mention should be made of the secretariat of the Saint Vincent Teams (GVV) of Rome which was in charge of the logistics, and many others who offered a thousand and one small and hidden services.

Faith is justified by works of charity

The Congress opened with two talks of great theological and spiritual value:

- Without getting bogged down in casuistry, but sometimes using it, Bishop Rino Fisichella, auxiliary bishop of Rome and Rector of the Lateran University, discussed the theological aspect of the encyclical *Deus Caritas est* and its cultural impact on today's reality. Bishop Fisichella explained clearly Benedict XVI's intention to go to the very essence of Christianity, demonstrating that in reality it is charity that justifies faith. In our times particularly, works prove the authenticity of the faith that

animates believers. Ideas are combined with action, not by a simple moral coherence, but by the gift of love for all human beings and for every aspect of their lives.

- Father Emino Antonello, Visitor of Turin, began by reading a page from the Swiss theologian Von Balthazar, from the book "Only love is worthy of belief". His intention was to demonstrate that the very source of Love, while remaining a basic requirement of the human heart, is a response to the Love of God, according to the teaching of Saint John in his Gospel. *"Filled with the Love of God, we can look at others in truth and love them in charity. The parallel here with Saint Vincent is clear."*
From affective love to effective love

Studying Benedict XVI's encyclical has renewed in the participants an awareness of their vocation to charity: a grace to receive and a mission to carry out. In the afternoon various testimonies enabled us to experience how love moves from being affective to effective. These testimonies roused the interest of the participants by helping them discover the many ways to live out effective love, something that knows no boundaries in space or time:

Father Matteo Tagliaferri, founder of the Community *"In Dialogue"*, gave a talk on the principle behind Vincentian foundations: following, not anticipating Providence. Saint Vincent was always clear on this point, saying that he himself had never thought of founding anything at all. Father Matteo – who founded several communities in Italy and two others in Latin America – was amazed when he realised how these works for young drug addicts and other forms of addiction, sprang up without his being aware of it, and he expressed his gratitude for all that the Lord has accomplished through him, in spite of his inadequacies and powerlessness.

Next followed two testimonies by Vincentian Volunteers: Giovanna Giuggia di Mondovi, from the Province of Cuneo, shared her experience at an advisory centre and working in people's homes, and Anna Marie Esposito on the "Group Vi,Vo" in Naples, serving prisoners and their families. In both cases, the main theme was that before anything else there must be love which manifests itself as a capacity for listening, for being attentive, for sharing and showing courage. Charity changes the world because it changes people: the one who gives and the one who receives share an experience of love.

Then, Annunziata Rigon Bagarella de Vicenza, a member of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, described her missionary experience which showed the international aspect of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society in Italy. When she went to missionary areas in the Third World, she set up links with Italy, organising long distance adoptions and developing initiatives to improve the material and spiritual lives of the poor in developing countries.

Finally, Emilia, a member of the Marian Youth Movement of Forte dei Marmi, shared her experience in Eritrea with some friends from the A.M.P.E.R (Friends for Eritrea), which has connections with the Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission.

At the end of the afternoon, the members of the Congress learned about the life of Sister Giuseppina Nicoli, a Daughter of Charity who will soon be beatified. Born in Lombardy, she lived at the end of the nineteenth century in Sardinia. For 40 years she worked in the education of children and young people at a time when this work was scarcely known and received little support from the people.

“A gospel open at the page on charity”

The following day, Mass was celebrated in the Basilica of Saint Peter with 35 priests of the Mission and Bishop Rode C.M., Prefect of the Congregation for Consecrated Life. The latter invited each person to be a “Gospel open at the page on charity” so that everyone, especially the poor, can read there all that is written for them: God is Love.

After the Eucharist, Father Luigi Nuovo, Moderator of the Congress, proposed

- Creating works in favour of the poor, as a Vincentian family
- Always living united with those who identify with Vincent de Paul and looking on him as their founder, inspiration, teacher and friend.

At the end of the Congress, the Visitor of Turin reported on the donations received for the various Lenten Campaigns since 2002. The Congress ended with the recitation of the Angelus, with Benedict XVI, in St. Peter’s Square.

Sister Maria Ida
Daughter of Charity (Province of Turin)

An event still very fresh in our minds!

It was the morning of November 21st, 1996, in Rio Piedras (Puerto Rico). That day, we had seen a six-storey building, across from our intermediate school, suddenly collapse following a gas explosion. This accident caused the death of many people in the building as well as many injuries, even among those passing by along the street. Our school was also hit, as well as the dormitories and the building where the Sisters lived. However, thanks to the calmness of the Sisters and the staff, none of the 500 students were hurt. The school chapel was rapidly transformed into a hospital to house the dead and to give first aid to the injured. For ten days the school became a gathering place for everyone. On December 5th the Capuchins put at our disposal their school, San Antonio, located near ours, to allow us to resume classes. The Capuchins gave their classes in the mornings and we held ours in the afternoon. Despite the deaths and suffering, this tragedy led to a great movement of solidarity in the entire neighbourhood.

Ten year later we still speak of this event. After a century of presence in the neighbourhood, the Sisters had to leave the intermediate school in 2001. However, on November 21st 2006, they returned to participate with the people of the neighbourhood in a remembrance celebration organised by the mayor’s office. After a Eucharistic liturgy in the parish, the chief of transport and public works emphasised how much this tragedy had provoked a wave of hope, thanks to the courage of so many people, including the Sisters. Then another Mass was celebrated in the school chapel. With the students, we not only prayed for the many victims and their families, but also thanked God for the overwhelming generosity and solidarity experienced on this occasion.

(Central American Province)

An exceptional day in Durres, Albania

In 1919, the Province of Slovenia was erected. Vocations were plentiful. New works opened and the Province expanded into Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia and into the regions of Vojvodine and Kosovo. In 1993, the Slovenian Sisters went on mission for the first time to Rreshen in Albania. In March 1999 the region of Albania was erected and included Albania and Kosovo. Sister Mira Berisha was named Regional in April 2000. Formation, which up till then had been organised by the Provincial Director of Slovenia, and given in Slovenian, was now given in the Albanian language when the Seminary opened in December 2003. Father Vittorio Pacitti, C. M. an Italian missionary in Rreshen for five years and who knew the language well, was named the Sub-Director of the Region of Albania on March 3rd 2007

On 3rd March 2007 a Eucharistic celebration brought together Sister Barbara Selih, Visitatrice of Slovenia, the Sister Servants of Kosovo, the Sisters from the three communities of Albania, the 4 Sisters sent on mission and the other 5 Sisters at present in the Seminary, to celebrate the appointment of the Sub-Director, the sending on mission of four Seminary Sisters and the closing of the annual retreat for the Sisters of the Region. In his homily Father Vittorio urged us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, so that we may be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. At the end of Mass, Sister Mira thanked Father Vittorio for generously agreeing to take on this work in addition to his other duties as Provincial Treasurer and Director of the Scholasticate at Piacenza. The afternoon ended with a lively activity based on the virtue of obedience and prepared by the Seminary Sisters. (Region of Albania)

NEWSBRIEFS

Sister Angela and Scotland Yard

Recently, a rather curious news item appeared in *Stampa* (a Turin newspaper): several officers from Scotland Yard came to our town to talk to Sister Angela Pozzoli, Daughter of Charity, who for ten years has worked in social services. Her work and that of the Vincentian volunteers serving victims of prostitution, came to the attention of the British police. In fact, Sister Angela and the Saint Vincent Teams (G.V.V.) take care of young women who, in order to escape from prostitution, denounce their exploiters, thereby acquiring the right to a residency permit (according to article 18 of the Italian law on immigration).

In the city of Turin and its surroundings, Sister Angela and her collaborators have equipped several houses and offer these to anyone subjected to violence (including being sold several times), the opportunity to recover their dignity in honest work and a placement in the city. Since 1996 until the present day, 287 young women have been helped in this way, and 258 of them have resisted the temptation to return to the streets. Some have been able to obtain university degrees, others are now economically independent, others have married and all have rediscovered peace and serenity.

So we are moving toward collaboration between the British and Italian police, and between the Vincentian volunteers of Turin and those of Great Britain, in order to save these young women from slavery and to give them back the dignity they have a right to, as our founder, St. Vincent de Paul, taught us.

Sources and Updates

Original manuscripts of letters exchanged between Louise de Marillac and Monsieur Vincent

Our holy Founders wrote a great number of letters to each other. It is estimated that there are 200 letters from Louise to Monsieur Vincent and 400 from Monsieur Vincent to Louise. We find them in different works of reference, particularly in the first eight volumes of Pierre Coste, "Documents," and in Saint Louise's "Spiritual Writings."

It would be difficult to choose from among these "treasures." After visiting the Archives, however, the choice was finally made. In a display cabinet in the Seminary, there is on exhibition a copy of two handwritten letters by our holy Founders, a manuscript *"given to our Most Honoured Mother Derieux, on August 24th, 1880 by the secretary, Sister Geoffre, and restored to the Archives in rue du Bac on March 14th 1994 by the Province of Belgium."* There is a copy of it on the opposite page. All visitors (Daughters of Charity, Priests of the Mission, Religious from various congregations, lay people) who have seen this document have been impressed by the exhibit, and the contents of the letters have sparked great interest in⁹on everyone's part. We thought it would be good to share this discovery with all Daughters of Charity by means of the Echo.

The document on the left shows Louise's letter, with the ink greatly faded, and a first reply from Vincent, which strangely enough, is written on the very letter that Louise had sent. Was this to save time?

On the right, we have a second reply from Vincent. Coste gives an explanation of this unusual feature: "Saint Vincent wrote the first draft of his reply in the margins of Louise de Marillac's letter. Perhaps because this was not legible enough or because he did not express himself clearly enough, he began again on a blank sheet." (Note 1 in Coste, volume 3, page 387)

Here is the letter from Louise, an excerpt from her Spiritual Writings, page 180 (English edition):

Sunday (End of September 1646)

Monsieur,

Several days ago a person from Fontainebleau sent us word that our Sister Barbe Angiboust has had a fever since the September feast of Our Lady. Yesterday we heard from Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois that her confessor had informed a lady parishioner that Sister was dying and that she had received Extreme Unction.

In the light of this news, do you think it would be wise, Monsieur, to send a sister there today? We did write, and one of our sisters left for there a week ago to be her companion, but we have heard nothing from her.

I ask your Charity to give us a quick reply. For the love of God, I also ask you for your blessing. I am, Monsieur, your most obedient and most grateful daughter and servant.

⁹ In volume 3 of Coste we read, « she was going to receive Extreme Unction »

Louise de Marillac

Barbe Angiboust, who entered the Company in 1634, had been successively in Paris, Saint Germain en Laye, and Richelieu and had been placed in Fontainebleau since August 1646. In a letter dated August 21st, 1646 addressed to Louise, Monsieur Vincent wrote this: "*The Queen has commanded us to send her two Sisters for the Charity in Fontainebleau. We have complied with this and we chose Sister Barbe and another Sister...*" (Coste, Volume 3, page 21, English edition)

When Louise learned about Barbe's illness, she hastened to write to Monsieur Vincent to tell him of her intention to send a Sister that very day. In this way, the sick Sister would have someone with her for support. In doing this, Louise reveals her concern for the Sister and a desire to help her through the assistance given by the person who would join her. She asks, however, for Monsieur Vincent's approval: "*Do you think it wise...*" Louise was thus putting into practice what Article 16 of the Rules for the Sisters in Parishes recommends. This article was quoted by Monsieur Vincent in one of his conferences: "*When a Sister is sick and confined to bed, they will notify the Superioress no later than the third day of her illness, so she can send someone to visit and do what is necessary.*"

Moreover, it is touching to note the compassion shown by Louise in a letter to the Daughters of Charity at Nantes, also dated the end of September 1646: "*There are two of our poor sisters about whom we have no news; we do not know if they are living or already dead. Sister Barbe Angiboust, who is in Fontainebleau, and Sister Andrée from Nanteuil. We have been informed that both are near death. I recommend them to your prayers.*" (Spiritual Writings, p. 179). Communicating news in this way, sharing anxieties and asking for prayers, maintains union among the Sisters who are at a distance and makes them love the Company.

Louise asks Monsieur Vincent *to give us a prompt reply*. Perhaps this is the reason for the first draft of Monsieur Vincent's letter which he wrote in the margins of hers:

End of September 1646

Mademoiselle,

It would be charity and encouragement for the other Sisters if you would send a Daughter to visit our poor sick sister, by coach, if there is one and if not, by boat to Melun and from there on foot for three leagues to Fontainebleau, with someone accompanying her.

This first reply from Monsieur Vincent is very brief, but it goes straight to the point. Monsieur Vincent does give his consent, stressing that to send a Daughter to stay with Barbe would be a witness of charity towards the sick, and the other Sisters would know that Superiors were concerned about their "daughters" This would encourage them when times were difficult. Although this letter is short, Monsieur Vincent takes pains to note the distance from Paris to Fontainebleau, as well as the means of travel. He is also concerned about the Sister's safety, recommending that someone accompany her, since she would have to travel three leagues (about 12 kilometres) on foot through the forest.

Monsieur Vincent could very well have been satisfied with this reply but nevertheless he wrote a second one.

End of September 1646

“I am very moved by the serious illness of our poor Sister Barbe. Out of devotion toward her and encouragement for the others, it would be well to send a Sister. Therefore, you may send someone, if you wish, Mademoiselle, by coach, if there is one, or by boat to Melun, where there is easy access to Port Saint Paul on Mondays or Tuesdays. From there, it will be necessary for her to go on foot through the woods to Fontainebleau, where, at present, there is no danger since the Court is not there. The coach is at rue de la Cossonnerie.”

In this second reply, Monsieur Vincent begins by expressing his compassion and simply saying that he is moved by Barbe's condition. The adjective “poor” shows his sensitivity. He then goes back to what he wrote in his first letter. He gives information about the journey. They will have to go to Melun and then on to Fontainebleau, cities southeast of Paris. They will need to take a coach (horse-drawn carriage) or a boat on the Seine. He adds some details about days (Monday, Tuesday) and places (Port Saint Paul, rue de la Cossonnerie in Paris). These details are invaluable because they help to speed up the response to the Sister who is sick. We are intrigued by something that Monsieur Vincent writes at the end of this letter: **“where, at present, there is no danger since the Court is not there.”** Given that the hunting grounds of the Court were at Fontainebleau, perhaps the danger would have come from the presence of hunters in the forest.

With the consent of Monsieur Vincent, Louise is going to send Anne Hardemont, who had been serving the poor of the parish of Saint Paul in Paris since 1641. She would only stay in Fontainebleau a short time, because in 1647, she was named for the mission at Montreuil-sur-Mer. As for Barbe, Louise de Marillac wrote to her at Saint Denis in June 1649: *“My very dear Sister, I praise God with all my heart at seeing you restored to health, and I beg him to increase it for his glory.”*

The two handwritten manuscripts shown here reveal the interest that Louise de Marillac and Monsieur Vincent have in the Sisters, their concern to help them, directly or indirectly, and to provide help and support in times of difficulty. This is all the more admirable, since both of them had heavy responsibilities and since in those days, letters took much longer to arrive and travel was difficult. May their example encourage us, with God's help, to be attentive to the persons we encounter, most especially our Sisters.

Archives Service
Sister Danièle GEORGES
Daughter of Charity

Special Centenary Celebration of the birth of Mother Suzanne Guillemin

Mother Suzanne Guillemin

Daughter of God – Daughter of the Church
Superioress General of the Company

1906 – 1968

II - SERVICE TO THE COMPANY

A) LA CENTRALE DES OEUVRES

“*God is in events*” Sister Guillemin liked to repeat with a smile, in both happy and difficult circumstances.

1954 ! Mother Lopicard summoned Sister Guillemin to the Motherhouse...After their meeting, Sister Guillemin returned to Tourcoing with a new mission, one that was not yet official. The decision about this mission would be decided by the General Council after prolonged reflection on the contents of the Constitutions of 1954.

And this is the event in question! The Echoes of January 1955 made the mission official giving it the grand title: **LA CENTRALE DES OEUVRES DE LA COMMUNAUTE**¹⁰ Mother Lopicard decided to inform the Community, herself, in a special circular letter, announcing that the Secretariat for the Works had been transferred to the site of the St. Louis Orphanage, 67 rue de Sevres, not far from the Motherhouse. It was given the name: “*Centrale des Oeuvres des Filles de la Charite*”.(known generally as *The Centrale*).

Its direction was entrusted to Sister Guillemin. The Echo explained in greater detail the services that the Centrale could provide for all the houses. Time would be needed to organise the various aspects of this enterprise. In the beginning, all that was specified was that mail addressed to the former Secretariat for the Works would henceforth be sent to the Centrale des Oeuvres des Filles de la Charite, 67 rue de Sevres, Paris, 6th arrondissement.

A few months later, a letter written by the Superior General, Father William Slattery to Sister Guillemin, would shed some light on the former Secretariat for the Works. “...*The documents relating to the Centrale des Oeuvres are a reminder of the way that the organisation you are now directing and managing came into being. 25 years ago, Most Honored Mother Lebrun founded the Secretariat for the Works, giving it a name, a location and a Sister. During the last Marian year, this Secretariat moved from rue du Bac to rue de Sevres and became the Centrale des Oeuvres. Today, the Centrale is fully operational, publishing documents that are extremely useful for the various activities of a Daughter of Charity. I wholeheartedly congratulate you. I bless your activities and hope that you will continue to grow in the threefold role that has been assigned to you: reflection...liaison...information-sharing.*”

This encouragement from the Superior General confirmed the intuitions Sister Guillemin had about the mission that had been confided to her. Before we examine what was achieved over time, a document sent to Mother Lopicard gives us some insight into the work to be accomplished and the spirit in which it was to be carried out. Several excerpts from this report show that these were times when nothing was stable, where the winds of renewal were moving everywhere, bringing innovations that involved varying degrees of risk.

THE CENTRALE DES OEUVRES

¹⁰ In those days people referred to the Company as “the Community”

Let us look again at Sister Guillemin's explanation of the Centrale's mission:

“Now is the appropriate time to specify what the Centrale des Oeuvres is, so as to explain its place in the new organisation of the Community and to clarify its activities and its relationship with the six Provinces of France. It seems that this institution corresponds to what is called, at diocesan level, the Directorate of Works, which is responsible for Catholic Social Action and the coordination of the efforts of all groups related to the Church; in our case, the Church and the Community. The Centrale des Oeuvres, then, is an organisation dealing with research, documentation, reorganisation, current thinking, and direction, in the sense of providing guidance in all matters connected with the Works.”

In the following lines, Sister Guillemin expresses with deep conviction the Centrale's dependence on authority:

“The Centrale is directly and very closely linked to the Superioress General for whom it is an entity that provides technical information which it also publishes. The Centrale never acts in its own name, nor with any authority it does not possess, but rather in the name of the Superioress General and in virtue of the mandate received from her and given to it in matters related to the works: responsibility for representing, judging and directing these, with the clear understanding and loyal practice that all initiatives or directives are carried out in accordance with the Superioress General and submitted to her judgment, and that everything is done according to her way of thinking and her advice.”

In stressing the efficacious work of the Centrale, its development, its many aspects and extraordinary complexity as a result of France being divided into Provinces, Sister Guillemin recalled the great advantages this separation would bring: a deeper knowledge of the regions and Houses, a more precise understanding of the members and more personalised relationships between the Provinces and the Visitatrice.

Ever concerned with safeguarding unity, she reminded the Sisters that an entire network of customs and established relationships would continue to preserve the spiritual and community unity desired by Saint Vincent; that the authority of the Visitatrices would be exercised in a particular way, according to established directives defining specified powers: *“it will never occur to anyone to undermine this,”* she said. *“It seems that in matters concerning the works, only a continual link with the Superioress General, by means of the Centrale, together with concerted and unified action, will bring about worthwhile results.”*

After these considerations, Sister Guillemin began the practical tasks related to the mission confided to her. A whole network of relationships, connections and information needed to be set up. It was of the utmost importance that things should not happen simply by chance or be dictated by circumstance. Rather, each one's role was defined with clear specifications, to avoid friction and misunderstandings, encroachment and non-participation, and to spell out what needed to be in place to effectively transmit ideas.

HOW WAS THIS NETWORK ENVISAGED?

There would be three lines of support: current thinking, administration and technical advice.

Current thinking: Gone were the days when one could carry out any work freely and without controls. Each work was authorised, inserted in a network of laws and decrees which brought with them various degrees of interference and control. The intention of all this was the good of the works and those who benefited from them, but it also created obligations which could be a hindrance, so that at times it was not easy to discern which side to take or what path to follow.

Administrative problems leading to confrontation with public or private services. Technology had taken over all medical, social and educational activities and led to controls sanctioned by law. Problems in the different apostolates were continually being studied by the Hierarchy and by Catholic Action groups.

Sister Guillemin made this suggestion: *“These problems need to be reflected on in common. Arbitrary decisions made by an isolated individual cannot offer sufficient guarantees; regrouping will be the only way to gain strength and light.”* To put her argument more concretely, a programme of study and reflection could respond to the problems of the times with a **National Council for the Works** that would bring together those in authority at general level, the six Visitatrices of France and the Superior of the Centrale.

Technical Councils were set up for each branch of the works: hospitals, social services and home care, medical and social work, residential homes for children, primary, technical and rural schools for children and young people.

These proposals were followed by another even more important element, that of ongoing formation, and information sharing with the Sisters to create a sense of union of thought and action among them. Suggestions were made in response to problems in administration or ministry in general.

These concerns needed to be presented before the actual setting up of the Centrale because nothing was to be left to chance. For Sister Guillemin, *“God is all”*. God was in her thoughts and actions, and we, her first companions, would respond to her deep conviction by saying: *“Yes, God is all.”*

B) ESTABLISHMENT AND ORGANISATION OF THE CENTRALE DES OEUVRES

SETTING UP THIS NEW SECRETARIAT FOR THE WORKS

It was with great solemnity that Mother Lepicard gave the former Secretariat for Works its new title: Centrale des Oeuvres. The reading of the patent was done in the Council room in the presence of the General Council, the Sisters named for this new Secretariat and Sister Guillemin, the Sister Servant.

And again it was Mother Lepicard who showed Sister Guillemin her new house, not far from the Motherhouse, at 67 rue de Sevres. It was formerly an orphanage which had become too small for the needs of that time. Instead of being closed, the orphanage was transferred to another area of Paris. The larger house allowed two dreams to come true: “to create a young workers’ residence for children aged 14, houses of Daughters of Charity where the young people would not only find shelter but would be brought up in a family atmosphere.”

We would not know until much later the impression that this first visit made on Sister Guillemin. The house had been closed for several months. The entrance was hardly inviting with its uprooted cobblestones bordered by patches of sidewalk, the

garage was in an unsightly place, being located next to the chapel filled with statues and artificial flowers, and there were several floors of unused dormitories. As soon as Sister Guillemin saw all this she understood what needed to be done. The immediate priority was to live in this house that had been uninhabited for several months. Mice had moved in and were coming out of the old woodwork and roaming round everywhere...

To set up places for the little community to live in, offices for ongoing Services, as well as meeting rooms, Sister Guillemin, a folding tape measure in her hand moved from the top floor to the basement, devising a layout plan to which the old house did not easily lend itself. With her artistic sense, she contrived to make the the house a bit more attractive, she improved its entrances and established at least minimal comfort for community living.

Once the plans were drawn up, a workman had to be found. Maitre Matran, known as Monsieur Lucien, met the requirements. Another occupant was needed to dislodge the mouse population: Crapoton the cat! Every morning, he could be found in front of the office. Just a gesture and the words: "*Crapoton, get to work now*", and Crapoton, who understood this language, would lift up his tail and head for the cellar.

ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANISATION

Sister Guillemin immediately understood the role that the Centrale needed to have in the Company in order to fulfil its mission. Certain services functioned efficiently from the time of their foundation, others came about after signs from God in response to problems presented by the life and activities of the Works. Solutions to these problems had to be considered in the same light. Two major concerns had to be resolved: administrative organisation of the different works and the community life of the Sisters.

Administrative organisation was achieved by setting up specific services, with a Sister placed in charge of the service. The Visitatrices of France made the necessary sacrifices. After some time, Sister Guillemin, with great modesty, was able to present to Mother Lepicard the structures for the way the works would function, and the appointment of those who would be in charge of:

- Hospitals, schools of nursing, social services and home care,
- Residences for children: health and social work,
- Education, at all the different levels, and religious formation,
- Work with children and young people, including summer camps, Children of Mary and Louise de Marillac groups.

There was a real problem in the area of formation which was to be not only professional but also spiritual and Vincentian. As each branch of the works was involved, Sister Guillemin asked everyone to reflect "*in depth*" because the matter was urgent. At the time she wrote these lines, the Secretary General for Catholic Action, Bishop Guerry, Archbishop of Cambrai, gave a long conference on "The Apostolic and Missionary Role of the Church in the Contemporary World" at the opening of the Religious Studies Centre. His conference had this to say to religious congregations: "*...The apostolic mission of the Church is also carried out by a large number of religious congregations which, throughout the world and in the missions, by their works of education, health care and social services, respond to all the material, physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual needs of humanity: children, young people, and persons who are poor, ill or elderly. Through them, the Church is present to all the sufferings of humanity and extends the charity of Christ...*" The Archbishop backed up his words by listing these essential conditions: "*Understanding and love*

of the Church, obedience to the hierarchy, generosity of heart, tact and extraordinary prudence, the courage to give witness to the truth of Jesus Christ, and great love for truth...To love the truth means to seek it with ardent faith through personal meditation, doctrinal study, and an ever deeper level of theology..." (18 November 1957, Maison de la Chimie)

It was now clear; the path was set out for responding to all the concerns that had previously been listed in the report to Mother Lepicard: formation at all levels, including doctrinal, theological and professional formation in the different forms of service; in order to return "to the sources" in faith and have a better understanding of God's plan; to promote and intensify relationships with other institutions; moving out of "isolation" seemed the way to respond to the need for mutual assistance. This was the programme that Sister Guillemin would carry out with the Sisters of the Centrale.

MEANS OF PROVIDING INFORMATION AND FORMATION

Documentary files

The formula was original. Sister Guillemin felt the real need to inform the Sisters on a regular basis about the functioning of the works for which she was responsible. Early in 1957, the first editions appeared. Sister Guillemin herself presented in a logical manner the first issue, "a working instrument", a monthly update and tool for information about the works. Each edition, about twenty pages long, would be presented in different colours and filed according to subject matter..." Each Sister in the Centrale was called on to contribute to the development of these Files in accordance with her area of specialisation. The Bulletins would include only what was strictly necessary, omitting anything superfluous; they would be read in each house, but they would not replace any other specialised publications that the Daughters of Charity needed to make use of according to the type of work they did

On 29th January 1957, the Documentary Bulletins were distributed to the houses. Father Slattery, on receiving the first edition, expressed his gratitude in the following words: "the Centrale is in this way providing a valuable service to the Church and the Community."

Sessions

Sister Guillemin saw that Sessions on a national scale would be a powerful means of creating unity of thought and action among the Sisters of the different Provinces. As she said, it was necessary to organise such Sessions as soon as possible; their content, length and subject focus would be determined by experiences allowing the Sisters to move forward in a process that was still relatively new for the Community. She shared these ideas with her companions, the spark was lit, and everyone left with thousands of ideas!

However, in order to have these Sessions, they needed a house! The parish of Saint Medard solved the problem by offering the "chateau" of Ballainvilliers, about 25 kms from Paris. This chateau, which had always kept its name, had been in ruins for centuries. Without any attempt at preserving the original style, huge three-storey dormitories had been constructed on one side, and the other side was flanked by a huge chapel built at the entrance to the vegetable garden. And so they began once again. With mice and rats in the rooms, owls in the chimney and mould on the walls, the Sisters with their Sister Servant in the lead, scrubbed the walls, the floors and any window panes that were still intact. There was no central heating, only a wood

stove in the conference room that let out smoke when the wind was blowing in a particular direction..

Everything needed to be ready for the first Session in the Spring of 1957. Surprise! The beds had not arrived. People felt really worried. *“All I know,”* said Sister Guillemin with unshakable faith, *“is that the Session will take place and the Sisters will have beds!”* The famous beds arrived that night. She began to assemble them with an ease that was all her own. During these historic beginnings, the Sisters had to content themselves with using as cupboards and bedside tables, the cardboard boxes that the bedding had come in. But good humour prevailed! Instead of exaggerating these little difficulties, Sister Guillemin showed others, by her good example, how to see the positive side of it all. *“It will all work out,”* she would often repeat.

When the Sisters for the first Sessions stepped off the bus and gathered in the assembly room, they would find their place with their name, a small picture and the schedule for the Session. This welcome offered by the serene and smiling Sister Servant created a warm atmosphere.

Father Slattery and Mother Lepicard honoured each Session by their presence.

The pattern these Sessions followed

In the beginning, the sessions were more informative than formative in nature: it was necessary to refocus on subjects from religious, doctrinal and professional angles in every area of service. Specialists were contacted and they never refused to participate, this was specially true of the Priests of the Mission. Then came the updating process. This refresher course was centred both on people and on the Community; on the participants themselves, in order to help them realise how they might be out of touch with life and to resolve the problems this brought, and also with a Community focus, of course, in order to bring the Sisters to reflect and engage in real **teamwork**.¹¹ Very quickly, the idea of offering “a breath of renewal” was added, especially in the Sessions for the Sisters between 10 and 25 years vocation, to help them adjust to new situations and be renewed to face a future in a changing world. Sister Guillemin would be more and more struck by the fact that our problems are all simply at a personal level and that of the world and the Church in our day. Our main concern should not be for things that disquiet us but rather to “start up again” within this general searching and renewal of works: *“We do not need to renew ourselves just as an institution, but as part of the Church, in order to serve the Church better.”*

All the apostolic activities were considered in this light: hospitals, social services, teaching, catechesis, children’s Homes, the Children of Mary and the Louise de Marillac Youth Groups. All these had their own training methods with special publications, meetings and retreats.

It is important to add that from the earliest Sessions, Sister Guillemin liked to take the opportunity to go with the Sisters to Chartres Cathedral, under the leadership of dear Brother Ricardien, because “everything about it speaks of our roots”. For her this was a real source of renewal, especially when she thought of how Saint Vincent himself had prayed in this place and how Saint Louise de Marillac, on her way to visit Angers, had stopped in Chartres to confide to God the foundation of the Little Company.

¹¹ Excerpt from a book on the life of Mother Guillemin

The solemn celebrations of the Tercentenary Year allowed Sister Guillemin to gather 600 Sister Servants in session for an opportunity to return to the sources together, along with the Superiors General and the General Council.

The students in the early days

With the growing demands made by administrators, there was an urgent need for Sisters to gain diplomas that would guarantee their professional competence, and so the Sisters were called to study. Mother Lopicard asked Sister Guillemin to organise this, a work requiring much physical and intellectual effort over one or two years. With a great spirit of faith, Sister Guillemin prepared her companions for the arrival of Sister students. *“The Sisters who arrive need to feel completely at home here, sharing fully in the life of the Centrale.”* It didn't matter much that the first groups were set up in such a rudimentary fashion: passage ways in the dormitory served as a study hall littered with textbooks and notebooks, the beds covered in tailors' dummies for the technical students or notice boards for catechesis. There wasn't much comfort to be found here but working side by side with one's Sisters helped to make difficulties more bearable.

The first five students enrolled in the School of Hospital Management. Sister Lucie Roge, who was assistant to the Directress, Mother John of the Sacred Heart, was actively involved with this first important group that was called “the young managers.” Soon other categories of students from France were added to this group: they had professional training for several months, then a three month course in preparation for a specific exam and an extensive course at the Catholic Institute of Paris. The Centrale extended its scope to include foreign lands: Sisters came from Brazil for the School of Management, from the Near East with its numerous countries, for pedagogy, from Asia for music and doctrine, from Switzerland, Madagascar, Japan and other countries for doctrinal formation at the Catholic Institute. The examinations period became a legend at the Centrale. Throughout the whole of June there was great activity at the School of Management, the Catholic Institute and the various specialist colleges. The entire house was mobilised to pray.

We might end by recalling that this “student” experience, which had an emotional side, too, included a Vincentian input session. This took place in the Seminary every Saturday, when the Sisters attended the instruction given by the Seminary Directress, Sister Midon.

THE INFLUENCE OF SISTER GUILLEMIN

As Superior of the Centrale, Sister Guillemin soon became a member of the board of directors of UNCAHS (National Union of Congregations in Hospital and Social Ministries) and UREP (Union of Religious in Parish Schools) of which she became the National President, as well as two of the three Apostolic Unions of Women Religious in France. From that time on, Sister Guillemin was convinced of the importance of collaboration among religious institutes in their apostolates. Relationships extended far beyond this framework of religious life based on a call to a particular vocation. *“As Daughters of Charity, we are also in the midst of numerous changes...Opportunity for success and for recognising multiple needs that call for a response, as well as links with others...Relationships of a technical, administrative or charitable nature...Revising relationships in the light of Saint Vincent's way of relating to others, being convinced that our experiences, our conversations, even the most uninteresting and technical conversations, must take place in an atmosphere of*

humility, loyalty and charity that the world continues to expect from us as Daughters of Charity.”¹²

In concrete ways, Sister Guillemin sought to respond as far as possible to all the requests made by Church, state, public or private organisations. At this time she also had a deepening awareness of matters on the international level, through her participation in the International Catholic Children's Office. To all of these, she brought her clear-sighted and realistic judgment based on her experience, and this experience always led people to reflect. The spiritual dimension was never absent

In the matter of relationships, we must draw special attention to the National Committee of the Workers' Mission, of which Bishop Bonnet was the Secretary General. He wrote to Sister Guillemin: *“I have recently thought of contacting you about considering the position of delegate for the Association of Women Religious affiliated to the National Council of the Workers' Mission; you would be responsible for establishing the link between the Union of Major Superiors and the Secretariat of the Worker's Mission.”* This was October 1960. Sister Guillemin did not hesitate to express her joy at receiving this invitation which was so much in line with her ideas on serving poor people. Among the files that she prepared, it is worth mentioning the dossier of 1961, containing reflections that reveal her spiritual life: openness to the Church, to the apostolate, to the world of the working class, always in a spiritual and community context. She noted: *“May we have a clearer idea of the holiness of the laity and a truer sense of our consecration to God and his kingdom, based on values far beyond social or moral criteria.”*

While the spiritual influence of Sister Guillemin was evident outside of the Community, within her local community she was the Sister Servant who was attentive to each Sister, making others aware of the problems for which she offered good advice that stemmed from her own rich interior life. At all times, it was obvious that her reflections were simply a repetition of her personal relationship with God:

*“Let us give ourselves to God to serve Him corporally and spiritually,
Let us give ourselves to God in line with our holy vows,
Let us give ourselves to God so that we may be stripped of all attachments,
as if we possessed nothing in this life,
Let us give ourselves to God in order to see that in chastity
God alone wants our love.
Let us give ourselves to God to practise obedience...
leaving everything up to Him.”*

(to be continued)

Sister Claire HERRMANN,
Archives Service

¹² To her companions at the Centrale

Sister Anne,
as Sister Servant I beg you
to take good care of your Sisters.
They should do the same for you,
as daughters of Our Lord,
whom they should esteem in you, and you in Him.

In a word, live together as having but one heart and one soul
so that by this union of spirit
you may be a true image of the unity of God,
since your number represents the three Persons
of the Most Holy Trinity.

I pray for this to the Holy Spirit,
who is the union of the Father and the Son,
that He may be your union too,
and give you profound peace
in the midst of contradictions and difficulties...

Note : Letter from M. Vincent to Anne Hardemont, in Hennebont.
The two other Sisters are Barbe and Geneviève Doinel.
Coste, Volume 4, p. 238