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SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

To all Daughters of Charity

Letter of 4th June 2007

Dear Sisters,

These days when we are still close to Pentecost seem a fitting time to write to you again about the beatification of our Sister Lindalva Justa de Oliveiro.

Sister Lindalva was born on October 20th, 1953, the sixth daughter of a large family. Having stayed at home to help her mother nurse her father who was ill, Sister entered the Company on July 16th, 1989, after her father's death. Sister was a member of the Province of Recife and was sent on mission in 1991 to the community of "Abrigo Dom Pedro II" in Salvador in the state of Bahia. Her community life was cut short when she was martyred on Good Friday just two years later in 1993.

The process of beatification was started by popular acclaim. The people were touched by this young Sister's faith, service of the poor and fidelity to her commitment that ultimately led to her martyrdom. This was also recognised by the Church, and the decree of beatification was signed by Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. It is of note that Sister Lindalva is the first woman to be beatified in Brazil, and the Procurator mentioned the fact that apart from St. Clare, St. Francis and Mother Teresa, no other process has moved so quickly in the history of the Church. This is a tremendous grace for the Church, for the entire Company and of course a very special joy for our Brazilian Sisters.

A Commission is already at work preparing the beatification celebrations. These will be held in San Salvador – Bahia, Brazil, on November 25th 2007, Feast of Christ the King, in a huge stadium with nearly 60,000 people present, so you can well imagine the organisation that will be needed! The Company will be represented, of course, by many Sisters from the six Provinces of Brazil.

Father Gregory, our Superior General, and Father Javier, our Director General, all the members of the General Council and myself will represent the Company internationally. Among the other invited guests will be Father McCullen, Father Maloney, Father Quintano, Mother Duzan and Mother Elizondo. As the Brazilian participants will be so numerous, we are obliged to limit the number of Sisters from the other Provinces of Latin American and the Caribbean to two per Province. The most significant presence will be that of Sister Lindalva's elderly mother as well as her twelve brothers and sisters and their families. You can well imagine the emotional time this will be for the family. Also present will be the other eight Sisters who were in the Seminary with Sister Lindalva.

Although it is not possible for every Daughter of Charity who would wish to be present, to actually be there in Salvador on November 25th, the Company throughout the world will surely be united in celebrating the day together. Some suggestions for liturgical celebrations will be sent later. You will also receive leaflets about Sister's life, printed in your various languages.

This is such an important event in the life of the Company, Sisters, and is for each one of us another time of grace. Everything in life speaks to us of God. One same Spirit is at work in everything, as Saint Vincent and Saint Louise so clearly realised. May this Spirit inspire us anew through the beatification of our Sister Lindalva and deepen in us that passion for Jesus Christ, living and present among those who are poorest in our world and in the heart of humanity.

Affectionately and devotedly, and united with you in prayer,

Sister Evelyne Franco
Daughter of Charity

To all Daughters of Charity

Letter of 15th June 2007

Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Dear Sisters

May Jesus, who was gentle and humble of heart, make our hearts like his! Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation, was dear to Saint Louise; it was the spring that quenched her thirst for God and nurtured her love for her Sisters and for poor people. We all unite in prayer today as we ask the Good Shepherd, the Servant par excellence, to give us the tenderness and concern for poor people that colour so many pages of the gospel and which have so deeply penetrated the lives of numerous Daughters of Charity who have gone before us or who live...in our midst.

I have chosen this date to share with you some family news. It seems important first of all to call to mind the painful situations experienced by our Sisters in Lebanon where the violence that is reigning in the Palestinian refugee camps is threatening to destabilise the entire country. We recall that in July of last year, our Sisters were already mobilised to welcome thousands of refugees fleeing the south in its state of unrest caused by war. Let us all pray that they may have the courage to begin again, and also that this cycle of confrontations may come to an end and that lasting peace will be established.

Our Sisters in Venezuela are also experiencing difficult times, with new laws that seem to be limiting their freedom to manage schools and social services. They are also asking for our prayers.

I am only mentioning these two examples, but I know that the universality of the Company and the communion that exists among you are regularly nurtured by recent news, our web site and what you read in the Echoes.

In your name, I attended the plenary session of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) which was held in Rome in early May. 850 of us attended and we were invited to "weave a new spirituality which generates hope and life for all". We had chosen five threads to weave: "The woman with full and calloused hands, the earth and its sacredness, inter-religious dialogue as a spiritual way, immigrants and displaced persons, and the laity." We sat at tables of eight, and after listening to five conferences on these themes, we gradually wove together, thanks to our sharing, a declaration of commitment which was fully in line with the Congress for Consecrated Life in 2004: Passion for Christ and Passion for Humanity. This meeting, where prayer and sharing of the Word were the underlying support of our activities, reminded me of recent visits to the Provinces: your commitment to helping exploited women, marginalised persons, immigrants, and your work of sensitisation, undertaken in collaboration with others, for social justice and a respectful use of the goods of the earth. Let us give thanks for this new impetus given to all Congregations and let us continue our journey, with our special Vincentian spirit, side by side with those who are neglected in our times.

Another event that I attended in your name was the Encounter in Aparecida, the work of the Bishops Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean, held at the famous Marian sanctuary in Brazil in mid-May. As you know, I had been invited by Pope Benedict XVI, along with four other Superiors General. I had the privilege of attending and participating in these days of prayer, reflection and exchanges in an atmosphere of respect and freedom. There were about 265

persons gathered there, including 160 members (cardinals and bishops), 82 guests (diocesan priests, permanent deacons, men and women religious, lay people, major superiors, representatives of secular institutes, ecclesial movements and charitable organisations), 8 observers representing other Christian churches, and even one of our Jewish brothers together with 15 experts, mostly theologians. For me this was a powerful experience of Church and an excellent opportunity to understand better the realities of the continent of South America, which lives its faith in the God of Love as the most precious patrimony of its culture and which is currently confronted by the destructive effects of globalisation.

The media have given much attention to the inaugural discourse of Benedict XVI during this gathering of Celam, as well as to the summary of the final document. These pronouncements included a confession of faith, a commitment to pastoral conversion and extraordinary missionary renewal so that the Church, in all its facets, may be complete disciples and missionaries of the Lord so that the people may have life in Him.

The presence of Cardinal Rodé, Sister Alba Arreaga (who was invited because of her service to Catholic education within the Bishops Conference of Ecuador), a Priest of the Mission from Colombia (for communications) and two Daughters of Charity from the Province of Mexico to help in welcoming participants, was a sign of the commitment of the Vincentian family in the evangelising mission of our Church.

I will end this family news letter by pointing out that the Echoes of 2007 offer us a study of Mother Guillemin. On this subject, several Provinces have taken the wise initiative of asking the Sisters who knew Mother Guillemin to record in writing their memories of her and to have their accounts certified by their Visitatrice and Provincial Director. This is a good way of preserving the memory of this humble Daughter of Charity who was also a great prophet.

After the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we will celebrate, tomorrow, the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Let us remember that the reverse side of the Miraculous Medal unites the hearts of Jesus and Mary in a symbol of compassion for the suffering of humanity. We confide the Company to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, filled with God. Let us ask her, a woman nourished by the Word in order to be totally turned towards others, to help us understand the meaning of contemplation and joyful perseverance in the service of Christ in those who are poor.

Affectionately and devotedly, and with an assurance of my prayers for each one of you,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

To all Daughters of Charity

Letter of 13th July 2007

Dear Sisters,

On my return from a fascinating visit to Equatorial Guinea where two communities of the Province of Gijon, serve the poor with joy and competence, I received wonderful family news which I am sharing with you officially today, and which I imagine some of you know already.

During an audience on July 6th, with Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, Prefect of the Congregation for the causes of Saints, the Holy Father authorised the publication of the decrees concerning miracles attributed to the intercession of several servants of God, among whom are two Daughters of Charity, Sister Guiseppina Nicoli and Sister Marta Wiecka. This is to say that both Sisters will be beatified next year. Magnificat!

Allow me to summarise the main features of their lives and I promise to give you more details during the coming months.

Sister Nicoli born in the Province of Pavia in Italy in 1863, entered the Company of the Daughters of Charity in 1883 in the Province of Turin. On leaving the Seminary she was sent to

Sardinia where she died in 1924. She dedicated all her life to helping the street children, young girls and young women. Like St. Louise she combined her concern for religious education with professional education.

Sister Wiecka, born in Nowy Wiec in Poland in 1874, entered the Company in 1892 in the Province of Crackow, then cared for the sick in Lvov, Podhajce, Bochnia and Sniatyn (a town now situated in the Ukraine) where she died in 1904. She leaves us an example of dedication to the spiritual and corporal service of the sick, rather like Marguerite Naseau. In fact she died from typhoid, which she caught when she replaced an employee whose duty it was to disinfect the room of the person affected by the disease.

Sister Guiseppina and Sister Marta lived according to the Spirit of the Beatitudes and to repeat again an expression dear to St. Vincent, accomplished "what the Son of God did".

Each of them, by her life given to God for the service of Christ in the poor, enriches us with a new feature in the face of the Daughter of Charity, who down through the centuries from St. Louise de Marillac to Sister Lindalva, personifies the tenderness of God towards the lowly and those who suffer. May they help us to incarnate Prophecy and Hope for, and with, our contemporaries, now and everywhere!

Assuring you all of my prayers and affection,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

To all Daughters of Charity

Letter of 15th August 2007

Dear Sisters

The feast of the Assumption of Mary once again gives me the opportunity to write to all of you to express my gratitude and to honour Mary, the only Mother of the Company. This year, she is certainly sharing the sadness of the terrible tragedy that our Sisters in Peru have experienced.

First of all, through this simple letter I would like to communicate to you my appreciation for the loving greetings and assurances of prayer that have arrived at the Motherhouse in recent days from all over the world. They really touched me and led me to give thanks for the Company, for the lived experience that each of you has with God, with persons who are poor and with your Sisters.

You describe all of this with love, a sense of pride or with pain, as circumstances dictate: joys you have encountered, difficulties met and overcome, obstacles confronted. The latter arise because of walls of contempt, injustice or indifference which isolate and marginalise our most vulnerable sisters and brothers, depriving them of their dignity and fundamental rights. You describe for me your attempts at scaling these walls, circumventing them and opening passageways in fidelity to the prophetic audacity of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise.

Your messages also allow me to recall the faces of malnourished children, young people in the streets, exploited women, abandoned elderly persons whom I have met during my visits. I can remember the services that you provide for them and how united your hearts are with them, in joy, perseverance and compassion...

This letter also gives me the opportunity to share with you my love for the Blessed Virgin. Who better than Mary can illustrate, by her entire life, the short passage of the Gospel for the nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" (Lk. 12:34)? Mary's treasure is God's Will; she seeks it and fully accomplishes it because of her docility to the Spirit. Jesus, the Word, is another treasure that Mary possesses, a treasure that she waited for, joyfully welcomed and then offered and shared with all, in generous faith and

complete selflessness. I also imagine Mary as she holds the precious gift of all the women and men that her Son confided to her at the foot of the Cross.

We confide to Mary our Sister Jesús Antonieta Perla Cavagneri (1932-1958) who was Visitatrice of the Province of Peru from 1991 to 2000. She had been the Sister Servant of the Community of Pisco, the Saint Louise de Marillac School, since November 11th, 2001. We also confide to Mary, Sister Elizabeth Rosario Oré Ventura (1962 – 1983). She was Provincial Secretary from 1995 to 2002. She had arrived in Pisco in January of this year. Both Sisters lost their lives on the evening of August 15th when the church collapsed during the Eucharistic celebration. May they rest in the Peace of God!

We can be sure that they will continue to love and serve their Province of Peru. Next year the Province of Peru will be celebrating the 150th anniversary of the arrival of our Sisters. I know that the entire Company shares the pain of the Province of Peru and is closely united with the Peruvian people at this time of mourning and intense suffering.

The Assumption of Mary is the fulfilment of the prophecy in the Magnificat: “*God has lifted up the lowly*” and the call of Jesus: “*Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*” (Mt. 11:29). She is our sign of Hope!

With the assurance of my prayers, my affection and devotion,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

“SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT”

We may all need spiritual accompaniment at some time, and there are many people who can provide this service in one way or another. It is possible to be accompanied and, at the same time, accompany someone else, that is to say, we can help somebody and also receive help from another person. There are people in the Province who, by reason of the office confided to them, have to carry out the task of accompaniment. This is the case with the Visitatrice, the Councillors, the Provincial Director with regard to the Province, the Sister Servants with regard to their respective communities, and the formators with regard to the persons entrusted to them. There are also many other people who can accompany us: Priests of the Mission or other clergy, Sisters, etc. Accompaniment is a process, recommended by the Church and by the Company, for helping people to make progress in their vocation.

I would like to take as my starting point the words of C.20b: “*Accompaniment and spiritual direction are effective means of growth in the following of Christ. In order to fulfil their Vincentian vocation, the Sisters seek this assistance from persons who know the spirit of the Company and are able to help them, preferably Priests of the Mission and Daughters of Charity*”. The 1993 Constitutions only spoke of spiritual direction. The present ones also include the concept of “*accompaniment*.” As we can see from the Constitution just quoted, the two words are used synonymously. However, in other articles the word “*accompaniment*” is used in a wider sense than that of “*spiritual direction*”: there is the accompaniment of young people, of Sisters in formation, and Sisters in general (cf. CC. 31b; 51d; 65b; 75a; St. 42). Is there any distinction in spiritual theology between “*accompaniment*” and “*spiritual direction*”? As its name suggests, spiritual direction uses a more directive method than that of accompaniment. In the process of accompaniment, something which came into being in the 70s, the focus is on the person being accompanied, with the one accompanying having a secondary though important role. Accompaniment is based on the non-directive method used by the American psychologist Carl Rogers. It is spelled out in the following definition: “*The human personality is well constructed. Given the right circumstances, there will emerge hidden values and challenges: in this way, the appropriate responses will gradually become clear.*”¹ In conformity with the Constitutions and current spiritual theology, we will use the term “*accompaniment*” and all that it implies, rather than speaking of spiritual direction.

¹ Cf. C.ROGERS, *Psychotherapy and human relationships*, Boringhieri, Turin 1970

Accompaniment, therefore, presupposes a helping relationship in which both parties are on an equal footing, and not from the position where one person has the leading role, as in spiritual direction. Of course, the help given in this situation where both persons are on the same footing, does not in any way mean that the different roles are blurred: the person who is accompanying has a very clear part to play, as we shall see in this article. The gospel incident of Jesus and the two disciples on the way to Emmaus can help us to understand what accompaniment should be like (cf. Lk 24, 13-35): Jesus accompanies the disciples as one of them, then follows a dialogue during which Jesus leads them to reflect, and in the end it is they, themselves, who discover the truth and see what they need to do. In this passage from the gospel, discernment finally brings about an important purification process in the hearts of those disciples who had become bogged down in disappointment and pessimism.

In the article of the Constitutions that we are speaking about (cf. 20b) there is an important basic detail that we should go back and consider: as well as mentioning the Priests of the Mission, the Constitution speaks of Daughters of Charity as persons qualified to accompany the Sisters. We share in this recognition and rejoice in it. We know that in every Province there are Sisters who are well able to offer this service in the Company. Moreover, the Church, as well as pastoral and spiritual theology, is well aware that this ministry is open to other people. The conclusion arrived at by Lola Arrieta, for example, is highly significant: *"Today, it is a well recognised fact that accompaniment is not reserved to priests, as used to be the case in the past, but that ordinary people, (religious and secular, men and women), we are called to the service and ministry of accompanying others in the faith."*²

It is true that accompaniment varies greatly in practice. For example, systematic accompaniment through monthly interviews to discuss someone's personal plan is not the same thing as occasional accompaniment. Between these two extremes, of course, there are many other forms of accompaniment. Which particular form of accompaniment are we going to reflect on? Although somewhat different reflections will be called for with regard to the different forms of accompaniment, since there is such a variety in the ways this is practised, I will be offering a general reflection that embraces all forms of accompaniment.

WHY IS ACCOMPANIMENT NECESSARY?

The great majority of people need and desire to communicate at a deep level. This is firstly the fundamental need to be listened to. This is truly a basic need that a human being has: he or she needs to share their convictions, their plans, their ideals, their fears and their feelings. Not being able to do this means that the person has to make their journey without the precious support of a companion who will liberate them from illusions and from fantasies of their own making. Indeed, sharing one's interior life is most liberating. So the first aim of accompaniment is attentive listening that liberates the person. In some cases this will be the only possible form of accompaniment but it is in no way to be undervalued. The person can feel liberated and this, from the vocational perspective, means they will be encouraged in their vocation of service and commitment.

A second reason for accompaniment is to help the person when they need to discern, that is, to discover what God's will is for them and to put it into practice. Sisters frequently find themselves in rather delicate situations that they have to respond to. We know that these difficult occasions can present a variety of problems: personal or family circumstances that need to be resolved, problems of relationships, the demands of the particular form of work they are doing, the need to discern some spiritual matter, God's call to greater generosity that the person accompanying perceives and makes very clear. It is at times like these that the person accompanying or the spiritual director can help to state objectively the best way of looking at the situation and help someone to find the best way of dealing with it, or better still, to see what God is asking for. We must never forget that the person accompanying has to keep to the pace of the one who is journeying, in order to support by their presence, to give their opinion on the best path to be followed, and to encourage the other person when they are weary. The root meaning of the word indicates this helping relationship where both are on an equal footing. The word "accompaniment" comes from the word "company" which in turn is derived from the Latin term "cum panis" (sharing bread).

Obviously the type of accompaniment will be different in the case of an elderly person, someone who is middle-aged or someone who is young. The apostolic exhortation *Vita*

² LOLA ARRIETA, *Welcoming life, accompanying life*, Frontera-Hegian, Gasteis 1999, p.14

Consecrata describes the challenges that arise at each particular stage of the vocational journey: idealism, fragility, lack of coherence and inconsistency in young Sisters, activism, routine and disillusionment in those who are middle aged, pessimism and physical deterioration in those who are old.”³

QUALITIES OF THE PERSON WHO IS ACCOMPANYING

The person who accompanies is a mediator. He or she has to offer this service in a responsible way and be always open to their own formation. This is absolutely essential. Saint Teresa of Jesus is very clear on this point: *“It is very necessary for the master to be experienced,”* she says, *“because if not, he can make mistakes and can deal with a person without understanding them or helping them to understand themselves. When a person does not understand the movements of the spirit, this has a bad effect on the body and the soul and so the person derives little profit from it.”*⁴

In our own times, many experts voice the same concern. Lola Arrieta, for example, says, *“The person who accompanies badly, does not really accompany even though they are accompanying.”*⁵ *The Directory for Provincial Directors of the Daughters of Charity* stresses the need for formation: *“given that accompaniment and spiritual direction is an important and delicate ministry”* states section 6 of this Directory, *“the Priests of the Mission who undertake this task will try to keep themselves adequately trained for this work. The Congregation, for its part, can offer some means of doing this.”*

It is certainly true that people offering this accompaniment today need to know the particular spirituality of the Company as well as having some grounding in psychology (even though this is on an ordinary level) and they will have had to master some of the simple techniques used in dialogue. Another quality needed is that of empathy, or, to put it another way, the ability to adapt to people, situations and different surroundings. This is the complete opposite of being rigidly set in one’s opinions. We do not mean by this that the person who is accompanying should have a lax conscience in order to justify all the negativity of the one they are helping. Of course not. It is clear that good accompaniment in no way precludes confrontation, which serves to unmask the delusions and incongruities of the person being accompanied. This is an important aspect of accompaniment although it is not, of course, the only one. Having this quality of empathy means being very sensitive to the other person, being able to be on the same wavelength as they are, and to understand what they are experiencing.

The most important disposition that every person accompanying should have, is surely that of being docile to the Holy Spirit. What does this mean? First of all, the one who is accompanying must realise that the work of accompaniment is beyond their own powers and personal qualities because it is the Lord’s work. The person who is accompanying another is not the central protagonist with absolute authority, but has a relative and subordinate part to play. This is simply to offer a helping ministry as service that is subsidiary in the sense that it helps the working of grace. In this work, the person accompanying is very conscious that he or she is entering holy ground where the Lord dwells and operates. So, one has to be able to enter the sacred space of another person and stay there with the greatest respect. The conversation between God and Moses when he appeared to him in the burning bush is a good illustration of what we have just said, *“Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.”* (Ex 3, 4-5).

Secondly, being docile to the Holy Spirit will mean helping the Sister to be attentive to the signs given by God, to let herself be challenged by the Holy Spirit who, as the Constitutions tell us, manifests himself through the needs of the poor, the calls made by the Church, the signs of the times and the Constitutions and Statutes (cf. C.31b). Accompaniment must always be referring back to these documents and guidelines that are the basic points of reference for orienting a Sister’s life in conformity with God’s will.

The ultimate objective that should guide the work of accompaniment and which the person who is spiritually accompanying another must be clearly conscious of, is not to bring the other person to a state of personal autonomy, to independent ways of acting, but to theomania, that is, letting oneself be dependent on God and be configured to Jesus Christ, in accordance with the characteristics of the Company’s spirituality which is clearly set out in the Constitutions. This

³ *Vita Consecrata*, 70

⁴ TERESA OF JESUS, *The story of her life*, № 8, Edit. Apostolada de la Prensa, Madrid, ch. XIII

⁵ LOLA ARRIETA, o.c. p. 10

theomania or passion for God, which brings with it a relative degree of autonomy, means that the one who accompanies must be able to maintain a certain distance from the other person and when the time comes, withdraw, so as not to create dependencies which impede personal growth. This is quite clearly demonstrated in the New Testament for example, in the account of the Emmaus meeting we have already mentioned. Once the disciples understand the meaning of the experiences they have lived through and discover what they need to do next, Jesus disappears (cf. Lk 24, 13-35). In the Acts of the Apostles, Philip accompanies the Candace's eunuch until the man discovers the faith and embraces it. Afterwards, Scripture tells us, "*each went on his own way*", (cf. Ac 8, 26-39).

COMMUNICATION DURING INTERVIEWS

We can say that accompaniment is basically communication. In this process the one who is accompanying adopts an attitude of attentive listening, support, advice, confrontation or evaluation, depending on the situation, what is said, and different turns in the conversation. As we said earlier, the interview and the communication involved, transcend the two people taking part (the one who accompanies and the person who is being accompanied) because the perspective in which this communication takes place is the perspective of God's Spirit. It must never be forgotten that the Holy Spirit takes an active part in our lives but it is the person accompanying and the one being accompanied who are responsible for interpreting the Good News of the Spirit. That is to say, during the communication the focus and the emphasis have already been decided on, as well as the relationship between the two people involved: both have to try and faithfully respond to God's will, and both of them must be obedient to his voice. So the third and most fundamental protagonist in such conversations is the Spirit of God. The one accompanying must never lose sight of the fact that they are the intermediary between the Holy Spirit and the person they are accompanying.

Communication helps people to put into words and give a name to what they are experiencing, to take an objective look at the situation they are in, and see all this from enough distance to be able to judge matters calmly. We all know very well that talking about a situation is, in some measure, a way of mastering it. So it is most important that the person accompanying knows how to listen during the interview. It is also very important that the setting for this conversation should encourage naturalness and freedom from constraint. However, having a particular topic to discuss can also be a good way of getting to know oneself and it can lead to deep and fruitful exchanges.

There are no limitations to the content of such communication. Everything that affects the Sister should be of interest to the person accompanying, whether or not, objectively speaking, these matters are external or internal. However, there are some topics that are so objectively important in themselves that they should be dealt with. We will speak about these in the next point of our reflection. In the interview, who determines the degree of communication, which, as we all know, can take place at different levels? Obviously this must always be the person who is being accompanied.

The person who is accompanying must not fall into the trap of "identifying too closely" with the person they are helping. It is one thing to show empathy, to accept the other person, to be able to listen attentively and show fraternal warmth..., all this is necessary for good accompaniment; it is quite another thing to identify so closely with the person being accompanied that one is led to justify all their shortcomings. It is true, too, that the person who is being accompanied is not always objective in what they are saying even when their version of events is completely coherent. Sometimes the person being accompanied is looking for someone who will justify them and take their part; and of course, will always want to be listened to and understood. In such cases, the person accompanying will always try to listen, to understand and encourage but will be careful not to give unqualified approval. This is particularly the case if the conversation involves disapproval of others. The person accompanying must always build on a foundation of truth and charity and never on easy flattery which will only result in bad service. Besides, identifying too closely with the other person would prevent both people transcending themselves and being attentive to the voice of the Spirit.

A second difficulty that can arise in accompaniment and in communication is impatience or the inability to respect each person's different rate of progress. Admonishing others for their slow progress or for the little effort they make is not a good thing in the accompanying process. This would not encourage, stimulate or even make demands. That is not to say that accompaniment cannot make demands. Demands have to be made, especially in systematic

accompaniment based on someone's personal plan with long and medium-term objectives. In such cases any demands made will take into account the person's capabilities and so will prove stimulating. Another danger in communication arises when the person accompanying is dogmatic or too sure of themselves. Firmness and a certain degree of self assurance are an acceptable base to work from but this is not the same thing as knowing problems in advance, giving quick answers to them or even imposing such solutions. Anyone who acts in this way shows they don't know how to listen at all or show respect. Such an attitude would prevent the person who is accompanying from understanding in any depth the situation that the other person is experiencing. Also, it is not the task of the person who is accompanying to impose what should be done, but rather to clarify the other person's situation from a gospel and Vincentian standpoint and encourage them to opt for what is best.

During the interview or the communication, welcome and the manner in which we receive people, are very important. From the outset, we should create a pleasant, relaxed and cordial atmosphere. After a short time spent greeting the person, the conversation should turn to matters connected with accompaniment. During the interview, the person who is accompanying should devote all their attention to what the other person is saying in a peaceful and relaxed atmosphere. If this is not the case and the man or woman accompanying looks at their watch, for example, then what the other person is saying is immediately devalued. Only very urgent matters should be allowed to interrupt the interview. The person who is accompanying should show, in some way or other, that nothing that the Sister says is being ignored but finds an echo in the listener. Nodding one's head, answering in monosyllables or making brief interjections may be sufficient to show that one is cordially sharing in the dialogue and following what is being said. Prolonged silences can make people uneasy and disconcerted so they should be avoided.⁶

SPECIFIC AREAS THAT MAY BE COVERED DURING ACCOMPANIMENT

As we have already said, every topic that a Sister wishes to discuss can be part of dialogue or accompaniment. Generally speaking, there should be no limits set on what can be discussed; personal maturity, human qualities, religious convictions, important practical questions..... However, there are three specific areas to be dealt with in accompaniment and they are as follows:

1. Accompaniment in the spiritual life

We need to distinguish between convictions and practices. Convictions are obviously going to be discussed during accompaniment. The Sister will be helped to base her life on solid gospel convictions or to deepen these. We know that the absence of such convictions is at the root of many community and vocational problems, it affects a person's sense of belonging to the Company or even of finding meaning in life itself. When we base our lives on the Gospel, this becomes our point of reference, our constant motivation for action and it enlightens us about our ways of acting. This is important. When these convictions are assimilated they spontaneously give rise to a desire for conversion, to forgiveness and to a life dedicated to the service of the poor. We are speaking here, of course, about the Gospel being read and assimilated from a Vincentian perspective. With the aim of basing a person's spiritual life on the firm rock that Matthew speaks about (Mt 7, 24-27), the process of accompaniment can also deepen awareness of an individual's call from God, the response they make to the Lord, the difficulties that the person may be experiencing in their faith and their personal efforts to assimilate the virtues proper to the spirit of the Daughters of Charity.

Constitutions 19-23 set out the different practices that constitute a Sister's spiritual life: Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, Reconciliation, prayer- meditation, the monthly and the annual retreats, spiritual reading, etc. All these spiritual aids can be the basis for dialogue. Experience teaches us that these spiritual exercises can be carried out in a very superficial or routine way. Good accompaniment will look for ways of motivating people so that these practices will nourish their spiritual life. The aim of accompaniment is to revive what has become dulled, straighten out what is twisted and raise up again what has fallen.

All these aids to the spiritual life can be discussed during accompaniment. With regard to the Eucharist, for example, how does the person receive and live out this sacrament? How truly does her life reflect what the Constitutions say about the Eucharist: *"the centre of their life and mission"*, *"an indispensable meeting each day with Christ and their brothers and sisters."* (C. 19b)?

⁶ Cf. JOSE FELIX VALDERRABANO, *Spiritual accompaniment in formation for the religious life*, Instituto teologico de vida religiosa, Madrid 1983, 81-93.

How can she make what these words signify a reality in her life? Accompaniment can give similar help with the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Liturgy of the Hours, using the text of the Constitutions. (cf. CC 19,20).⁷ This last named exercise can be an important discussion point in dialogue with the Sister. As we all know, one of the dangers of repeating a liturgical practice every day can be routine; we can repeat the words mechanically not putting our hearts into them. How can we make the psalms into living prayers that refresh and strengthen each day our faith, hope and charity? Listening to what a Sister says about her convictions and about the way she actually experiences the Liturgy of the Hours can lead into useful dialogue

It is also useful and appropriate to discuss meditation during the accompaniment interview. It is not uncommon to hear a Sister of several or many years vocation say that she cannot make meditation. If you thought that to be literally true you might well ask what has she been doing during prayer for so many years? But the person accompanying needs to understand what lies behind the Sister's words. Very often this complaint is a cover for shortcomings in her prayer life. So we have here a good opportunity to talk about the need for prayer, experiencing God, what meditation means and the obstacles to making meditation.

2. Accompaniment in community life

Good accompaniment in this second aspect of the process can greatly help the Sister to overcome certain difficulties. In what way? First of all, the Sister has to start by accepting her community for what it really is and not some imaginary, ideal community, for such a community does not exist anywhere in the world. She has to accept differences in age, the fact that many Sisters are elderly and that people view things in a different way because of differences in temperament and very different types of formation. This acceptance should lead the Sister to sincerely love all the members of her community no matter how different they may be from her or how little they have in common. One aspect of loving is to recognise each Sister's good points as well as appreciating the particular way she serves poor people. When this recognition and appreciation are shown to us, we cannot help but feel part of that community. Good accompaniment has to help a Sister to appreciate unreservedly the good points of her companions in community and the work that each one does for the poor, and of course she has to avoid passing judgment on the Sisters of her community for this is an obstacle to personal relationships and is a barrier to acceptance.

As well as this realistic view of community we also need to see it from the theological angle as set out in Constitutions 32-37: the community has been called and assembled by God. We do not choose our companions on the journey; God allocates them to us. The community is modelled on the unity and love shown by the Blessed Trinity in their unity and diversity. This theological vision of living finds concrete expression in a "*mysticism of community*" which means understanding and appreciating the community, not as some NGO or working group, but as a community gathered together round Jesus Christ in order to accomplish the same mission that he had. So the Daughter of Charity who is imbued with this fraternal mysticism will never lose sight of the gospel motives that are the basis of community and render this possible. On the contrary, she will see that it is the Lord who is the basis and foundation of the community, and she will act accordingly.

Accompaniment in the area of community life is not conducted just on these general and theoretical principles; it also leads the Sister to ask herself how she collaborates in these community practices. For example, how does she participate in the different community meetings and in the community review of life? (cf C32b). What contribution does the Sister make to dialogue and sharing information, things that help to build up a family atmosphere and promote co-responsibility for the common mission (cf. CC, 32b, 36)? Questions like these should come up during accompaniment. It happens quite often that Sisters are content to talk about community situations that are negative, or to present difficulties and problems that arise in community. Of course, one has to begin by accepting what the Sister says, whether she is being objective or not. But genuine accompaniment cannot be satisfied with this initial stage of the conversation which is often a form of emotional release and a need to confide in someone. After a while, the Sister should be asked to consider how she might contribute to solving the problem she mentioned or the situation she described. We have to discover what response the Lord is asking her to make in these circumstances. This is what true accompaniment is all about because nobody in community is simply an onlooker, but everyone shares responsibility. Constitution 32a could not be clearer: "*Community is built day after day by each Sister's gift of self and commitment.*" (C.32a).

⁷ Cf. F.QUINTANO, *The Sister Servant as animator. What and how does she animate?* Echoes 2000

3. Accompaniment in mission

With regard to this third aspect of vocation, accompaniment is meant to help the Sister to have a deeper understanding of her service and the way she carries it out. How does she regard service? Although commitment to God is not the same thing as commitment to people who are poor, nevertheless these are two inseparable realities; two sides of the same coin. This is admirably expressed in Constitution 16b which says, *“Service is for them the expression of their total gift of self to God in the Company and gives it its full significance.”* We see from this the close relationship that must exist between the spiritual and the apostolic life. That is to say, the Daughter of Charity meets God when she goes to the chapel, in prayer and in the sacraments, but she also encounters God in the service of the poor. Or to put it another way, Vincentian spirituality demands that the Daughters of Charity be “contemplatives in action”, a modern phrase that has now become part of the Church’s tradition. So, this most important question (how does the Daughter of Charity regard service?) can give rise to a dialogue that is enriching for both the people involved. The Sister will have the opportunity to express her deepest convictions, her motivations and her difficulties. The person accompanying will be happy to accept all that the Sister says, and at the same time, offer some reflections to promote a deeper understanding of ways of serving the poor.

How does she feel about the particular service of the poor that she is engaged in? What concerns and difficulties does she have about it? How does she share her apostolic service with the community? These are some of the questions that might provide useful guidelines for this third aspect of accompaniment. Taking these practical suggestions as a starting point, we have to reach the stage of viewing matters in the way set out in Constitution 10b: *“Through faith they see Christ in those who are poor, and they see those who are poor in Christ. They serve Him in His suffering members, with compassion, gentleness, cordiality, respect and devotion.”* It is only in faith that the Daughters of Charity can serve poor people. It is faith that enables them to overcome difficulties in the service they give, to understand the deeper meaning of service (including the problems it brings), and to find the strength they need to carry it out. The five dispositions mentioned in this Constitution show very clearly that the Daughter of Charity cannot be content with being just a good professional. She has, of course, to offer quality service in her work for poor people but she must also give the “something more” that springs from her chosen vocation. She offers herself as a servant, practising the three virtues specific to the Company. To sum up what we have been saying, good accompaniment can protect a Sister from the dangers of professionalism which, as we all know, simply means being content to offer good professional service. The temptation to do this is very strong in our day, given the socio-cultural context in which we live.

TWO SPECIAL TIMES FOR ACCOMPANIMENT: THE ANNUAL AND THE MONTHLY RETREAT

In this final part of our reflection I am not going to speak about the Retreats themselves but will offer you my thoughts on accompaniment during them. I do not want to exaggerate by saying that accompaniment is the most important part of these retreats or that without personal accompaniment they will not achieve their objective. It is simply another pastoral service that people take on so that the retreats will have a successful outcome, which simply means promoting the Daughters of Charity’s enthusiastic fidelity to their vocation and mission. It is a pastoral service that each Sister is free to avail herself of or not, but experience teaches us that if this help is offered there will always be a group of Sisters ready to take advantage of it.

I know that there is a difference between the “accompaniment” offered by the Visitatrice or by a Councillor, and the “accompaniment” given by the Provincial Director or the person directing the retreat. The Visitatrice and the Councillors will have more of an impact on the practical aspect of the Sister’s vocation and mission. However, the Visitatrice and the Councillors should not, and cannot, refrain from advising, confronting and encouraging the Sister, in accordance with the spirituality that is proper to the Daughters of Charity. I mean by this, that although the content of the conversation may be different, this personal accompaniment must be genuine accompaniment, no matter who is engaging in it.

I would like to develop a bit more the idea that accompaniment helps to achieve the objectives of a retreat. There can be no doubt at all that the Sisters greatly appreciate their retreat as a useful means of stimulating them to be faithful to their vocation. Many describe it as “a deep experience” or a real “kairos from God.” We have all found from experience how

important it is to go aside somewhere for a few days in order to give fresh impetus to our life, in an atmosphere of silence and prayer with relaxed and festive liturgical celebrations. How does accompaniment fit into the context of Spiritual Exercises and, by extension, retreats? Constitution 21d speaks of the three goals that a community and Vincentian retreat should achieve: *“Deeper union with Christ in prayer; more festive liturgical celebrations; and looking back over one’s life with a view to giving better service.”* This third goal (reviewing one’s life) fits perfectly well into the process of accompaniment. Sometimes a Sister will ask somebody to help her to review her life or some particular aspect of it. It is with this in mind that she goes to the Retreat Director, the Provincial Director or the Visitatrice. It is a privileged opportunity for listening, discussing and reflecting. The special ambience of a retreat is a great help to reviewing one’s life and to communication. There are many ways of conducting this review. Some Sisters use the outline of a Personal Plan, others prefer a more spontaneous form of communication. Whatever method of approach is used, the person accompanying has a particularly good opportunity to invite the Sister to ask herself the fundamental questions about her life as a Daughter of Charity. Everything that has been said in the previous section is equally applicable to this situation.

Sometimes the Sister feels the need to seek accompaniment, not because she wants to review her life, but for a variety of reasons: personal and family illness, setbacks, difficulties in her work or in community, failure, discouragement, dryness in prayer, the temptations that come with retirement, confrontations or coolness with regard to Superiors, etc. Spiritual help will consist in listening, reassuring, verifying what is being said, encouraging, seeing things objectively (as far as this can be done). However, this must never be done with a lax outlook that justifies anything that is not in line with the vocation and mission of the Company. The person who is accompanying must not set lower standards for the gospel-Vincentian ideal but should certainly show understanding and offer encouragement when helping people who are experiencing problems in their journey towards the vocation ideal.

Father Javier Alvarez.
Director General

TODAY’S CHALLENGES

The universality of the human person

Notes taken during a talk given by Professor Henri Joyeux on the occasion of a formation session for the Chapel Ministry Team (Priests, Sisters, Laity) on the theme of **HOSPITALITY**.

Introduction

By way of introduction, I am going to read to you a short text that seems an appropriate way to begin this day together. It was written by a woman who is quadriplegic:

“For 2000 years”, said God, “I have been trying to talk to humans. I have asked them, in every tone of voice, to open their hearts to me, to let themselves be loved by me. This word”, God said, “needs to have feet. A word with feet that can run and meet human beings wherever they are. It must have hands to serve humanity. It must have a mouth to smile at people and ears to listen to them. This word needs to have a heart in order to understand people.” And so God gave hands, feet, ears, a mouth and a heart to this Word. It was the most beautiful Word that God had ever pronounced. God breathed into it and sent it to earth. And humanity discovered it almost by accident, wrapped in swaddling clothes, in the arms of a woman.” This is the child we celebrated at Christmas!

Who am I addressing?

Before I start my talk, the first question to ask is: “who will I be addressing?” I tried to reflect on this from the basis of what I know of this Chapel at rue du Bac where I happen to come from time to time, not very regularly, but as often as I can. So then, I am addressing all of you, both

religious and lay people, who serve in the ministry of welcome and hospitality in a place that is very special and recognised throughout the world as a spiritual place in the centre of a huge city. And this is the place where you carry out your mission of hospitality. So, without realising it, I had in some way been prepared for it.

We have a better understanding of many things in life after they have actually happened. During the Christmas holidays, in addition to this little book written by the woman who is quadriplegic, I discovered a man with whom I was not familiar and about whom I had some strange prejudices: Maurice Zundel. I read his life and was greatly impressed by it, so much so that I was eager to read all his works. I only knew about his life and a few aspects of what he has written. Maurice Zundel will certainly be much in our minds today through several of his sayings that have touched and impressed me a great deal and which I can apply to my personal life. Here is one that will be of particular interest to men and women religious: *"Those who give themselves to God become able to give God to others."* He also says that God has high regard for our humanity because he knelt down before human beings to wash their feet.

Your role and your mission, then, is to welcome pilgrims. But what does it mean to "welcome"? You have a sense of God and you know, that as Zundel said, *"Every human person is a pathway to God."* That means that all the men and women who come here are a pathway to this God, and even more so, as he rightly says, and as Marthe Robin remarked to me several years ago: *"There is something in me that is more than me and is outside of me."* That means, then, that there is more to a person than just the individual. Basically, that is what is revealed by the people who come here, and it is what you try to reveal to them in one way or another.

Who is this Professor Henri Joyeux?

I am a person engaged in health care and as a cancer surgeon I am in direct contact with reality. Yesterday, I was in the operating theatre all morning until 3:00 p.m, and in the afternoon I had consultations until 8:00 p.m. I performed surgery on a woman and a man. Whenever you touch the ureter, the liver, the chest cavity, the lungs, you can't afford to make any mistakes. You have to stay in close touch with what is happening and not daydream. I have a profession that is very, very close to reality, a suffering reality. All the people with illnesses whom I see as an oncologist ask important questions, especially the question: how much longer will I live? They expect, as we all do, that the end will come some day, but they have an expiry date ahead of them. They are going to present themselves just as they are, because what matters for them is the meaning of their life.

For the last five years I have also been involved in ministry to families. My voluntary work in this sector is a heavy responsibility. I am involved with about 100,000 families in France, in a movement that is not affiliated to any particular religion, political group, syndicate or ideology. Among the families in today's world, more than 2 million children are poor, and families are in precarious situations that cause much suffering. There are more and more single parent families and many difficulties in what have become "second families" as well as those that have not.

I am also involved in working with young people. Since 1982 I have been devoting one day a week to them. Last week, when I was in the south of France, I met 1350 young people all day Friday. I usually meet them on Fridays, students from the youngest to the oldest classes. I talk to them about three topics: health, love and emotions, and sexuality. When I say that last word, all the young people are very interested. That is a very important word for it concerns the most intimate part of a person.

Finally, I am a believer. I believe first of all in human beings, in humanity, because I am in touch with humanity every day. For me, however, human life has meaning and that meaning is God. Some words from Zundel support my belief: *"It is the life of God that gives total meaning to our life."* And I would add: *"We desire what is good because God breathes in us."*

So my mission today is to use my experience to help you to be even better at welcoming and showing hospitality, knowing that we can always learn more. I often say to young people: *"We have a river within us; it is the river of love. When you are standing in front of a river or stream, take a look at the water in front of you. The water never remains the same, it is continually moving forward. So your river of love began for each one of you 270 days before your birth through the union of two other rivers: your father and your mother. Even if there were difficulties afterwards, at least there were a few moments of union between your father and your mother. And even though today there can be unions that take place in test tubes, the seeds still come from a man and a woman who*

have decided to give life to a new being, a child. Thus, the natural riverbed of this river of love is first of all the mother's womb. That lasts for nine months, and many things happen during these nine months. Doctors know now that the relationship between the mother and child begins even before the child starts moving in the mother's womb. We know that this takes place around the fourth month.

There is a text that you are very familiar with: it speaks about a sort of interchange or silent dialogue between an infant that has been six months in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, and another infant, Jesus, who is at the beginning of his life. So then, things happen during this time in the womb. In biblical times science did not yet have echography or recording facilities, but it did have basic knowledge. Science rediscovers things that have been written in the great works of human authors. This river of love, then, continues when we leave our mother's womb, when we spend a bit of time resting on her body and then, afterwards, the river extends out to the family: the father, then brothers and sisters. Let's imagine, though, that this river of love finds itself in front of a dam. Will this river stop? Certainly not! You'll have a lake, and either this lake will be so strong that it will leap over the dam or it will get bigger and bigger. In either case, though, the water will continue to move on. It will pass through spaces and crevices, or if necessary, the sun will even take this water and make it come down again in the form of rain. In one way or another, our river of love continues to flow each day, regardless of our age. In a way, that is what eternity means to me. I can't imagine that this river will stop at the end of our life, knowing that when we begin our life, we have this lifetime ticket that lasts a century or 120 years at most, and a century would be 36500 days."

One day when I was telling a student this, he asked me where I was on this journey. Since I hadn't calculated the number of days exactly, I responded 10 years times 6. He quickly did the calculation to find out my age and told me how many days I had left!

What does it mean for us who are involved in welcoming others, to consider this reality of the river of love that flows without ceasing? It means that not a single day passes in which we do not find ourselves enriched on an emotional level. We learn new things every day. I am not saying that every day we are improving, because on any given day we can have moments of true holiness and other moments that are the complete opposite. But the river advances every day and that's a very important notion. It means that in the act of welcoming, you are going to give of yourselves and welcome the other person, but you are also going to receive a great deal. We receive much from other people. Zundel said: "*God is a great secret of love; the person loved is a mystery.*"

It can be taken for granted, then, that you love all the people who come into this chapel. They are all part of the mystery. Zundel also said: "*The person is sacred because the person is God.*" This reflection is very, very far reaching. Basically, we can say that if humanity was more aware today of this sacredness of the human person and this presence of God in each human being, many things would be changed.

Last week, I received 74 emails from the young people at the school where I had been. The last one arrived last night, at almost midnight. I wanted to go to bed but I said: I can't not reply to this. It was from a 17 year old young woman who wanted to commit suicide. She said to me: "*No one loves me; I was adopted and my parents hate me...I cut my hands with razors.*" What I understood in this email of about twenty lines was, that as an adolescent, she was creating problems for her parents. The parents must be saying that they had had enough of this child whom they had adopted: they give her everything and she understands nothing! We can imagine something of what must be happening inside this young woman's head. That's why I responded immediately because there was a very serious problem here. So I replied to her and then secretly sent a copy to the principal of the school so that he would be attentive to this student and see how he could help her.

I would like to draw your attention to the importance of silence. As Zundel said, "*God is the great unknown; he only reveals himself in the heart of silence.*" That means that perhaps silence can be a response to certain questions a person asks. Even if we have an answer, the greatest form of respect for the person might be to remain silent in response to such-and-such a question. In the gospel it says: "*He healed all sorts of illnesses, he drove out many evil spirits, and he forbade them to speak because they knew who he was.*" He said to them: "*Silence!*"

Who comes to the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal?

Women and men from every country in the world, from all five continents, from every age group, with every possible skin colour. Why do they come here? I tried to come up with several

possibilities: they might be attracted by the Miraculous Medal and hope for a miracle for themselves or their loved ones; they come to express their gratitude to the Blessed Virgin Mary, their Mother; they come simply to pray and to entrust themselves to Mary's protection; they bring someone else to the Chapel or they are brought here by someone; they are searching for something extraordinary... And there are also people begging. Every time I come, I see them at the door. They aren't necessarily looking for a medal, but they are holding out their hands. In any case, they are there. They are counting on the goodness and the alms of the people who are coming and going from the chapel. In any case, whether as beggars at the door or people inside the chapel, we are all beggars before God.

What is special about all these people is that their spiritual antennae are tuned in. That is a great advantage, because if their spiritual antennae are tuned in, I would say that the journey, as it were, to connect with them, is relatively short. There is no need to go about it in a complicated way. Zundel said: *"Jesus is always among us, and it is often on the faces that are the least attractive that we need to seek him with the most love."* There is a story told in the book I read on Zundel's life, that one day he was in a car on a road in Egypt when he saw a poor man covered with flies, holding out his hand on the side of the road. Zundel signalled for the car to stop, went up to the man, knelt down next to him and offered him a cigarette: a brief moment of pleasure. I find this a very powerful image on the level of giving: Zundel kneeling down and lighting a cigarette for this poor man.

So we are in contact, then, with people who are beggars. When someone is a beggar, he or she is a seeker. Here at the Chapel people are seeking God. These are people who have the humility to think, *"Left to myself, I can't make it; the system the world offers is not enough to make me happy in the depths of my being."*

There are also those who are wounded by life. I believe that we are all wounded. Are you going to ask me about original sin? That is something too complicated for me. I would rather say that we are all wounded in our life.

Our reality as human beings leads us to speak about this universality of the person, knowing that all human beings are similar. When I have colleagues from foreign countries (we have many young surgeons from all the continents coming for training with us), I have fun saying to them sometimes: "see how the ureter passes through this part of the body; in your country, it's different, it doesn't go through the same place!" Of course, I correct myself right away: anatomy is the same everywhere, and the body's function and its physiology (all the digestive, cardiovascular, respiratory, cerebral and other functions) are identical. There is therefore, a true universality of the person, even if the "framework" is different, even if the skin, the eye formation, etc. are different. All human beings are similar, and at the same time, each one is unique. Even identical twins are different, there may be a perfect resemblance between them but as individual persons they are different in a great many ways.

Many Europeans, Americans, Asians, Africans and Australians pass through this Chapel at rue du Bac. And if you wanted to evaluate their different spiritualities, you would certainly discover the whole range of people of faith, from coal miners to the greatest intellectuals and mystics. But the most important thing about this place is that the flame of spirituality is burning.

In the first part of my presentation, I will focus on some important ideas relating to welcoming people. In the second section, we will spend some time on how human beings function, something that is both unique and universal.

(To be continued)

Professor Henri Joyeux

Note

Pope Paul VI said of the Swiss priest, Maurice Zundel, (1897-1975) "he was a genius, a poetic genius, a genius who was a mystic, writer and theologian, and in him all these things came together in the most dazzling fashion."

VISIT BY SUPERIORS

Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General

and Sister Marlene Rosa, General Councillor

Visit to the Province of Amazonia (Brazil)

Amazonia, set up as a Region in 1991, became a Province in 1998. The Province is currently made up of 17 houses, plus the Provincial House and the Seminary, and numbers 88 Sisters, 3 Seminary Sisters, 4 postulants, 4 pre-postulants, one Sister on mission at the Translation Centre in the Motherhouse and another Sister in the Province of Mozambique.

On February 15th 2007, Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, and Sister Marlene Rosa, General Councillor, set foot on Amazonian soil at 9:30 in the evening, delighted to meet the Sisters in the youngest Province in Brazil. Sister Evelyne was warmly welcomed at the Belém-Pará airport at the start of her short visit to the Province. The 4 postulants and 3 Seminary Sisters greeted her with the song: *"You are here: heaven and earth are rejoicing"* as a way of expressing the Province's joy at this visit, a real blessing for everyone..

Sister Eleni, the Visitatrice, spoke on behalf of all the Sisters present as well as those who were not able to be there. The French flag was displayed in front of the altar along with the flag of Brazil, recalling the origins of the Company and its mission in the footsteps of Jesus Christ: to witness to his love for those who are poor throughout the entire world. Afterwards, while the Sisters sang a hymn in honour of the Blessed Virgin, one of the Sisters presented Sister Evelyne with a statue of Our Lady of Nazareth, Queen of Amazonia. This statue symbolises Mary's maternal protection of the servant of the poor who guides the international Company. The evening concluded with a celebratory meal accompanied by songs recalling the 70 years of presence of the Daughters of Charity in the northern areas of Brazil.

The following day, during morning prayer, the Sisters gave thanks to God for the marvels that have taken place in our lives. Sister Evelyne and Sister Marlene prepared themselves for a very full day of activities. Accompanied by the Visitatrice, they made a tour of the Provincial House and the Seminary which has been placed under the protection of the Virgin Most Powerful.

At 8:30 a.m., Sister Evelyne spoke to the Sisters about the need for consistency between our lives and our Constitutions. She answered questions and gave recommendations, speaking with great enthusiasm and humour.

At 10:45 a.m., we celebrated the Eucharist at which Father Pedrinho Carlos da Silva, the Provincial Director, presided. During the time of thanksgiving, a poor person who had been cared for by the Sisters, presented Sister Evelyne with a simple gift to thank her for the presence of the Daughters of Charity in Amazonia.

After a festive meal shared with Archbishop Orani João Tempesta of the Archdiocese of Belem, several Priests of the Mission and seminarians, Sister Evelyne visited some of the houses in Belem:

- The Catherine Laboure Institute, a primary and secondary school for about one thousand students; here the teachers and students presented Sister Evelyne with fruits that are typical of their region.
- The "Sister Ivone de Barros Lima, in Águas lindas" House (Ananindeua).

The base community in the parish of Saint Vincent de Paul where the Vincentian family serves in Belen.

On their return trip, the visitors stopped at the Basilica of Our Lady of Nazareth where they confided to Mary the intentions of the Province of Amazonia and the entire Company.

That evening, Sister Evelyne visited the Saint Vincent de Paul Centre where the senior Sisters live. Here they shared a meal with the Sisters and then viewed a power-point presentation recounting the history of the Province of Amazonia, its works, its achievements and the challenges it has faced. This programme gave Sister Evelyne an overall view of the mission of the Sisters in the Amazonian region: visiting indigenous people in their homes, caring for sick persons in hospitals or health care centres, education of children and young people (primary and secondary

schools), accompaniment of young people (Marian Youth Groups, vocation ministry, etc.), and ministry in collaboration with the Vincentian Family.

PHOTO

This long and full day ended with a time of prayer; then Sister Evelyne expressed her gratitude to the Sisters for their hospitality and the opportunity she had to enjoy this memorable visit, a chance for us all to get to know one another better.

Sister Evelyne's simplicity and sisterly approach touched us very much, and our hearts were filled with gratitude.

Sisters Anagilsa SAMPAIO BENTES and Maria Rejiane da MATA DIAS
Daughters of Charity

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

In Ukraine

First Gathering in Sinak for Sisters on Mission in the former Soviet Union

June 19th-23rd 2007

Experiencing that love is infinitely inventive!

The first gathering of Daughters of Charity who work in territories in the former Soviet Union took place in Sinak, Ukraine, from June 19th – 23rd 2007. The Sisters came from 11 local communities that are separated from each other by thousands of kilometres (Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia) to meet together with Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, Sister Zofia Daniscakova, General Councillor, and the Visitatrices from Poland and Slovakia. They totalled 47 participants in all, including 2 postulants, one aspirant and several Priests of the Mission.

For the last several years, the Daughters of Charity from the Provinces of Poland, Slovakia and Los Altos Hills (USA) have begun serving the people living in the former Soviet Union, in response to invitations from bishops, apostolic administrators and Priests of the Mission in the Vice-Province of Saints Cyril and Methodius. On mission in Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia (eastern and western Siberia), the Sisters carry out their mission in countries that have a history of over 1000 years of Christian tradition, interrupted, however, by the communist regime.

On **June 19th 2007**, during the evening prayer that marked the opening the gathering, Sister Evelyne and Sister Zofia were presented with bread and salt, the symbol of hospitality for the Slavic peoples. Members of Marian Youth Groups from Svaljava provided the entertainment (a poem written for the occasion, and Ukrainian songs and dances performed in the traditional dress of the country.)

The following day, the sessions began, with 3 days of work consisting of testimonies, conferences, times of prayer and celebrations.

Presentation of the missions

By means of power-point presentations, the Sisters presented their experiences of community life and their service of poor persons:

IN UKRAINE

In **Dovhe** (since 1991) and in **Svaljava** (since 2001) – These two local communities are attached to the Province of Slovakia. The Sisters are responsible for the care of sick persons and

for parish ministry. In Svaljava, they also work with the Romanian gypsies, are responsible for organising the liturgy in a long-term health care facility and work in a children's home.

In **Storozyniec** (since 1995) and **Sniatyn** (since 2000) – These two local communities are affiliated to the Province of Cracow. The Sisters provide catechesis, care for children with disabilities and visit sick persons in their home or in hospital.

In **Kharkov** (since 1996) – The Community is attached to the Province of Warsaw. The Sisters provide home health care and are involved in parish ministry to children and adults. They have also opened a centre for very poor children, where they serve meals, help the children with their homework and provide other activities for them. One of the Sisters works in collaboration with a Vincentian priest and a member of AIC (Ladies of Charity) to assist homeless children.

IN BELARUS

In **Brest** (since 1992) and **Szumilino** (since 2000) – The two local communities are part of the Province of Warsaw. The Sisters serve in the parish in liturgical ministry, provide religious instruction for children, young people and adults and visit poor and sick persons in their home or in hospital.

IN KAZAKHSTAN

In **Szortandy** (since 2000) and **Novokubanka** (since 2005) – The two communities, attached to the Province of Chelmno, were founded at the request of the bishop of Astana to assist the poor and abandoned people in their religious needs. They provide the same services for children, persons who are ill, as well as the parish community.

IN RUSSIA

In **Nijnij Tagil** (since 2000) in Western Siberia – The local community is attached to the Province of Slovakia and has responded to the invitation of the Vincentians already on mission in this large city founded on the metalwork industry. In addition to the ministries already mentioned, the Sisters started a club called "Zabota" that offers educational support and activities for children coming from broken families that are socially poor. They also visit and care for patients who have been abandoned in hospital (trauma and tuberculosis patients), sponsor youth camps and provide spiritual retreats for people of all ages.

In **Magadan** (since 2005) in Eastern Siberia – Formerly a region of forced-labour camps, this mission was opened at the invitation of the Church in the United States. The community, affiliated to the Province of Cracow, comprises two Polish Sisters and one American Sister (from the Province of Los Altos Hills). Their ministries include adult catechesis (preparation for the sacraments, *Alpha* classes for persons searching for God), the parish choir, visiting and caring for persons who are poor and isolated, or those in the final stages of terminal illnesses. They also collaborate with a group that manages a soup kitchen for poor persons.

Some realities these missions have in common

After sharing about these various missions in the ex-Soviet Union territories, the Sisters highlighted the features that they have in common despite the immense geographical distances that separate them:

- Catholics are in the minority in these Orthodox regions. In spite of this situation, the people have a great desire to understand and live their faith. The Sisters are there to live and pray with them, and strive to serve in such a manner that the people can discover God's love dwelling within them.
- Since the fall of communism, material and spiritual poverty is extensive. The Sisters encounter many destitute people who are completely abandoned, and many homeless children. A high unemployment rate, especially in Ukraine, has led to the departure of adults to other countries to find work in order to support their families. Alcoholism and crime are major problems, especially in the major cities.

- The population of Ukraine and Belarus is young, due to the fact that families have many children. The Sisters try to work as much as possible with young people in order to guide them on a human and spiritual level (Marian Youth Groups, prayer groups, etc.)

Afterwards, the Sisters reflected with Sister Evelyne on the important issues concerning the future of these missions, especially on the need for formation of young women in the former Soviet Union who express an interest in joining the Company.

Prayer experiences during this gathering

These three days of work were nourished by beautiful liturgies in 7 different languages: Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian, Kazakh, Polish, Slovakian and French. The way in which the Sisters prayed and celebrated the Eucharist, presided over by Father Tomas Mauric, CM from Kiev, was a beautiful expression of inculturation and respect for diversity. The Eucharist on June 23rd, the last day of the gathering, was presided over by the Apostolic Administrator of the Eparchy of Mukachevo, Bishop Milan Sasik, CM, along with Father Tomas. The Sisters taking part in this gathering gave thanks to God for the wonderful sense of communion that unites them all in spite of the variety of cultures and languages, emphasising the beauty of internationality in these lands so marked by the suffering of many martyrs during the communist regime.

May the Charity of the crucified and risen Christ impel us to go even further, radiating the joy and strength received during this first gathering. May Love be inventive in our everyday lives!

Participants in the Gathering

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Peru

The tragic earthquake

On the evening of August 15th 2007, a powerful and prolonged earthquake, measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale, violently struck Peru along its southern coast, in the region of Ica. The gravity and consequences of this earthquake was given significant press coverage. In Peru, the Vincentian Family was among those traumatised by the events. Saint Clement's Church in Pisco collapsed while a Vincentian priest was presiding at a Eucharistic celebration with about 300 participants, including 4 Daughters of Charity. Among the many victims were two Sisters who lost their lives under the fallen debris.

Sister Marina Melendez recounted in a letter some details of the situation experienced by the Sisters of the Province:

"It took us twice as long as usual to travel from Lima to Pisco because of the damaged roads and the heavy traffic. All along the route, we saw uprooted electricity pylons and cables for light and telephone services. When we reached Pisco, there was a veritable human tide fleeing the city, as a warning had announced that the tide had receded, predicting the arrival of a tsunami. Thank God, it was then judged to be a false alarm! Our anguish increased as we got nearer the city and saw all the debris from houses that had been completely destroyed. Since the time of the earthquake, the city has had no electricity, no telephone lines and no means of purchasing necessities, as everything has been destroyed. The only thing remaining is dust everywhere. The people living in this region are very poor and most of the buildings are made of baked clay (adobe). Even the few buildings that are more solidly constructed suffered a great deal of damage. The Saint Clement Parish in Pisco is staffed by the Congregation of the Mission; the church building, over 150 years old, was made of adobe and had been renovated seven years ago. On that day, the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, about 300 parishioners had gathered for Mass, among them our four Sisters, two of whom managed to escape from the building in time along with many others. The other two Sisters, however, were not so fortunate: Sister Antonieta Perla Cavagneri, 75 years old and 49 years vocation (Sister Servant and principal of the Saint Louise de Marillac School) and Sister Elizabeth Ore Ventura, 44 years old and 24 years vocation, both of whom were teachers in the school. They were buried under the fallen building. After a stressful and seemingly endless wait, 39 hours after the building's collapse, we were

able to recover the body of Sister Elizabeth, and then after 68 hours, the body of Sister Antonieta. Each interment was preceded by a very touching Eucharistic liturgy in the Provincial House. These liturgies allowed us to experience once again God's tender love expressed through the prayers and demonstrations of solidarity from the Company and from so many people who know and appreciate us.. We are very grateful for this.

As you know, Sister Antonieta Perla was a very holy Daughter of Charity, a woman of prayer, intelligent, very prudent and humble, full of faith, very sensitive to the Sisters and poor persons. Her way of relating to others was gentle yet firm, and she was very loyal to her superiors. In the Province, she has been successively Provincial Secretary, Seminary Directress, Councillor, Assistant and Visitatrice. Today we have lost a very good Sister, teacher of thousands of children, adolescents and young women. The teachers and the poor persons whom she loved so much and whose human and Christian promotion she worked for, mourn her loss as we do..

Sister Elizabeth Ore, a joyful and good Sister, was Provincial Secretary at the time that Sister Antonieta was Visitatrice. She had been able to leave the Church quickly since she happened to be near a door, but she went back to look for Sister Antonieta who had stayed with the children. Sister Elizabeth reached her and both were found shielding the children in the choir, their students at Saint Louise de Marillac School. I admire Sister Elizabeth's loyal commitment to Sister Antonieta.

The Sisters' house was not greatly affected but the school was so severely damaged by the earthquake that classes cannot be held there for now, and this is a matter of great concern for us. Among the victims of this disaster are parents of some students and some of our students as well, who died under the rubble. The families of seven of our Sisters who live in the region have lost their entire homes and all their belongings. Many other families have lost loved ones and possessions and are now at risk from epidemics...All this compels us to respond quickly with inventive charity in faith and hope.

In this midst of these challenges that are so difficult to overcome, there is widespread and reassuring solidarity among the Peruvians. In Lima, thousands of volunteers were mobilised to send help to the areas ravaged by the earthquake. Gathering in public squares, they sorted and packaged tons of provisions and clothing which were transported by trucks supplied by the government. Many Daughters of Charity, religious communities and lay members of the Vincentian Family participated in the emergency aid teams. The generous dedication of the Sisters of the Province eases our suffering. We also experience a sense of solidarity coming from the countless expressions of support and prayer from the other Provinces. It is a sign of the union that exists within the Company. We also hold in our hearts the witness and the sacrifice of these two Daughters of Charity who have gone home to the Father.

Together, let us continue to ask God to give us the strength, wisdom and creativity needed to overcome our sorrow and to thus come to the aid of so many families for whom it will take years to return to a normal life."

Sister Marina MELENDEZ
Visitatrice of the Province of Peru

Newsbriefs

Servant of Peace Award 2007

In recognition of her life-long commitment to the service of humanity and the Church, Sister Sabina Iragui, Visitatrice of the Province of Central Africa, is one of two recipients of the **2007 Servitor Pacis (Servant of Peace) Award** given by the Path to Peace Foundation.

The Path to Peace Foundation, based in New York, in collaboration with the Holy See's Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations, directs its activities primarily, but not exclusively, to the international stage of the United Nations. It was established for the purpose of spreading the message of peace by which the Catholic Church strives to "guide our steps into the path of peace." (Luke 1:79) It serves this mission by sponsoring conferences and other educational forums to study the Church's social teachings and justice and peace statements from the Holy See and by funding projects sponsored by Church organisations to promote justice and peace. (Province of Central Africa)

Lord Mayor of Dublin Awards 2007

The Daughters of Charity are one of two organisations that have been awarded the “**Lord Mayor’s Award**” 2007 for their outstanding contribution in caring for the sick and poor, their dedication to education and healthcare as well as their outreach work in Dublin parishes with particular reference to young people and the elderly.

“The Lord Mayor’s Awards” honour individuals and groups who have made a special contribution to both the city of Dublin and its citizens. The Daughters of Charity have been ministering in Dublin for 150 years. They began their mission by visiting sick and poor people in their homes, and then gradually became involved in psychiatry, childcare, education and general social services. Today these works continue and develop in collaboration with many co-workers. (Province of Ireland)

2007 Special Judges Award

Recently, the Africa Centre hosted their 5th World Refugee Day Awards in Ireland. The aim of the World Refugee Awards is to highlight a country’s achievements in working with asylum seekers and refugees.

The Vincentian Refugee Centre, where Sister Breege Keenan serves, was the first day centre created for asylum seekers in Ireland. It quickly became the model for a number of other centres around the country. Sister Breege, who has served there tirelessly for 9 years, received the Special Judges Award in recognition of her pioneering work and her commitment to social justice. (Province of Ireland)

Newsbriefs

2007 Golden Heart Award

In May 2007 in Florence, Italy, the “50 Years and Over Fenacom Association”, part of the General Trade Confederation, presented the **Golden Heart Award** to Sister Rosalba Sacchi.

On alternate years, this association honours 10 persons, one from each Province in Italy, for their involvement in the areas of social and volunteer services. During the awards ceremony, an account was given of the principle events of Sister Rosalba’s life; her vocation, her ministry in the slums of Rome, her service as Visitatrice of the Province of Rome, her mission in the Thevenin Institute and her role as Director of Caritas in the diocese of Arezzo-Cortona-Sansepolcro, that she has been exercising with great dedication for more than 10 years. There is much joy among the Sisters of the Province of Rome, who in humility and simplicity serve children, teenage mothers and elderly persons. (Province of Rome)

SPECIAL CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF MOTHER GUILLEMIN

Mother Suzanne Guillemin

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

1906-1968

IV – MOTHER GUILLEMIN AND THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

INTRODUCTION

On January 25th 1959, Pope John XXIII solemnly addressed the Cardinals present in Rome on the day of the closing of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in Saint Paul Outside the Walls. The occasion was a secret extraordinary Consistory that brought together 18 cardinals in the monastery of Saint Paul.

After speaking about several important matters related to his responsibility as bishop of Rome and supreme Pastor of the universal Church, the Pope, inspired by the age-old custom of the Church, announced three events of utmost importance: a Diocesan Synod in Rome, the celebration of an Ecumenical Council for the universal Church and the updating of the Code of Canon Law:

“Trembling a little with emotion,” said the Pope, “but with humble firmness of purpose, we now tell you of a twofold celebration. We propose to call a Diocesan Synod for Rome, and an Ecumenical Council for the Universal Church. For you, venerable brethren and beloved sons, it is not necessary to give numerous explanations relating to the historical and juridical significance of these two propositions. They will fortunately lead to the awaited and desired updating of the Code of Canon Law which must accompany and crown these two examples of the practical application of the dispositions of Church discipline that the Spirit of the Lord will offer to us throughout this process...”

The following day, the entire world had heard the news. A short time later, Cardinal Tardini would explain to representatives of the international press what this future Ecumenical Council would entail. All the major news agencies, the leading newspapers, radio stations and other forms of media were represented. The Cardinal explained first of all what an Ecumenical Council was. It is not superfluous to recall here the definition that was given: *“An assembly of all the bishops of the Catholic Church and other prelates who have the right to study and resolve together, with the Pope and under his authority, the most important doctrinal and disciplinary matters that interest the life of the Church.”*¹

The Cardinal then highlighted the goal of the Council, the participants, its duration, the dates and the work of the Ante-preparatory Commission. There was also the question of language to be used: the Latin language is the most suitable for expressing the doctrinal concepts and the rules of discipline precisely, clearly and concisely. The Cardinal added that *“for the moment, we are not considering simultaneous translation with headsets. In matters of faith, a word that is incorrectly translated, or at least, inexact, could lead to confusion.”*

The members of the press asked questions related to their work. To appease the journalists, the Cardinal assured them that there were plans to establish a press office that would give them the opportunity to have accurate and timely information about the various phases of the Council.

PREPARATION FOR THE COUNCIL

In 1959, at the time this significant event for the Church was announced, Sister Guillemin was Sister Servant at the Centrale des Oeuvres; adding to her daily concerns those of the Church in France. To her mind and heart, the Council was a great joy, and she easily expressed this when she met the Sisters, either in Sessions, in the local community and even at the level of national gatherings. At that time, she was not aware of what was waiting for her in the third session of the Ecumenical Council in Rome.

It seems useful to give a brief overview of the preparation, organisation and ecumenical aims of Pope John XXIII, now more than 40 years since its convocation.

¹ Documentation Catholique, p.1499

On May 17th 1959, the Pope decided to launch a **universal consultation of bishops**. He invited the Conciliar Fathers to express themselves with the utmost freedom:

*"...I earnestly beg Your Excellence, to please send to this pontifical commission, in full liberty and sincerity, the remarks, counsels and wishes that pastoral solicitude and the care of souls suggest to Your Excellence, regarding the matters and subjects which could be discussed at the next Council."*²

More than 2000 responses arrived in Rome. These responses, classified according to country, were the basis of the almost 9000 propositions that were presented and were destined to guide the work of the preparatory commissions. This information was published long after the Council.

IMMEDIATE PREPARATION, FROM 1960-1962

On the feast of Pentecost 1960, Pope John XXIII opened the preparatory phase of the Council. *A moto proprio* recalls the Pope's view of the Council which was: *"to work for the renewal of the Church and the union of Christians."*

The organisation was confided to 11 Commissions and 3 Secretariats. Each Commission was presided over by a Cardinal, with the Pope presiding over the Central Commission. The work was carried out with the utmost secrecy. The texts were developed by groups of specialists and then proposed to the general assembly of the Commission for amendments. Their outlines were sent to the Fathers for study. Critical appraisals arrived. Constructive comments brought enlightenment: Cardinal Suenens proposed an outline on the Church, and the Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Montini, suggested that ecclesiology was an important question for discussion.

The Company had the joy of seeing the Congregation of the Mission participate in the work of the Council.

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS:

Father Slattery, Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission
Cardinal Sidarous, Patriarch of Catholics of the Coptic Rite, Egypt.
20 Vincentian Bishops: 10 from Latin America, 4 from Africa, 6 from Asia.

PHOTO OF FR. SLATTERY

Father Slattery, Superior General of the Mission

FOR THE COUNCIL PREPARATION:

4 consultants:

Father Slattery: Commission for the Discipline of the Clergy and the Christian People
Father Bugnini: Commission for Liturgy
Father Rossi: Commission for Theology
Father Diebold: Secretariat for the Unity of Christians.

2 members of Commissions:

Father Menichelli: member of the Commission for the Lay Apostolate
Father Pizzoni: member of the Liturgy Commission

Spiritual preparation, at the Pope's initiative, was in the form of a broadcast message: *"the Church must make its voice heard."* During this time, the Pope made a pilgrimage to Loretto and to Assisi.

² Histoire du Concile Vatican II, Tome 1 – Le Cerf

This process of spiritual preparation concluded with a procession from Saint Mary Major to Saint John Lateran, with prayers to the Holy Spirit for reconciliation.

OPENING OF THE COUNCIL

On October 11th 1962, a solemn liturgical ceremony, impressive in the number of its participants, marked the opening of the Council. Those present included nearly 2400 bishops, several foreign ambassadors, 86 extraordinary ambassadors sent to Rome by 79 governments, 7 international organisations including the European Council, and more than 1000 journalists.

The “observers”, numbering about 50, occupied places of honour. Among the persons invited by the Pope were Roger Schülz, Max Thurian and the French philosopher Jean Guitton.

In Pope John XXIII’s important discourse entitled “The Church must face the future with optimism”, two particular statements deserve to be mentioned:

*“In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, it sometimes happens that we hear certain **opinions which disturb us**—opinions expressed by people who, though fired with a commendable zeal for religion, are lacking in sufficient prudence and judgment in their evaluation of events. They can see nothing but calamity and disaster in the present state of the world... One would think from their attitude that history, that great teacher of life, had taught them nothing... We feel that we must **disagree** with these prophets of doom, who are always forecasting worse disasters, as though the end of the world were at hand.”*

A second point was emphasised by the Pope: *“The Church has always opposed errors, and often condemned them with the utmost severity. Today, however, Christ’s Church prefers **the balm of mercy** to the arm of severity...”*

HOW THE COUNCIL EVOLVED

A ruling was promulgated. The obligation of secrecy was solemnly affirmed and sealed by oath for the members of the General Secretariat. Latin was the only language permitted in the public sessions and the “General Congregations.”

The Council began on October 13th with a certain uneasiness: it had to elect members of the Commissions without knowing the individuals. Cardinal Lienart, Bishop of Lille (France), member of the Presiding Council, requested a postponement of the vote. The matter was important, *“since the Fathers were to strive to provide the Council with assistance from the most qualified of those among us in order to assure its proper functioning. However, how can we find them in this enormous assembly, when we do not yet know one another?”* The session was suspended and the members would have three days for consultation.

As a general rule, the Pope did not attend the working sessions of the Council. His presence was not to be a hindrance to the Council Fathers’ freedom of speech. Each session began with the celebration of Mass by one of the Council Fathers on the altar in the assembly room, generally in the Latin rite, at other times in the Eastern rite. After the enthronement of the Gospel on the Council altar, the president recited the opening prayer.

Mother Guillemin, from the time of the third session, to which she had been admitted as Auditrice, placed great importance on this Mass. She spoke about it most fervently: *“Not for anything in the world would I miss this Mass, so essential for the work of each day...”*

THE WORK METHOD

The time period for speaking was limited to ten minutes; the speakers often spoke in the name of a group since the gatherings allowed for interactions with other nationalities. It happened that some Europeans accepted the request of some Africans to speak in their name. This does not mean that the Africans did not dare to express themselves. Father Henri de Lubac, a Jesuit who became Cardinal, makes this point as follows:

“I like to recall that the most beautiful intervention heard in Saint Peter’s on the subject of the schema on Revelation was made by Bishop Zoungana, Archbishop of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), speaking in the name of 67 African bishops. ‘Basically,’ he said, ‘Christ himself is the Revelation he brings.’ He supported his words with texts taken from the liturgy and from the famous passage of Saint John of the Cross in his Ascent of Mount Carmel. ‘The truths to be believed and the duties to be accomplished,’ he concluded, ‘need to be considered more in relation to a living person. Say to the world that divine revelation is Christ. The beautiful face of Christ must shine forth more in the Church. It is in this way that you will renew the wonders of love and faithfulness that shone out in the early Church.’”

These words made a great impression on the assembly. It can be said that on that day, the Church in Africa had a star role in the Council.

All the discourses, most of them held in Latin, were recorded. Voting took place with individual ballot papers. Decisions were transmitted to the Pope for his confirmation.

THE SESSIONS OF 1962 AND 1963

First Session

The schema on the liturgy was adopted after discussion. On the contrary, the schema on Revelation was rejected.

Pope John XXIII died before the second session. He was replaced by Cardinal Montini who took the name Paul VI.

Second Session

This session opened on September 29th 1963. The opening ceremony was simplified, the bishops were not seated in hierarchical order, and Paul VI walked into the basilica.

PHOTO

On September 21st, a week before the opening of the session, and in the presence of 1200 cardinals, prelates and collaborators in the Roman dicasters, Paul VI gave a highly significant speech on “The reform of the Curia”, in which he referred specifically to “a renewal of relationships between the episcopacy and the Curia.” The key event in the second session was Pope Paul VI’s journey to meet Patriarch Athenagoras.

Third Session

Dom Helder Camara from Brazil was in the habit of keeping his Council journal in order to send it regularly to his beloved family in Sao Joakim, It contains two letters of particular interest.

Letter of October 6th 1963: The idea that, if God wishes it, we would advance in ecumenism, at least for the third session, by calling together representatives of Women Religious. The bishops, the priests and the laity are at the Council, but the Women Religious are not. Yet, they are a powerful force of devotion to the Church and the

neighbour. Extending this thinking even further, there was even the idea of confiding to them all matters not strictly sacerdotal...

Letter of September 15th-16th 1964:

We are going to propose two post-conciliar Commissions: the first to assist in the adaptation of Seminaries to current times, and the second to assist in the apostolic promotion of women religious.

Pope Paul VI to women religious

On September 8th 1964, feast of the Nativity of Mary, the Holy Father celebrated Mass in the large audience hall in Castel Gandolfo in the presence of the women religious from the diocese of Albano, including cloistered nuns. The following passage is found in his address to them:

*"...We believe that the day has come for the religious life of women to be more honoured and made more efficacious. We believe that this can be accomplished by strengthening the bonds that unite religious life to the life of the Church in its entirety. We share with you a little secret with regard to this: we have given instruction that a few qualified women of piety should assist as **auditrices** at several solemn rites and at some of the general congregations of the Third Session of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council. That means they will attend meetings of the congregations during which will be discussed questions that might be of particular interest for women's lives. In this way we shall have, for the first time perhaps, a feminine representation, not numerous of course, but significant and quasi-symbolic, symbolic, first of all of you religious women, and then of the great Catholic organisations of women so that women may know how much the Church honours the dignity of woman as a person, and in her human and Christian mission..."³*

On September 24th, *Osservatore Romano* published the list of those elected and Mother Guillemin, the Superioress General of the Daughter of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, was on the list of Council "Auditrices", one of several new categories. All the terms used applied to the participants.

Observers were the invited guests belonging to non-Catholic religious denominations. They attended the "general assemblies" without having any right to speak or vote. Each Tuesday, the Secretariat for Unity organised a meeting for them in which he gave updates on the Council and invited their comments.

Experts in the Council, named by the Pope, attended the general assemblies, but only spoke when questions were addressed to them, and they did not have the right to vote.

Private experts, chosen by the Council Fathers, could give advice, but they did not attend the general assemblies. However, they were sworn to **secrecy**.

From the second session onwards, the possibility was introduced of inviting experts and **lay auditors** who would be able to attend the general audiences.

On November 12th 1964, Bishop Huygue, Bishop of Arras (France) intervened to request that the women religious who served as auditors be allowed to work with the Conciliar Commission for Religious just as the lay auditors had been permitted to work on the Conciliar Commission for the Lay Apostolate. This observation once made, the bishop drew attention to the fact that *"we cannot confuse religious life for men and religious life for women...these two forms of religious life have appreciable differences and it seems important that these be taken into account..."*

³ Documentation Catholique September 1964, p. 1171

Mother Guillemin joined the Council from the beginning of the third session on September 29th 1964.

PHOTO

The auditors were seated in the tribune with the experts to the right of the table for the presiders and the cardinal moderators. Sister Rohou, the Assistant General, received the family letters giving Mother Guillemin's impressions:

"Without mincing matters I can say quite simply: It is simple but great...Seeing it is truly quite different from hearing about it ...Cardinal Antoniutti came twice, the first time to tell me how pleased he was that the change of habit had been made; the second time to bring me a humorous drawing on the flight of the cornette. But all this is external. And this was soon forgotten when Mass began. I cannot tell you the impression it made, words cannot express the truth. It was already a bit of the celestial city; at any rate it is the Church...Then work began; interventions and votes. I was afraid I would not understand but a Dominican was given the task of translating for us what was being said. He did this in such a simple and fraternal way that it was not at all embarrassing and we could follow everything perfectly...Tomorrow morning the new auditors have to arrive 15 minutes earlier to take the oath. I suppose this is the oath not to reveal what is said at the Council, so this will limit my effusive outpourings..."

Mother Guillemin added this observation: *"As we entered St. Peter's, a most moving spectacle attracted our attention. In the transept, where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved, were many of the Council Fathers in prayer, preparing for confession. One or two hundred of them were there, either on their knees in adoration or standing in line, waiting near the confessionals that bore a sign indicating their language, before humbly kneeling to receive absolution. In the midst of the Bishops in prayer, some Protestant observers could be seen, in particular the two Taize Brothers, plunged in deep adoration. One felt oneself bathed in an atmosphere of ardent supplication to the Holy Spirit, of common searching, in a word, of ecumenism..."*

Mother Guillemin described the mornings during the Council as a long meditation on the concerns of the Church, which gave her a much broader vision of the world.

The schema on religious life was making progress. Before voting, the bishops requested further clarifications. Cardinal Marty of the diocese of Paris asked the help of Mother Guillemin. She agreed to speak on the matter, having reflected on this at length over the years. The African Bishops would request this same conference at the beginning of the following year.

Here is the complete text of her conference to the Bishops of France in Rome on October 26th 1964:

CONFERENCE TO THE BISHOPS OF FRANCE IN ROME, OCTOBER 26th 1964

PROBLEMS IN THE LIFE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS

INTRODUCTION

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

I would first like to point out that we shall be speaking here only of the **active religious life**, leaving aside for the moment everything that concerns the contemplative religious life, with which I am not very familiar, although I know enough about it to be able to foresee grave difficulties for it. It is important to note that contemplative life in the 20th century cannot be lived as it was two or three hundred years ago.

In France, we are concerned about this problem, and the Major Superiors very much wished that a religious representing contemplative life could come and participate in their work. A place had been designated for them in the Commission of the Union of Major Superiors, but the necessary authorisation was never given.

SOME COMMON GROUND

All Congregations are experiencing their darkest hour even those who are not yet fully conscious of it because they are in countries far removed from the crisis.

* The extraordinary changes in the world, in scientific knowledge, technical developments, philosophical thought and ideologies, the socialisation of the world, the improved position of women in society and of the laity in the Church, all these **profoundly transform the social and ecclesial structures** to which we belong.

Obviously, this transformation **affects the mentality of young people** who join us and who will form tomorrow's Congregations. We need to understand, appreciate and assist these young people to **offer the vast potential of their generation to the service of God**, rather than wanting to make them like us.

In the same way, we need to **take another look at our own mentality**, our customs, at times even the structures of our institutions and our ways of acting.

To come into step with the Church and to adapt to the world of today **are matters of life or death** for a Congregation, and what is even more serious, they are a matter of fidelity to or betrayal of its true vocation within the Church.

THE PROBLEMS OF ACTIVE RELIGIOUS LIFE

Are the same as those of other people today

Too often women religious are considered as beings that are apart, withdrawn from the world, knowing nothing about changes in society and hardly feeling their effects.

Now, because the very essence of our life is to be active, **we belong to this world** and in many ways **we experience its evolution just as much as any other person does**. I did not say, because of the active "part" of our life. I said, because of the active "essential nature" of our life. Our religious life is not simply a part of our life, another part of which is action. Our way of seeking God, the manner in which we are united to God and the place where we contemplate him, is precisely in our action, and in the people with whom we come into contact through this action. *"A Sister will go ten times a day to visit the poor, and ten times a day, she will find God there,"* Saint Vincent said.

This must be understood before the problem itself is addressed. People who write about us, who advise us or who are our spiritual directors; too often treat us as though we were enclosed religious. Such a fundamental error distorts the nature of the problem.

Our religious life has its milieu in the world. Consequently, we feel the weight of the world's problems just as our contemporaries do.

Although I could give many examples to illustrate this point, I shall simply sketch a brief outline of what I have learned to be true through my contacts with the poor "average French man". Most of the time this average man is torn between:

- His own capabilities as an average person, and the scientific and technical demands made on him by an almost "superhuman" civilisation.

- His deep personal need for fulfilment and balanced development and the socialisation that appears to reduce his every activity to some degree of slavery.
- His direct and familiar human perception of things within his immediate environment and the multiplication of great universal 'signals' that are transmitted to him on new and different wavelengths.
- His ancestral and sociological thought patterns and the great currents of contemporary thinking that are presented to him by all the propaganda media.
- His natural desire for peace and quiet and the intrusion of noise into his life, as well as the accelerating rhythm of daily activity.

Many demands are being made of him and he is being repeatedly called on to tear himself away from a way of being, living and thinking in order to improve himself. This inner tension which varies, of course, from individual to individual, according to circumstances, appears to be typical of our era which is still impregnated with the characteristics of an old-fashioned civilisation, but is strongly attracted to the radical renewal of everything, to a new order which has not yet found its proper balance.

We religious experience all this just as our contemporaries do: on the one hand, we are tempted to seek support in customs and traditions and a sense of security by basing everything on past experience. On the other hand, we are quite strongly tempted by and attracted to a new conception of things. This concept is still rather vague, but we religious are finally accepting the responsibility which we have, together with all our brothers and sisters, for discovering just what this new conception is to be. It is a situation that is much less comfortable than what preceding generations faced... and much more demanding.

It is in some sense disloyal not to be involved in this quest. Loyalty in our time must be dynamic and never static.

THE PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOUS IN THEIR WORK

Are the same as those of Christians involved in the world

Christians involved in the world work in anticipation of the new order that is coming. **They contribute to the construction of tomorrow's technical and socialised world.** However, they are in a sense detached from this world because of the added dimension of faith that inspires their action. However sincere, however complete their solidarity with the world, Christians must, on many occasions, sever their connection with it in order to be faithful to their baptism. The life of Christians, torn between God and the world because of this faith, can be a scandal to others, but it is also a call that God addresses to the world.

We religious belong to this group of Christians in the world. Before attempting to give witness that is specifically "religious", we must give Christian witness in our life and profession. This is something that we perhaps have forgotten for too long.

Before we think in "religious" terms, or rather to establish a foundation for our religious witness, we must live as Christian technical and professional people in a socialised world. I shall give a few examples of problems this situation causes:

OVERWORK, A CERTAIN NERVOUS TENSION

The religious, particularly the active religious engaged in health care and social work, is often described as overworked, tired and tense. This has often been intended as a reproach. Without doubt, certain "religious" lives justify this criticism (by rejecting different methods of organisation, by refusing to accept collaboration, by refusing to take the necessary time for rest and recreation). However, more often, there is no question of

guilt. For no sensible solution has been found, as yet, to the problem of the radical change in lifestyle demanded by certain completely new situations. But, we may ask, is this something peculiar to religious life? Is there a labourer, a businessman, a doctor or a mother who does not, quite justifiably, deplore the fact that we have “no time to really live anymore”, who is not seeking a way of life that is “more human”?

This involves, of course, reorganising one’s life in a practical way and it is the grave responsibility of religious superiors to make this adaptation possible. But a new asceticism proper to the active religious life is also involved. This way of seeking perfection should be particularly dear to us precisely because it touches the world’s problems, especially those of the worker who is oppressed by a situation that we can remedy only with great difficulty and at a very slow rate.

It is not because of her religious life, but because she belongs to the world, that the active religious feels the problems and stresses typical of our times, to the same degree that these are experienced by the ordinary person and by Christians of the 20th century.

SOCIALISATION AND THE CONSEQUENT NEED FOR COLLABORATION

The religious woman who has chosen a profession must observe its rules and aim at the highest possible level of technical efficiency. She takes on this responsibility in a socialised world, and she sees her activity as closely bound to that of numerous collaborators and members of collateral professions. She finds herself depending on numerous public and private organisations. A whole network of social and administrative obligations, calmly ignored by her predecessors, must be shouldered by the religious as well as by her colleagues. These include administrative and social work, Catholic Action, catechetical and other work, etc., etc.

Daily personal contacts have increased considerably. In the past, the Sister engaged in hospital work was often alone with three or four staff. The doctor who treated all illnesses visited the patients once or twice a day and was venerated as a father.

Today, the Sister in health care sees the hospital team increasing more and more. The religious who holds the position of supervisor in a University hospital centre (CHU) has an average of 175 persons who expect daily care and comfort, or direction and guidance in their work or collaboration with her.

The group she is with might include the following, as in the case with the CHU: 125 patients, 1 chief physician, 4 associates, 10 interns, 16 nurses with a state diploma, 8 nursing assistants, 15 hospital staff, 8 student nurses in their 2nd year of study, 4 student nurses in their 1st year, for a total of **191 people**, not counting medical students, the physiotherapist, the dietician, the two medical secretaries with whom she has daily contact, and without mentioning her contacts with the patients’ families. So the Sister’s area of specific action is steadily expanding, for it is no longer limited to the patient, to the child or to the person in distress. All these people who gravitate around the nun also demand her attention, her active sympathy and all the undefined nuances of attention and interest that one unconsciously expects from religious.

One could also describe in detail the situation of the social worker, the home care nurse, with her difficult problem of arranging her schedule to fit the great demands that exist. I am not speaking so much of the parish-based teacher as she is less of a professional, though perhaps she is even more overextended. She has a great challenge in adjusting her schedule to that of others.

THE SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL WORLD

These new fields of activity are very demanding and they conceal many dangers. Within our professional and human teams, we collaborate primarily as technicians. We share with our contemporaries a certain intellectual energy that results from the many

new discoveries, leading to what has been called “medical determinism”. The hospital setting **easily becomes destructive of faith**, for it is a setting where nature is tamed and death often defeated, where human intelligence continues to accomplish what was formerly thought impossible. The religious who works there must have deep theological roots that spring from enlightened doctrine and from her own deep spiritual life. Otherwise she will lose her Christian outlook on people and events.

The patient, who is in a disturbingly technical environment which will probably save his or her life, urgently needs something even more important than this. For example:

In a recently opened hospital, a new piece of equipment was installed to monitor the patients’ temperature, pulse and blood pressure, and simultaneously record them in a room adjacent to the recovery room. If there was a sudden change in a patient’s condition, a signal would alert the nurse on duty. One night the Sister in charge, not content with simply observing the monitor screen, entered the room where she expected to find the patient in a semi-conscious state. To her great surprise, he was anxiously looking at the door. Unable to speak, he grasped the Sister’s apron with his hand, as his eyes indicated the chair beside his bed.

This mixture of demands on the Sister, a combination of professional techniques and the personal attention required by the patient, obliges the Sister to be constantly on the alert. Her participation in the scientific development of the profession she engages in, as a duty of justice towards sick persons, must not lessen her awareness of the human person as both a human being and a child of God. Her attitude often shapes the spirit of the team with which she works, for they need her example to remain mindful of the psychological and spiritual needs of those who are sick as well as of their obvious biological needs. (Her presence is at times disquieting but always a reminder.)

This teamwork also poses problems within the hospital itself. The Director, master of science and technical organiser, is blindly obeyed. And if he wishes to collaborate closely with those who form his team and unite them in common thinking, as many do today, he is revered almost as a god. The hospital team takes shape around him, united in their efforts to reach a common goal, focused on the same purpose, and so strong ties are formed as a result. The Sister spends most of her life as a member of this team. Between the other members of the team and the Sister herself, strong spiritual and even sentimental ties are formed (which I do not wish to condemn here.) But how strong and how balanced her community life must be – so that community ties and that unique love of Christ which forms the basis of her chastity may remain strong within her.

NEED FOR ONGOING FORMATION AND SPECIALISATION

In our day and age, formation is never truly complete. The religious is unceasingly being urged towards a new order, to further discovery of technical and scientific progress. She must constantly improve her qualifications and continually raise her level of achievement.

An example of this occurred when a medical supervisor in a university hospital was sent by her superior to a nursing school for training that would increase her competence in the position she already held, as well as confer the necessary diploma. It was soon decided, however, to extend her area of responsibility to include patients suffering from metabolic illnesses. This is a specialised field that requires knowledge of renal pathology in particular and all metabolic disturbances in general. This extra responsibility could only be taken on by a supervisor who is very familiar with dietetics, special medications, methods of blood purification, artificial kidneys, etc. Immediately after her return with the diploma of supervisor, this Sister left again for the specialised training mentioned above, without which she would have found it impossible to direct the work of her own team of nurses collaborating with the medical team.

Like all other people today, the religious must constantly seek to improve her professional qualifications required by modern society. She must keep up-to-date in her field, be familiar with the latest developments and yet not yield to the love of knowledge for its own sake. She must maintain her own way of living in a technical world; she must humanise technology in a world that risks becoming enslaved by technology. She must integrate this scientific achievement into her own role, which is one "of service". For the professional, the occupation dominates, while for the religious, her occupation is and must be a vehicle of love. Could it not be that **knowing how to use technical progress** - with humanity's good as its sole purpose and with a focus on attention and understanding for the patient, in other words, charity – that this is an indirect way of proclaiming the presence of God?

Finally, **THE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING THE APOSTOLATE** will also bring to light a series of new problems.

I shall give just two brief examples without commenting on them, both taken from hospital life which is so rich in human experience.

In the past, hospital Sisters were taught to concern themselves with the patient's good for the duration of his or her hospital stay; to do everything possible to lead the patient to receive the sacraments. In short, as Saint Vincent said, "*to prepare the patient for a good death and, if he is regaining health, for a better life.*" Religious detachment and the need for time-saving efficiency ruled out any continuation of relationships with patients who had left the hospital.

Today, by the grace of God and ...technical progress, fewer and fewer people who come to the hospital actually die there. The hospital stay has been greatly shortened and the Sister is less likely to hope for an on-the-spot conversion than to make her small contribution to the work of God's grace, and generally, to help the patient acquire a sense of direction. A surgeon who was also a great Christian once told a group of Sisters: "*We must create bonds with our patients, and around them. They must never leave the hospital without having established contact with someone from their parish, either a priest or an involved lay minister*" and he explained how this was to be achieved. This is relatively easy in a medium-sized hospital, but what about our huge university hospitals!

Likewise in the past, the religious influence that was present in the hospital, in the school and in all personal contacts and exchanges was thought to be "Sister's responsibility." It was her work. It was Sister who assisted the dying, who taught catechism, and who entered the family circle to speak about God.

Today, this privilege (if it really was a privilege) is no more. The awakening of the laity to its apostolic responsibilities has ended this monopoly. As a result, wherever a religious may go, she will have to think in terms of collaboration, and avoid acting alone. Her role will often be that of preparing, supporting or extending the role of the laity.

In the hospital, Christian nurses are claiming their spiritual responsibilities.

In schools, lay teachers want to give religious instruction.

The young and old, in any situation, relate much more readily to an actively involved person from their own milieu than to a Sister.

If this is not understood and accepted by religious, it can create frustrations for them...

Some Sisters begin to doubt their own vocation, or the future of, or need for, religious vocations. A young Sister professed for a few years recently said: "*I really do want to give my life, but I don't want to give it for something that is useless and has no future.*" She had not yet understood that one does not give one's life to something, but to Someone.

At this point we come to **THE PROBLEM OF VOCATIONS**

I shall only touch on this subject. Not that I think it unimportant or not a current concern; on the contrary, it is an urgent problem of vital importance. But it does not seem to me to be an isolated problem, however, unrelated to other factors. I believe in the enduring nature of religious life in the Church. Consequently, I believe that vocations to the religious life exist even at the present time. I also believe in today's young people and in their generosity. It is not that God does not want vocations or that he does not call people, or that there are not young people ready to answer this call.

I dare to say that it is not even the sins and failings of religious congregations that create irreparable obstacles. I do not feel that we are so much more deficient and guilty than the generations that preceded us.

Yet, without our having realised it, a sort of trench has been dug between us and the world. We have remained immobile, and the world has moved forward, and the Church has moved forward, and we are a little...behind.

There are differences of opinion, ways of acting and language between the world and us, which hamper our coming into contact with one another, or at least, not frequently enough to enter into communion.

The vocations problem is a consequence of many other problems I have just mentioned and the fact that religious congregations have not adapted to them.

THE PROBLEM OF ADAPTATION

This problem of adaptation has been so often and so well addressed that it is difficult to know how we should approach it.

I will begin with an initial observation that I believe is very important. Why is it almost instinctive among most religious, because of a rather strange mental process, to equate **the idea of adaptation with that of slackening**? This is extremely unfortunate for two very different reasons: on the one hand the adaptation that is so necessary is considered dangerous by the more fervently traditional but rather unenlightened members. On the other hand, this adaptation is seen by some Sisters of dubious apostolic zeal as liberation from all constraint.

When the word "adaptation" is used, one immediately thinks of external changes, such as dress, living quarters, behaviour, language, etc. All this is of secondary importance and should only be the result of true adaptation.

There are other external changes that are of much greater importance: the adaptation of religious life and prayer formulas to the direction taken by the Church. The adjusting of schedules to meet the need of the apostolate, the way of relating to the family (visits, assistance in times of need) and with the world (rules of contacts, collaboration, meals, etc.) use of modern forms of media, radio, television, newspapers, journals, reading material, etc.

If we attempt to study each of these problems one by one, we soon see that they will not be solved if we remain on the level of formal rules. The only real solution is in the spirit that must animate the decisions that are made, from a general and widely applicable perspective that is also able to serve as a guide for each particular situation.

This is the same as saying that **the problem of adaptation is essentially one of conversion.**

It is not a question of changing a way of doing something, variations in methods, but rather it is a question of being converted, of going from our habitual ways of thinking to a new way of seeing, understanding and finally acting. These thought patterns are

sometimes centuries old; they were appropriate in their day because they corresponded to a certain situation that existed in the past. These perspectives are no longer applicable; at times they are only a distortion, through increased rigidity or exaggeration of what was originally intended.

These perspectives must be re-addressed and verified by what could be called the two poles of our conversion: the original inspiration of our founders and the Church's present studies.

For example: every congregation should examine, from time to time, whether its observance of the vow of poverty has remained what their founders intended it to be. This examination, however, must not stop there, for it must be adapted to the sort of pastoral poverty that is being sought by the Church today.

I do not believe in a conversion of a congregation that only refers to the founders, nor one that is solely done from the perspective of the Church today.

It seems to me that if one or the other is forgotten, mistakes will be made. The one must be interpreted in light of the other. Each congregation has its own particular characteristics, of course, but after all, our founders wanted only to teach us the Gospel. I believe that all can subscribe to the trend of conversion being outlined both by the changes in the world and by the guidelines of the Church.

If she wants to be faithful to the world, to Christ and to the Church, and consequently, to her founders,

THE RELIGIOUS WOMAN TODAY IS INVITED TO MOVE AWAY FROM A:

- situation of possession to one of insertion;
- position of authority to one of collaboration;
- complex of religious superiority to a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood;
- complex of human inferiority to a genuine participation in life;
- preoccupation with moral conversion to a missionary attitude.

It must be said that this entails a true turnabout from our traditional position, and a long and persistent spiritual preparation. We must also realise that we shall have to make some very difficult decisions. We must also be completely persuaded of the fact that to refuse this conversion is to go in the opposite direction from the one taken by the world and the Church...and to condemn ourselves to assuming the consequences.

Let us go into more detail:

Some decades ago, religious quietly took possession of certain types of work and the Sisters' authority within the boundaries of this work went unchallenged.

In any locality, the community of Sisters caring for the sick did so without any competition, they were admired by all, and generally maintained a monopoly on this type of work. Now, a Sister is faced with established organisations for family work and home assistants, with nurses practising in the homes of the sick. She will "insert herself" into this group; she must be aware of the need for diplomas, be familiar with the laws of the profession and the need for loyal collaboration. She no longer "dominates" in this kind of service to her neighbour; she "inserts herself" into it, and often she is financially and numerically at a disadvantage. It is her quality of being a religious that makes her different from the others, and which still accords her, one must admit, most of the time, a preference and confidence based more on age-old custom than on reason; this will probably not last.

In hospitals, the community in the past formed the “nursing body” of the institution; it would not have occurred to anyone to introduce a lay nurse; and when this became a necessity, the hired nurses were at a lower level, and were under the direction of a Sister “possessing” the position and responsibility of supervisor by moral and administrative rights (by convention). And the Sister began to “possess” **her** nurses, as she had previously possessed **her** employees, **her** sick persons, etc.

We must come down from this pedestal and let go of this privilege. At present, there are about twenty Sisters for every two hundred nurses in a hospital, and in the new hospital contract, the same process of access to positions of authority applies to both the laity and the Sisters. We now have some young Sisters who work under lay direction. This situation is not without problems... (We also have, in Algeria, some Sisters who work humbly under the direction of their former assistants, and who have taken on the task of training them how to exercise their authority.)

If we examine the school situation, we find some of the same basic problems, although they differ because they occur in private sectors, where we still hold financial and administrative control, at least with regard to the degree of freedom allowed by the contracts. There also, however, religious are no longer “the teaching body”; they serve along with teachers who outnumber them by 80 to 90 %. And we will encounter the problem of the A.E.Ps. Should these appoint staff and administer the institutions? And should we not be carrying out our teaching responsibilities in collaboration with the lay teachers and with the parents?

If we consider the direct apostolate of religious education, for example, we find analogous situations; formerly, a catechumen was confided to a religious who, once the instruction was over, presented the person for an examination conducted by the clergy; he was **her** catechumen. Now, the Sister is inserted into her role, whatever it may be, according to each particular situation, within a group of adult catechumens; the catechumen does not belong to the Sister, but to the Church.

There is no more possession, no more authority; instead there is insertion and collaboration.

This movement towards a new order is irreversible; it comes from motives much deeper than the pursuits of one person or one group; it is not the result of one school of thought; this movement springs from a social, historical and verifiable evolution. In today’s reality, whether it is industrial or commercial, social or pedagogic, the people working in that situation want to be responsible for its management, organisation and guidance, and, it must be said, they have every right to do so.

There are several ways in which to handle this experience. One way would be to look back with regret at the loss of the old order, mistakenly hoping for its return, while holding on to it with all one’s strength, whenever this still seems possible.

There is another way that involves seeing this evolution as the Lord’s call to a life that is much more authentically Gospel-oriented and then following its direction. One can “dig one’s heels in” with a negative attitude; or one can enter into the game of history, **into God’s game**, with joy and admiration along the way.

How easy it is to establish a link between these demands to give up ownership, and true poverty of spirit. In individual situations, personal and daily difficulties, there is no one way of responding with the right attitude or making the correct response, that is determined once and for all. Rather, for each situation, the correct response will emerge from deeply held attitudes, a state of interior poverty, and a letting go of possessions in a way that we will become accustomed to living. It is our actions and ways of living that reveal whether we are possessive or are poor in spirit.

The religious who is poor in spirit is someone who accepts sharing responsibilities with her professional colleagues, who can step aside to allow another religious or a lay collaborator to have influence.

This poverty must be our greatest form of witness. Poverty governs everything and is confirmed or negated by all our actions. It is rarely an isolated act that causes poverty to be recognised as a sign of God and a call to faith. At the same time, an isolated act that appears to be contrary to poverty immediately attracts people's attention, causing a reaction that stigmatises the religious and giving a negative witness. It requires repeated actions and unanimity among the members of a community for the religious to be cleared of this negative interpretation.

We all bear the weight of the problem of communal poverty, which comes from the apparent luxury of our buildings and the influence yielded by our institutions.

Perhaps an element of solution may be found in the current changes in the ways our activities are carried out and in works being taken over by society. The act of moving away from the sense of mystery that surrounded us in the past, one that continues to hide still too frequently the book-keeping done in our communities, to offer our budgets for public verification. Will the clear evidence of communal poverty be affirmed by the possibility of allowing the management of our schools, social services and other works to be entrusted to other persons, whenever it is prudent to do so? Will the scandal of wealth disappear when it is obvious, visible and able to be verified by everyone that the community only uses modest resources to maintain its standard of living; if the carrying out of its works and improvements to the institution are the fruits of the community's efforts and are in some way the responsibility of the users (even if the goods and funds continue to belong to the community)? What change of attitude or spirit does this require?

However, it is in a communal way that our congregations must let go of positions of possession and authority. It is correct to say that too often we have had the perspective of "community" and the interests of the community, without thinking enough about "Church". No community is an end in itself; it has no meaning and reason for being other than through its belonging to the Church and its vocation within the Church. Each community's life, development and recruitment are only justified by the measure in which it is needed by the Church. This is in no way an attack, it seems to me, on the interests and vocation unique to each Institute. It is precisely the opposite. This is not the way to approach the call for vocations: Let us put anxiety aside, however great it might be, as well as community needs such as they are (that is never a way to justify somebody dedicating their life) in order to transmit to young people the Lord's call, the call of the Church to fulfil the roles that need to be filled in the world. How much more urgent and more authentic would such a call be.

This is not opportunism, it is not manipulation, it is simply doctrinal truth.

The other area of conversion involves our relationships with those we formerly called "our poor" and who today we should call "our brothers and sisters". Much was said in the Council on the subject of clericalism; there is a similar phenomenon that has invaded our spiritual perspectives and our activities.

We have believed, all in good faith, that we have a monopoly on charity and spiritual influence. It is commonplace now to say that we must renounce all **maternalistic attitudes**, to listen as well as receive, to promote personal initiative rather than taking others' places and taking care of them. We need to discover all the Lord does in the "other". The era of benevolent ladies has passed; now we are called to live in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in our midst, as far as this is possible, striving to understand their problems and accompany them in their life. I think each community must ask each day for this grace of fraternity with all those they are in contact with each day. It is by doing this that we shall find the right note to strike in for relationships.

On the other hand, we need to move out of a type of human inferiority complex in order to participate very simply in the lives of the people and organisations with whom we are called to cooperate. Here we are touching on the second criticism commonly addressed to religious: **infantilism**.

It is no longer appropriate to guard the Sisters from every harmful contact with the world. Instead, formation of the mind and soul must take place to allow Sisters to be informed of events and contemporary thinking, by way of modern means of communication, to promote open and normal relationships.

Finally, apostolic aims themselves have undergone notable changes as a result of a de-Christianised environment. The concern of earlier generations was for **moral conversion**, leading back to God those Christians who had abandoned him.

Now it is more often a question of presenting God and revealing the Gospel; it is a **missionary spirit that must dominate**. This priority is not brought about only in teaching, which can rarely be provided, but rather is shown by our whole lives.

Each religious and each local community should have this missionary attitude, knowing that each one is responsible for proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel. There is much study to be done on this point which is of fundamental importance. It seems to me that we need to work on this missionary spirit in the religious in France; so that they may experience it and feel responsible, as Church, for the call to faith: that they become aware that their way of living, their attitudes, that the choices they make in all domains, have repercussions that they cannot imagine.

(It needs to be said that the life of religious is constantly on display. Very few actions or attitudes escape the notice of different groups of people: in the districts where they go through the streets, in the families where they care for the sick, in the classroom, in hospital service, in social or administrative services, the very fact of wearing a habit draws attention to them, and gives rise to favourable or unfavourable judgments that seek confirmation. (In the eyes that observe them or look away from them unspoken demands are always being made)

Whose life is more public than ours and less understood in its deepest reality? Religious life and the true meaning of the vows are less and less understood by our contemporaries, in spite of a certain degree of publicity. It is the attraction to mystery, a curiosity about what is hidden, more than any authentic religious attraction that draws crowds to the films and novels that claim to shed light on "what goes on" inside convents or the souls of religious. Perceptions like these are more or less what is projected on to religious when other people meet them.

It is certainly true that demands are made on religious life. These exigencies are not clearly understood and do not come from a faith perspective. They often spring from unconscious desires which have little to do with genuine religious values but correspond rather with sensitive issues specific to our times.

Where and how, then, can we nourish real spiritual contact that could ignite a spark of faith? This is the mystery of God at work. Our responsibility is simply to remove obstacles and to create favourable conditions. We do not speak the same language as people who listen to us, and what we believe to be signs often have no meaning for them.

In the face of such demands, it no longer suffices "to be" a deeply fervent religious, without striving to express this "being" through language and signs that are meaningful for people who see how we live.

These signs will only be meaningful if it is clear that we belong to the world; if the religious woman joins with those around her in ongoing concern for their social and professional problems: efforts to improve their situation, strikes, trade unions, etc; if she

shows her concern and sensitivity for other people's human problems: expenses, housing, children's future, etc.; if she presents herself as one who is there to help and support, seeking dialogue and sharing. If she does not distance herself from people by the way she speaks or by attitudes and customs that have become outdated and are not in keeping with our times and which even cause astonishment. Bishop Menager said one day in relation to this: *"There is a mystery about religious life that is in no way evangelising."*

A degree of similarity of life style and a manner of being profoundly human are indispensable conditions that give an evangelical meaning to the "rupture" entailed by the Vows. We need to be imbued with this missionary attitude.

So then, if the problem of adaptation is basically a problem of conversion, we can say that it is a problem of formation.

THE PROBLEM OF FORMATION

The real problem is that of formation and we must be willing to sacrifice everything for this. Other problems will then be solved.

Formation within Communities

This area of formation is not limited to formation given in noviciates or juniorates and the formation of young Sisters; nor is it a question of extending it to different spiritual renewal stages such as the 3rd year.

In the times in which we live, marked by a wide gap between formation received 20 or 30 years ago and the situations and demands of the present day, **the work of formation must extend to the entire Congregation**. It is up to each one to find the appropriate form: in-depth sessions, consecutive days of formation, etc. It can be envisaged according to stages of membership or professional groups. Both have their advantages, and the best way is to make use of one or the other method of grouping so as not to create any segregation. No Sister should feel excluded from the efforts to change; everyone must know that she is included, involved and plays an active part. She needs to know she is being "listened to", which is essential.

A major problem is that of the **formation of local Superiors**, including Sisters who will have this responsibility in the future, ones beginning to take on this role and those who have exercised authority for a long time. One of the greatest difficulties for our generation is the wide disparity that exists between the formation received by the Superiors in charge and that given to young Sisters today. This is a source of suffering on the part of both, and is also at the root of many vocation crises. We must make every attempt to re-adjust the mindset of local Superiors to "the present time". Here again, this calls for special retreats, sessions, formation days and dialogues...

In one of these formation sessions a psychologist said: *"Formation of authority figures is not achieved by courses and conferences, at least not exclusively; it is done by dialogue. It involves reflection, in groups of 8 or 10 at the most, on an authority issue recently experienced."*

What is said about problems of authority can be applied to other issues as well. I believe that the evolution of a congregation will proceed in a satisfactory manner and more quickly if the Major Superiors in charge of it make these dialogues one of their most urgent priorities.

I will now say a few words about the conditions for formation in general and offer some practical guidelines but as we are thinking here about **the novitiates in particular**, I will be focusing on a few of the most sensitive points:

- Need for deep theological foundations,
- formation aimed at creating adults,

- formation given “in the Church”,
- formation that is open to life.

Regarding the need for **deep theological foundations**, I quote a young woman of 32 years of age, who left after a trial period in the novitiate, feeling disappointed: *“It seems to me that the Lord is calling me to total consecration, but with a ‘rethought’ theology of poverty and obedience.”*

That is the heart of the issue: the evolution and “conversion” of our congregations is played out around teaching that is “rethought” in relation to current apostolic situations.

Above all, I would quote the uneasiness surrounding the question of obedience. Naturally, doctrinal formation must focus on the whole picture: dogma (which is very important), morals, social doctrine, etc., but the question of Vows is essential.

In the novitiate, formation must aim at **making the religious an adult**. There is no longer any room in our houses for little girls. We need, in our profession, in our life of faith, in our consecrated and apostolic life, adult Sisters, that is, those who are capable of taking responsibility for their daily difficulties. This reinforces the priority to be given to providing doctrinal foundations, formation of mind and judgment, rather than teaching prepackaged solutions.

Formation given “in the Church”. The young woman quoted above said bitterly: *“I would never be able to think ‘Congregation’ before thinking ‘Church’.”* That is very fortunate!

From the time of the novitiate onwards, a person’s insertion into the Church as a member of the congregation must be verified. Formation must “stick fast” to the current teachings of the Church; it must draw its strength, its reality and its examples from there. It is up to the novice mistress in her instructions to make real the synthesis between the spirit of the founders and the voice of the Church, without overlooking the Church on the national level which is becoming more and more a legally constituted reality.

It seems that this is the only condition that ensures not only that our young members will benefit from our novitiates, but even more so, that our formation will not be a deformation, and that it will prepare them for future insertion into the smaller local Church where they will be working.

Formation that is open to life. There is much more to be said about this. Let us note that the essential condition lies in the choice of novice mistresses. They need to be fully in touch with humanity and to have already integrated their personal religious life – apostolic life

More than being simply an organisation that provides instruction, the novitiate has to pervade all the teachings that must have already formed the novice so that she can integrate into the framework of her religious life all the human elements that make up her personal life.

Of course, the way we do this is important as well: information on major regional and global problems, reflection on social events and other matters etc.

Inter-formation of congregations by means of Unions

I will speak only briefly about **collaboration among congregations** with regard to the formation of their members. It should also be noted that this has come about because of changes in religious life within a country. **That is essential.**

This collaboration has already resulted in a significant number of concrete enterprises, such as a school of psycho-pedagogical formation for specialised teachers,

and a Catholic school of nursing that is directed by several congregations. Moreover, this has led to the ongoing development of national and diocesan initiatives: sessions and courses in doctrinal, professional or pastoral formation.

These initiatives generally proceed from specialised Unions, whose greatest value is that they provide opportunities for dialogue and bringing together findings from each congregation, all of which allows for discreet but indispensable inter-formation. We could mention in passing the activities of the Union of Major Superiors to assist smaller congregations; for a number of years, day gatherings have been organised for them where they study their problems in an atmosphere that respects the freedom of each one. These gatherings have made possible the organising of common novitiates, and have even led to the merging of some congregations whose limited numbers no longer allow them to remain independent.

These Unions are also a way of coming together at national and diocesan levels. These are not organisations closed in on themselves, focusing only on their own development. Rather, they must increasingly become means of contact and connection with the hierarchy, even more than with civil authorities. They provide times for meeting together in an organised way and encourage openness to the spirit and directives of the national or diocesan Church. It is largely due to the Unions that the French congregations have been able to maintain contact with the Church, receive its teachings, absorb its spirit, and as a result, begin the process of change that must be continued. Perhaps in an almost imperceptible but real way, we have been able to gradually absorb the thinking of our bishops through their words and writings and by the encouragement of the priests delegated by them. At times this has happened almost without our realising it. We know that we owe a great deal to the Church in France.

SITUATIONS THAT BRING PROBLEMS

Nevertheless, there is a problem of present day circumstances that needs to be addressed: because in the long run, if this is not dealt with, all the efforts at adaptation and formation will basically be useless.. I will confine the problem to three broad areas:

Decreasing numbers

The numbers of religious in France are decreasing at a significant and rapid rate. A single statistical example suffices for us to understand the situation: there are 6000 fewer religious than there were 5 years ago. In short, this must be translated into the closing of about 600 houses, because for many years, all possible cutbacks have already been made within the local communities.

The recruitment of new members seems to replace only one third of the number of deceased members. It should be pointed out, however, that although we are fewer in number the quality of candidates on a human level is improving. I would not go so far as to say they have better Christian values, because in spite of greater spiritual demands being made on them, the lack of basic Christian formation is one of the biggest difficulties in our novitiates.

The crisis of trust

This represents the most acute form of suffering that religious, in general, have to face. It presents itself under two forms:

People questioning the apostolic value of educational and charitable institutions (I include in this category all health and social services);

Questioning the place of religious in positions that lay persons can fill just as competently as religious can. Her role, it is said, is to pray; anything else will be tolerated only as a temporary stopgap.

And what makes this situation even more acutely painful is that we do not find this outlook among non-Christians, who still support us, but it comes rather from militant lay Christians and especially from the clergy.

We have to deal with this sort of disapproval in every area of our life, and it is something we have to teach our young religious to cope with. How can we explain to them that after enjoying the complete confidence of their priests when they worked with them as members of the laity, they now find themselves met by misgivings as soon as they present themselves as a religious? How can we strengthen them in the face of doubt that will inevitably assail them when they hear, for example, a priest saying to a group of young people: "all the same, you wouldn't want to be 'good Sisters' would you?"

I know that a reaction is beginning to surface. But how long will it take to reshape people's thinking? Religious would like to move into dialogue and collaboration with the laity and the clergy.

Necessary options

These options have become indispensable because of declining numbers, on the one hand, and changes in ministries that have taken place

All the Major Superiors are currently experiencing an ongoing temptation (at least this is true of those Institutes which allow for diversity): "since at the present time only direct service of people is valued, since this attracts the largest numbers of vocations and since it presents far fewer difficulties than other forms of service, let us withdraw from schools and hospitals and devote ourselves to doing some sort of work in the locality, or catechetics, etc."

But this gives rise to important questions: it means abandoning the world of education, abandoning the world of the sick, the health and social services, and all the extended services these provide for national and international organisations. And will there really be lay Christians to take over these positions? And even if there are, do not religious have a specific role to fill in these privileged places of human suffering, that is, our hospitals and hospices and with children and adolescents?

Each of our congregations and each of our women religious, experience this anxiety to a greater or lesser degree. The field of action for religious grows smaller each day in France so options have to be made. The presence of religious can and must be maintained only if this is worthwhile. It is necessary to choose between roles and positions: (home care, hospitals, social services, care of the elderly, children at risk). Do we opt for leadership positions where we can exert a greater influence on the establishment, or do we choose to have secondary roles that bring us closer to sick persons or children. Without playing down the role of "the creative imagination, fruit of the Holy Spirit", which is something we hope all Superiors will have, we do not advocate the right to act alone in making decisions that will have repercussions on the options made by the Church in France. We would run the risk of making random decisions if we did not see things on a broader scale. Without fearing that the particular objectives of our congregations might be lost, we expect our bishops to point us towards the most urgent needs, and to tell us what the Church in France expects from the considerable resource that religious still represent. We wholeheartedly hope for the development of improvements in the ways the hierarchy and representatives of our congregations relate to one another.

In conclusion, it seems necessary to say that if our bishops do not take a stand in supporting the need for religious life in the ministry sectors that they decide upon, religious life will decline. Religious life is not an isolated reality that only concerns itself and is self-maintaining. It can only survive if it is connected to the Church and effectively desired by the Church. Religious life will only continue if the Church and the bishops

influence people's opinion of it, allow its voice to be heard in Christian homes, and by young people who seek to give themselves to God as a call to play a role in the Church.

Finally, nothing will take place unless the bishops want it to happen; it is they who hold in their hands the fate of religious life in France.

(To be continued)

Sister Claire HERRMANN
Archives Service

COVER

OUTLINE OF THE CONFERENCE GIVEN BY MOTHER GUILLEMIN TO THE BISHOPS OF FRANCE

THE PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE AND ACTIVE LIFE

These problems are similar to those faced by

- people all over the world today
- committed Christians in the world
- there are particular problems arising from our Consecration, from the religious life.

These problem are

professional
religious
apostolic

The difficulty of recruiting new members is a consequence of these problems

The problem of adaptation

Means that external changes have to be made, some of these are of relatively minor importance: - the habit, discarding outdated practices - and others that are very important; prayer life and forms of prayer, ways of relating to the world. This is, basically, a problem of conversion, that is to say, of moving away from an outlook that has lasted for centuries but which now distorts the original insights of the Founders and the image that the Church wants to present to the world today.

The woman religious is invited to move on from a

- situation of ownership to one of insertion
- position of authority to one of collaboration
- religious superiority complex to a sense of fraternity
- human inferiority complex to genuine participation in life
- preoccupation with moral conversion to having a missionary attitude

SO THERE ARE TWO BASIC ISSUES:

The real problem is that of formation and we must be willing to sacrifice everything for this. Other problems will then be overcome.

- Formation within communities
- Inter-formation of Congregations with the help of Unions of Superiors

But there some situations where problems can only be resolved by the bishops. It is up to them to say how they want to deploy the women religious of France.

Direct or indirect ministries....starting up ministries

Current representation of women religious in France: statistics, professional and official posts.

Commitment of women in the active religious life

- In spite of being “separated from the world” are they not in a privileged position of proximity to it?
- How can this lead to a genuine insertion into the Church’s ministry?