

July-August 2008

Spiritual Life

Letter of 15th August 2008
Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General

“Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope you all have” (1.P. 3,15)
Father Javier Alvarez, Director General

Letter of 18th July 2008
To all the members of the Vincentian Family
Father Gregory Gay, Superior General

The Eucharist at the school of Mary
Father Guillaume de Menthier, professor of Mariology and Patristic Studies

Present day challenges

Introduction

“Serving with creativity and compassion people who are in prison.”
Province of Los Altos Hills (California)
Sister Christina Maggi, Daughter of Charity

The International Committee of the Daughters of Charity on “human trafficking”
Albany Province
Sisters Donna M Franklin and Joanne Dress, Daughters of Charity

News from the Provinces

Visit from Superiors

Sister Evelyne Franc and Sister Blanca Libia Tamayo, General Councillor;
Visit to the Province of Bolivia
Sister Andrea Emcerita Medina, Daughter of Charity

Testimonies given by the Sisters

Province of Northern India: “Empowering ethnic young women”
Sister Rosalie Palayoor, Daughter of Charity

Motherhouse, Paris
Meeting of newly appointed Provincial Directors
Father Ferdinand Macias Fernandez, Provincial Director in Chile

The words of “a prophet, bearer of hope”
Love is a powerful force! *“My faith saved me”*

(extract from the publication “Pilgrim” n° 6554)

History of the Company

In St. Vincent's days.....and in our own times

Introduction

Vincent de Paul and the Holy Spirit

1 Holy Spirit, who are you?

Father Jean Morin, CM

SISTER EVELYNE FRANC, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of 15th August 2008

Dear Sisters,

*“Just as the Mother of Jesus, glorified in body and soul in heaven, is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come, so too does she shine forth...as **a sign of sure hope and solace** to the people of God during its sojourn on earth.” LG 68*

I confide to Mary, *a sign of sure hope and solace*, my prayers for your intentions as we celebrate the Feast of the Assumption. These prayers are in thanksgiving for all the mail that I have been receiving recently, assuring me of your prayers and describing your joys and sufferings in the service of our brothers and sisters who are poor. All these messages show how dedicated you are to the Company, to your Provinces and local communities, and how much you want to share your experiences and your hopes with all Daughters of Charity. You also expressed how grateful you are for this time of participation in your Domestic and Provincial Assemblies. I join you in giving thanks to God.

Several weeks ago, I had the joy of accompanying Sister Wivine Kisu, General Councillor, on a visit to our Sisters in Eritrea, for whom I have often requested your prayers. How moving it was to see at first hand the difficulties that they are facing due to the country's economic deterioration and very tense political situation. At the same time, I witnessed their courage and unwavering dedication to those who are poor through their works in education, health and social services, works of humanisation and evangelisation. The Sisters give a beautiful example of the trust in Divine Providence, in keeping with the Vincentian charism that Saint Justin de Jacobis brought to their land.

At the end of our time there, the first Saturday of August, we participated in a Eucharistic celebration in a Marian Sanctuary, Maryam Dearit, located near the city of Keren. During this outdoor Mass, we prayed particularly for all the young women and men of this country, who are required to participate in the military forces, and who were to be brought together several days after for their final stage of secondary education, where they would undergo a harsh initiation into military life. Together, we confided them to Mary's protection so that their faith would not be shaken. This Sanctuary honours the Blessed Virgin represented by a statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal that was brought to this site by our first Sisters who arrived in the country 130 years ago. The statue is inside a giant baobab tree whose trunk forms a natural cavity large enough to hold about fifteen people at one time. I had the opportunity to stand inside this tree, where I confided the Sisters of Eritrea and the entire Company to Mary, *a sign of sure hope and solace*.

The feast of the Assumption is in fact a great reason for hope for the Church and for all people. Mary experiences already what all believers, the entire Church and humanity in general, hope to share in one day: life in the fullness of God's presence.

To contemplate Mary as *a sign of sure hope and solace* means to recognise and admire in her the woman who believed and hoped, who journeyed from Nazareth to Calvary with a heart full of humble and simple love, always open to God's plan for her. This is an invitation to cultivate our own life of faith and hope, to be nourished by attentive meditation on the Word of God, to welcome it with love, to safeguard it carefully in our heart, to allow it to transform our life as Mary did.

It also calls on us to brave the storms of the present day, times of doubt and uncertainty, difficult moments, holding fast to the firm conviction that *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever* (cf. Heb. 13:8) and that *He has conquered the world* (cf. Jn. 16:33). Supported by the Word of God, we will be continually challenged to plough new furrows of commitment and fidelity in order to be more fully present wherever there are hearts in need of love.

Contemplating Mary as *a sign of sure hope and solace* motivates us in our total gift of self to God. God was able to work wonders in Mary's life because she allowed herself to be fashioned by the Holy Spirit. We are also called to live as she did, open to God's will, so that the Holy Spirit may bring about our progressive modelling of self on Christ (cf. C. 49) and living fully and radically our vocation as Daughters of Charity.

Although, unfortunately, I cannot share news from all the Provinces, I can call to mind certain signs of hope gathered from here and there... the assistance provided in Burma thanks to the Sisters in Thailand and the solidarity of the Company, the opening of a new house in the Province of Haiti to serve abandoned people, various centres of the Dream Project in Mozambique, Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya and soon in Congo to serve those suffering from AIDS with gentleness, respect, devotion...and competence. I would also like to mention the good news coming from the interprovincial Seminary in Chile which brings together the Sisters from Argentina, Paraguay and Chile, as well as the generous care given to people at risk in the outskirts of Naples, Italy.

This letter also gives me the opportunity to express the gratitude we all feel towards Sister Claire Herrmann, Archivist, who is so filled with faith and passion for the Company and who for many years has shared with numerous Sisters and members of the Vincentian Family this love for our Founders. Sister Anne Marguerite Fromaget, who is currently serving in the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, has generously accepted to serve as Archivist and will begin after the 2009 General Assembly. We confide the intentions of both of these Sisters to Mary, the only Mother of the Company.

I also place under the protection of Mary, *sign of sure hope and solace*, the process that leads us to the 2009 General Assembly. May Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, Saint Catherine, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and all our Blessed Sisters keep us united in joy and love for our vocation, in the service of those beloved by God!

Devotedly and affectionately, with prayers for each of you,

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

FATHER J. ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

“Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope you all have.”

(I Peter 3,15)

To “have your answer ready” is another way of saying to “evangelise” or to “bear witness”. However, the reasons we give for enlightening others on their faith journey also serve to enlighten us on our way, too. In fact, whether we give or receive, whether we evangelise or are evangelised, we all need to know what our faith is founded on. *“Nobody can give what he or she does not already have.”* This popular saying can be especially true in the matter of hope. So it is essential that we first of all ask ourselves what we can base our hope on and how we can become hope-bearing people.

The Company calls the Daughters of Charity to hope. We need only recall the theme for our Domestic and Provincial Assemblies and for next year’s General Assembly, to realise this. Prophecy and hope are rightly seen to be closely connected because genuine prophecy cannot do otherwise than generate hope. The Old Testament prophets bear witness to this. If the Company is putting before us the theme of hope it is because this is something that our world lacks. For example, there are millions of people whom poverty has reduced to a state of desperation. Wars and violence end by destroying hope for those who suffer. Other factors such as damage to the environment, climate change, crises affecting institutions, and rapid changes in values, contribute to weaken the hope of very many people. In these circumstances we need to remember that the Daughters of Charity were created in the Church and in

society to be an example of hope against a background of despair, distress and poverty. Today the Company has to go on asking itself how to bear witness to hope because poverty is behind all forms of desperation.

THE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN HOPE

If we simply concentrate on externals we might confuse the optimistic person with someone who is living out the virtue of hope. The optimist appears happy, enthusiastic about their work and able to face the future with serenity and even with confidence. But that is not the same as practising the virtue of hope. To realise the difference between these two types of people we have to examine the basis for their convictions: the optimists rely on certain indications that seem to augur a good future, or else they trust in their own capabilities. There are some people who, by their very nature, are not given to despair. Nature has treated them kindly. On the contrary, true hope is founded on God and this can even mean hoping “*against all hope*” (Rm 4,18) as was the case with Abraham whose wife, Sara, was barren, and they were both advanced in age yet they continued to hope for descendants who would be as numerous “*as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore.*”(Gen 22, 17)¹

What optimism and hope have in common is the capacity to direct people’s attention to the future, to make plans and think up projects, to live with one’s sails fully unfurled. Saint Vincent had a good understanding of the strength given to people whose lives are based on the virtue of hope. To his way of thinking, “*loving confidence in God is the strength of the weak and the eyes of the blind.*”² The most visible consequence of the virtue of hope is a sort of permanent youthfulness and creative energy. The person who described hope as “*the elixir of eternal youth*” was not mistaken. On the other hand, when a person has no hope, he or she withers away, dries up and dies.³ The image used by the prophet Ezekiel to describe the state of mind of the Israelites in exile couldn’t be more striking: “*Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are as good as dead*” (Ezk, 37, 11). To be without hope is the nearest thing to being dead.

But to go back to the foundation for Christian hope. As we said before, this foundation can only be God. However, how can we act in a way that shows that the source of our hope is God? We do this to the extent that our lives are based on gospel convictions. And what are these convictions which properly assimilated are able to dynamise people so much that they fill them with life and make them bearers of life and creative energy? They are found in the core messages of the Gospel, as for example, the fact that we have a God who is our Father and who loves us tenderly even when we do not respond to that love (cf. Lk 15, 1-32), that it is possible to practise love and that love alone is able to redeem the human race (cf. 1Cor 13, 1-13), that it is God’s will that there should be peace and justice among nations (cf. Is 2,4) and that any act of charity done for a person in need will be regarded as done to Himself (cf. Mt 25, 31-46); that a person can become reconciled with God, with

¹ Cf. L. GONZALEZ CARVAJAL, *The most powerful people on earth are those who have hope*, in *The Company of the Daughters of Charity at the time of the Assemblies*, Bulletin of St. Vincent’s Province, Madrid, p.11

² III, 139; Letter to Jean Martin, 28th February 1647

³ Cf. L. GONZALEZ CARVAJAL, a.c.11

himself, with others and with nature, and so live in harmony (cf. Gen 2, 1-25); that this life does not come to a complete end but is extended and brings us to the fullness of life (cf. 1 Th 4, 13-15), etc. It was E. Blonch who summarised all these hope-giving truths into a single sheaf of blessings which he called “*the hope principle*.” If this principle takes root in the human heart the individual will be able to build up not just him or herself, but the people around them. We have to stress that Christian hope is not based on fossilised gospel convictions but it is founded on ongoing convictions that are kept fresh and vigorous. It is through daily prayer and the sacraments that a person makes the Good News of the Gospel their own, highlights and reinforces these insights and personalises them by transferring them from the words of Sacred Scripture to everyday life. It is simply not possible for anyone to live without hope if they feel that Jesus Christ is alive and present in this world.

SIGNS OF HOPE

Christians have one single hope and this is founded on Jesus Christ. This is the essential basis of the virtue which penetrates the whole person, conferring a particular colouring and disposition of character, something that has a special attraction for people living together and for evangelisation, particularly when this hope-filled person is also humble. It is not a contradiction to say that in order to arouse and sustain Christian hope, we are justified in seeking signs of hope on the human level. Let us not forget that the Christian virtue of hope can be perceived and expressed in certain hopeful signs we see in our world, and for Daughters of Charity, similar signs within the Company. In his encyclical on hope, Pope Benedict XVI points out the relationship between these lesser hopes and the great hope. This is what he says: “*We need the greater and the lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain.*”⁴

For example, where in this world we live in, will we find prospects of hope? In *Redemptoris missio*, n° 86, John Paul II gives an analysis of the world situation today. He recognises all the negative aspects but he also speaks of five important values that can be found in the vast majority of people in almost every society: rejection of violence and war; respect for the person and for human rights; the desire for freedom, justice and brotherhood; a trend towards overcoming racism and nationalism; safeguarding and adding to the dignity of women and affirming their worth. As well as these values we have to mention the numerous groups of people within and outside of the Church, who work to promote a higher level of social justice or try to create networks of solidarity to help the most disadvantaged. Statute 9 implicitly recognises this positive situation when it invites the Daughters of Charity to cooperate with private or public organisations in order to serve the poor more effectively. All these seeds of hope cannot remain buried under the assumption that our world is a disaster and that everything is going badly. The same must be said of our present day culture, born of the tremendous advances made by the sciences and technology. It is true that in many cases all these have at times been put to bad use but in many other situations they have served to bring improvements. We have to recognise that our culture offers marvellous opportunities for doing good. We need to make intelligent use of the

⁴ *Spe salvi*, n° 31

resources available to us and to happily accept our modern times without feeling nostalgia for anything that could prevent us from grasping the opportunities that our present times offer.

Let us now move on to the Company. It has its bright side and its shadows. We emphasise the bright side because we are now discussing how to recognise signs of hope. In general, people find it easier to see the negative rather than the positive side of situations. It is not at all easy to discern all the nuances of goodness but doing this is a great help in keeping hope alive.

We often see the lack of new vocations as a negative sign. However, we need to look at the different shades of this picture. In central and western Europe and in North America this may be a negative sign but this is not the case in the Provinces of Asia and Africa. It is good to know, for example, that in 2007 the number of Seminary Sisters reached 274. Is not this a small sign of hope for anyone who wants to broaden their horizon beyond the narrow confines of their own Province? We can detect another sign of hope in the number of Sisters in the Company who authentically live out their Christianity and serve others with no other object in mind than to restore hope to so many poor people. All the services they offer are simply a way of expressing that their lives are dedicated to God in the poor. This dedication is based on the silent, day to day offering that so many Daughters of Charity make of themselves. Saint Vincent compared the first Sisters to martyrs because they daily offered their life to Jesus Christ.⁵ As well as these signs we could also mention that the Company is present in places of extreme poverty or in situations of conflict and violence. The courage and generosity of many Daughters of Charity make it possible for the Company to be Good News for countless poor people.

Of course there are many other signs of hope in the Company and I am sure that each Province can recognise its own seeds of hope. I am not in any way claiming to say all that can be said on the subject, I just want to say that it is important to be able to discover the positive side of life, of persons and events, in order to nourish our own hope. It is much easier to highlight the negative side of things and this requires less effort; looking for the positive side is more demanding and requires more awareness and more faith. When we just look on the dark side, our vision is dimmed and could even run the risk of ending in blindness. We have to be able to look also, and more especially, at the positive side of things without exaggerating them but also in a generous way. We need well-balanced realism. Given people's tendency to see the negative side, it would not be a bad idea to "positivise" more our own way of looking at things and our own attitude. Transmitting a positive way of thinking and feeling, and promoting positive attitudes is a way of engendering hope. For the people of Israel, exile was a harsh experience, so much so that they were on the point of falling into despair and disillusionment. However, it was in these circumstances that the second Isaiah wrote the book of consolation. He upbraids the people for their blindness and deafness, for their inability to see and hear what is happening (cf Is 43, 18-19). It is useful to recall this biblical experience in order to avoid the risk of falling into paralysing and sterile pessimism.

⁵ Cf. IX, 418-20, Conference to the Daughters of Charity on love of one's vocation, 25th December 1648

PLACES WHERE WE CAN BUILD HOPE

There are signs of hope in our world but this does not mean that hope is no longer needed. There have to be both signs of hope and hope itself. Behind every fear, every negative situation or every problem lies a lack of hope. It can be said that in our world hope is a necessary commodity but for many people it is in short supply. So an encyclical on hope and salvation, or on “salvation in hope” (*Spe salvi*) is more than justified.

The Company should continue to be an expert in building hope. It was founded in the Church and in society as an example of hope when the climate inside and outside these was one of despair, anxiety, desolation and abandonment of the poor and the marginalised. The Company was like a warm and tender heart in a cold and heartless humanity. What we have said so far is clear and nobody would argue with it but it might prove harder to ask ourselves just where specifically the Company needs to inject hope today. In answering this question we have to take certain things into account. For example, the words of Saint Vincent: he tells us we have to bring hope to those who have no future. Saint Vincent’s hope is the same as the committed hope of Jesus of Nazareth. Secondly, we have to keep in mind the living conditions in places where the Company is serving and working. It seems to me that the following could be some specific places for building hope.

In local communities

For a local community to be a positive milieu for radiating life and energy, it is absolutely essential that the Sisters living in it should be happy in their vocation in spite of their age, social considerations or the sometimes complicated and difficult socio-cultural context in which they find themselves. So, just as individualism and a lack of communication can bring disillusionment and death, communication, sharing life, experiences and difficulties, generate interest and life. When a person feels accepted the burden of loneliness is lifted from them and they feel they have someone with them and this brings life-giving strength. No matter how difficult the person’s situation is or how overwhelmed they feel, if they discover that they are not on their own and that there is somebody they can turn to, then their heart can find hope again. Saint Paul’s recommendation, “*Treat each other in the same friendly way as Christ treated you*” (Rm 15, 7) can be seen as the essential condition for bringing hope into community. It is only in this way that local communities will be able to proclaim the Good News. Moreover, the Sisters themselves will be “Good News” or “sacrament” for people who have no hope. When the local community becomes a place of welcome and where everyone who arrives is treated with courtesy and affection; if some deprived person experiences there a gesture of solidarity, then we can say that the community “can give the answer to people who ask about their hope.” They do this not by words but by actions which speak more directly to people. However, the community cannot be content with simply offering a warm welcome, it must also reach outwards, striving to transform the world in the particular context that each Sister works in.

In their usual place of work

It is here that there are Daughters of Charity with their works and their concerns. Some will be called to cultivate the virtue of hope by presenting it in all its splendour, putting forward gospel values, not adding a gloss to these or minimising their demands, but showing their true greatness. At the same time you will be unmasking counter-values in society such as materialism hedonism, hatred.....These have to be unmasked because they all dehumanise and degrade a human being. Others among you will promote hope by being silent Samaritans. You will be signs of pity and compassion, or to put it another way, you will be signs of the Kingdom. These signs will be particularly powerful in reviving hope because they testify that what you proclaim has already come into being and is even now being fulfilled, and its promises are no deceptive illusion. Jesus often called attention to his works as a last resort for helping people to believe in Him and in the hope that the promises of the Kingdom would be fulfilled. *“Even if you refuse to believe in me, at least believe in the work I do”* (Jn 10, 38). *“If it is through the Spirit of God that I cast out devils, then know that the Kingdom of God has overtaken you”* (Mt 12, 28). And if these signs of compassion and pity are lacking in the service of the poor, the undeserving, the powerless, those who have no access to legal aid, in short, any poor person, then these people will not have any reason to hope.

By the service that they offer, the Daughters of Charity give the poor reason to hope but they never hide the truth that our final goal is not to be found in this world. Saint Vincent repeated over and over again that God chose the Daughters of Charity also to *“instruct (the poor) in the things that are necessary for salvation.”*⁶ As the present Holy Father tells us, we have to labour to keep up the hopes of many poor people without minimising the great hope which signifies the definitive future to which every human being is called.⁷ As well as striving earnestly to build the Kingdom of God in this our world, the Christian has to understand that LIFE is more than life. This human life of ours which is often so mediocre, nurtures the seeds of the true future of humanity. Christian hope has to reach this point.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND COMMUNITY SHARING

- **What does hope mean for you or what are your experiences of the virtue of hope?**
- **Saint Peter recommends us Christians to be *able to give reasons for our hope*, (1 P 3,15). With reference to your own particular community and the socio-cultural context of its specific work or works, how can you put these recommendations into practice?**

Father Javier Alvarez
Director General

⁶ IX, 917, Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity on the service of the sick, 11th November 1657

⁷ *Spe salvi*, n° 10-12, 31

FATHER GREGORY GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Letter of 18th July 2008

To all members of the Vincentian Family

My dear sisters and brothers,

“167 children who had been sold to Chinese factories as a source of cheap labour were recently set free. They had been living in conditions bordering on slavery, working 300 hours a month for 50 cents an hour.”

“Thousands of immigrants are fleeing recent outbreaks of violence in South Africa.”

“The UN has launched a dramatic appeal against hunger. Some 800 million persons lack adequate food because of rising costs.”

“A mother who has been abused, and is now pregnant and homeless, seeks help to avoid losing custody of her five children. She is in desperate need of a job and a place to live in order to be able to keep her children.”

In my letter to all the members of the Vincentian Family concerning our day of prayer associated with the feast of Saint Vincent, I decided to begin with these press headlines. When I read them and others like them, I often ask myself: What is being done to alleviate the suffering that exists in our world? What am I doing, and what more can we do, as persons of good will, followers of Jesus Christ and members of the Vincentian Family? We are called to action, and there is much that we can do, if we take inspiration from the life of Vincent de Paul, whose feast we will be celebrating once again on September 27th.

Saint Vincent de Paul himself, in speaking to the Missioners, said:

*“What! to be a Christian and see a brother afflicted **and not weep with him, not be sick with him**, would be to be without charity, to be a mere picture of a Christian, to be without humanity, to be worse than the brute beasts!”* (Coste XIb, Conference of May 30th 1659)

Allow me to also recall the words of Pope Paul VI in his inspiring Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*: *“No one is permitted to disregard the plight of his brothers living in dire poverty, enmeshed in ignorance and tormented by insecurity. The Christian, **moved by this sad state of affairs**, should echo the words of Christ: ‘I have compassion on the crowd.’”* (*Populorum Progressio*, 74)

It is from this perspective that I would like us to prepare for the feast of Saint Vincent this year, 2008. I will be more specific about these ideas more, inviting you to participate in something that is commonly called “interpreting reality from a faith perspective.”

In an atmosphere of prayer, after invoking the Holy Spirit and **being fully aware of the presence of God** in the midst of the group gathered together in the Lord’s name, I invite each of you to share situations that you know about, either because you have experienced them personally, or because you have learned about them through the various means available to us today. I don’t know if it is too daring to suggest that, when possible, the actual person who experiences the situation of suffering and/or risk be the one to share it with the group.

The second part consists of allowing ourselves to be “touched,” **letting ourselves be “affected”** by the suffering of our brothers and sisters, as Saint Vincent, Saint Louise, Sister Rosalie Rendu, Frederic Ozanam were “touched”... along with so many other prophets in the Vincentian Family who have gone before us in faith, inspired by the Vincentian charism.

Acknowledging the presence of “the Poor God” in our gathering, and being aware of God’s love for each one of his sons and daughters, cannot leave us indifferent. It will bring us to the next step of **commitment** to concrete action. This involves the truly Vincentian attitude of passing from “affective love” to the practice of “effective love,” that is modelled on the word of God, Vincentian documents and the documents of the Church, especially its social teaching.

In entering into this dynamic, the text of chapter 25 of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, one of Saint Vincent’s most cherished passages, takes on new dimensions. The expression “*I was hungry*,” will resonate in us as more than hunger for material bread, as a plea for the bread of the Word, for Life in abundance. The words “*I was thirsty*” will speak of the thirst for justice. “*I was naked*,” will also mean: clothe me with the right to be a person, to be your brother or sister, to be a son or daughter of the same Father!

This is the mystique that Saint Vincent has passed on to us; he has taught us to be contemplatives in action. We are called to have a profound experience of God who cries out for words of justice and life through persons who are impoverished, excluded, forgotten by the system. This God impels us to create a new society that is truly humane, one that is penetrated with Gospel values. In this way, our charity will be creative and our life will carry a message that speaks to those around us.

This is the way I suggest you prepare for the feast of Saint Vincent, so that at the offertory in the Eucharistic celebration on September 27th you can present on the paten the fruits of your reflection and the concrete actions to which you have committed yourselves in favour of the poor.

During this process, which can take place over a series of sessions, **refer once more to the five reflection themes prepared by the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change which were sent out last year in preparation for the feast of**

Saint Vincent.

I would also invite you to use the prayer for systemic change which is part of the reflections that I just mentioned and which I include below:

We praise and thank you, O God, Creator of the Universe. You have made all things good and have given us the earth to cultivate.

Grant that we may always use created things gratefully, and share them generously with those in need.

Give us creativity in helping the poor meet their basic human needs.

Open our minds and hearts so that we may stand at their side and help them to change whatever unjust structures keep them poor.

Enable us to be brothers and sisters to them, friends who walk with them in their struggle for basic human rights. We ask this through Christ our Lord. AMEN.

As we celebrate the solemnity of Saint Vincent this year, let us ask the Lord of Life to help us to be creative in serving persons who are poor.

With gratitude for all that God allows us to do together as a Family and in appreciation of your generosity,

I remain your brother in Saint Vincent,

Father G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

FATHER GUILLAUME DE MENTHIÈRE

The Eucharist at the school of Mary

Notes taken during a conference given by Father Guillaume de Menthier at a formation session for the staff of the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, Paris

“What is the relationship between the Eucharist and Mary? A very exalted one,” said Father Menthier. In fact, from the Annunciation to Golgotha, from the Nativity to Easter morning, the Mother of Jesus remained in constant and perfect union with her Son. She is the one par excellence to lead us to the Eucharist.

Using all the gospel passages relating to Mary, Father de Menthier creates very concrete parallels with the various parts of the Mass. This conference can

stimulate reflection and renew our way of participating in the Eucharist and living it in our daily lives.

Introduction - Mary and the Eucharist: a very profound connection

I am always very happy to speak about the Blessed Virgin, as was Saint Therese of Lisieux who used to say that she would have liked to have been a priest so that she could talk about Mary and present her as a model to be followed. One of the central elements of the Second Vatican Council was to show from many perspectives that Mary, like each one of us, journeyed on “*her pilgrimage of faith*”. These words from the Council represent the idea that Therese of Lisieux, our young doctor of the Church, had received as heritage. As you know, Pope John Paul II was one of the leading figures in implementing the Council. He said himself that his pontificate can only be understood in reference to the Second Vatican Council, and more specifically, *Lumen Gentium*. As you know, this important text concludes by devoting Chapter VIII to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This chapter is an excellent reference source for Mariology, Marian studies and even Marian piety today. This year we celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II’s great encyclical dedicated to Mary. It is a meditation on *Lumen Gentium* that focuses on our pilgrimage of faith. In *Redemptoris Mater*, the Pope says that there is a connection between Mary and the Eucharist and that we find evidence of this in all Marian sanctuaries: Mary leads the faithful to the Eucharist.

There is a very deep relationship between Mary and the Eucharist. Since both Pope John Paul II and his successor Benedict XVI invite us to experience the Eucharist through the school of Mary, I like to call to mind Don Bosco and his famous dream image of “the three white symbols”.¹ It represents the person of the Holy Father (who since the 16th century is traditionally dressed in white), the Immaculate Virgin Mary, symbolised by the white lily, and the white Eucharistic host. This imagery calls us to meditate on the profound theological link that unites Peter, Mary and the Eucharist; the bond that unites the Vicar of Christ, the Mother of Christ and the presence of Christ himself in the sacramental elements. I see them as three “solid rocks” that prevent our faith from being devalued into gnosis or deteriorating into ideological systems, because there is a constant danger that Christianity could remain simply at the level of ideas or discourse. We know, however, that we are called to love in deed and in truth. Our faith is not based on abstract concepts or theories but on landmark events that have been witnessed in human history, particularly the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Blessed Virgin and the Eucharist are two safeguards against the recurring temptation to reduce our faith to gnosis, knowledge of spiritual things. Christian perfection does not consist in having exactly correct ideas about Jesus or knowing one’s catechism by heart. Rather, it is about living fully this communion with the Body and Blood of Christ that fills us with the Holy Spirit. That is why we must seek support from these “solid rocks”:

¹ On May 30th 1862, Don Bosco had a dream: he saw a huge ship (the Church) with a man in white (the Pope) standing at the prow. The ship was solidly anchored in a stormy sea and defended from its attackers by two columns. One pillar held the white host of the Eucharist and the other the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

- The Eucharist which is not some abstraction but rather the Body of Christ present in the tabernacle

- The Blessed Virgin Mary who guarantees that our faith is not based on abstract ideas but on a flesh and blood person: Jesus of Nazareth. Mary did not give birth to an attractive system of thought but to a very real baby! To be Christian means to have faith in Someone. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh.

We need to meditate on this admirable exchange that the Church Fathers have spoken about, how Mary provided the flesh and blood that the Son of God needed to become human. Perhaps you are familiar with this beautiful poem by Marie-Noel which has Mary saying:

*Flesh and blood you did not have, O God.
And so that you might break bread to feed us,
In my youth your body was fashioned from my own.
My Son, it is I who gave it to you.²*

There is no better way to sum up this profound relationship that unites Mary to the Eucharist. The body that we receive at Mass in our hands and on our lips is the same one that the Blessed Virgin conceived in her womb!

AVE VERUM CORPUS

Thanks to Mozart, we are all familiar with this wonderful Latin hymn *Ave Verum* and the very deep, clear words: “*Ave verum Corpus natum de Maria Virgine*”. The link between Mary and the Eucharist is very obvious here. This is easy to understand as it is the Virgin Mary who has given flesh to the Word that we receive in the Eucharist.

“*The body given up for us and made present under sacramental signs was the same body which she had conceived in her womb!*” These words of John Paul II come from his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. In this encyclical, the Pope dedicates the sixth chapter to the Blessed Virgin: “At the School of Mary, Woman of the Eucharist”. The Mother of God can be considered the Mother of the Eucharist since the Eucharist is Christ. The other sacraments of the Lord are simply the effect of his actions, while the Blessed Sacrament is the actual Body of the Son of Mary. There is therefore a very special connection between Mary and the Eucharist.

The final years of John Paul II’s pontificate were marked by his desire for the entire Church to rediscover the precious value of the Eucharist at the school of Mary. As you know, the last years of his pontificate included a year dedicated to the Rosary (October 2002 – October 2003), which preceded the year of the Eucharist (October 2004 – October 2005). This was the Pope’s deliberate decision, so that the Blessed Virgin might introduce us to the mystery of the Eucharist. In his later texts, both the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (dated Holy Thursday, April 17th 2003) and his apostolic letter *Mane nobiscum Domine*, he notes the connection between Mary and the Eucharist.

² Marie Noel, *Le Rosaire des joies*, Stock, 1950

Let us see some specific ways in which Mary leads us to the Eucharist. To enter into the depths of the Eucharistic spirituality of Mary, we must begin with Scripture. One of the major characteristics of Mariology after the Second Vatican Council is the emphasis on the importance of a Scriptural basis and the use of a Biblical approach. It is very important, especially from an ecumenical perspective, that our discussions on Mary be well-founded on Scripture. “*‘Woman of the Eucharist’ through and through, beginning with her inner disposition: from the Annunciation, when she offered herself for the Incarnation of the Word of God, to the Cross and to the Resurrection; ‘Woman of the Eucharist’ in the period subsequent to Pentecost, when she received in the Sacrament that Body which she had conceived and carried in her womb.*”³ According to the teachings of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, we can marvel at the discovery that the life of Mary is the most solid catechesis on the Mass.

THE ANNUNCIATION

Let us begin with the first Scriptural scene, the Annunciation, which is Mary’s first appearance in the Gospel of Saint Luke. When we carefully study the account of the Annunciation, we see that it is presented by Saint Luke, whether consciously or not, like a Mass. We know that Saint Luke, for example in the account of the disciples at Emmaus or in the book of Acts in recounting the baptism of the eunuch, tells these stories in a liturgical way. The text of the Annunciation also closely resembles a true Mass.

THE GREETING; “THE LORD IS WITH YOU”

This account begins with the greeting by the angel Gabriel: “*Greetings, favoured one, the Lord is with you*” (Luke 1:28). The Mass also begins with a greeting by the bishop or priest. In the book of Revelation, Saint John calls the bishop the Angel of the Church (Rev. 2:1). The angel of the Church greets the Christian people gathered to celebrate Eucharist, using the same words that the angel Gabriel addressed to Mary: “*The Lord is with you.*” The bishop or priest greets the Church, spouse of Christ, just as the angel greeted Mary, model of the Church.

“*The Lord be with you*” is the way that the Mass begins. When said in Greek, Hebrew or Latin, there is no verb in this sentence, so whether we say: the Lord “be with you” or “is with you”, both are the same as: *Dominus vobiscum*. So then, the words that the angel Gabriel addressed to Mary are the same as those that begin the Mass. You are going to say to me: but the angel said to Mary: *kaire de kairemene*, which means “*Greetings, favoured one*”. What a beautiful greeting! It is often pointed out that this word *kaire* that the angel uses actually means in the original Greek: “rejoice”. It is quite amazing to realise that the first word that God used at the dawn of our salvation was “rejoice”, an invitation to joy. It should also be said that this expression reminds us of the oracles of the prophet Zephaniah or the prophet Zechariah: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord, your God, is in your midst...” Moreover, in modern Greek, this expression

³ Benedict XVI, Address for the closing of the month of May, May 31st, 2005, in the Vatican Gardens

is reserved for great dignitaries; it is a formal greeting. I think it is good to recall this, because without a doubt the most striking aspect of the scene is that God addresses the Blessed Virgin through the intermediary of his archangel Gabriel, using an expression reserved for the most distinguished persons. In the Acts of the Apostles, we find this same kind of terminology when Paul greets Festus or Agrippa. Paul uses the word *kaire* when greeting dignitaries. It is not the same everyday expression that is used in French: hello! Rather, it is a formal way of speaking.

The other occasion in the Gospel when the term *kaire* is used is quite astonishing: it is during the Lord's Passion. The Roman soldiers, who play the game of king and make Jesus a king in order to mock him, address him by saying: "*kaire*, king of the Jews! Greetings, king of the Jews!" They use this formal term as an insult. All the same, it clearly demonstrates that this greeting is only used for important persons. That is why I am very pleased that in French we have kept the formal way of saying "Hail Mary" because it retains the nuance of devotion and respect that exists in the word *kaire*.

It is a very beautiful way to address or greet someone, and I would be in favour of encouraging Christians, when greeting one another as they meet in the street, to say "*kaire*" instead of "hello". Or to say, as the first Christians did, "*The Lord is coming, maranatha*", which is a way of encouraging one another to have hope and be joyful.

THE PENITENTIAL RITE

"*The Lord is with you*" is the way the Mass begins. Immediately after this greeting, it is said that Mary was deeply troubled. We can understand why! To be visited by an archangel is in and of itself quite astounding, even if Mary was familiar with heavenly things. It was the greeting that troubled her, though. Why was that? Probably it was because never before had anyone shown her such respect and deference. I like to compare this uneasiness of Mary with the apprehension of little Bernadette of Lourdes when the Blessed Virgin asked her, using the formal form of the pronoun you in French: "*Would you do me the honour of coming here for a fortnight?*" No one had ever addressed little Bernadette in a formal way; no one had ever spoken to her with such respect. In the same way, Mary was also perplexed by the respect and by this title given to her: "full of grace". This sense of being troubled corresponds to the penitential rite in the Mass. The people gathered as Church, having just received the greeting "The Lord is with you," have a sense of uneasiness at being greeted in this way as they recognise their unworthiness to be in God's presence.

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

What follows in the Annunciation event are the words that the angel transmits very clearly as a faithful messenger from heaven. Mary listens to this message that the angel brings from God. Similarly, after the penitential rite at Mass, we listen to the Word of God. Here, we can once again learn from Mary how to listen to God's word. In Christian art, Mary is often represented with a small book resting on her lap, a symbol that she meditated on the Word of God. We don't know if she even knew how to read. Whether she did or not is of little importance; she is still the woman of the Word of God. The Magnificat clearly shows us how much Mary was imbued with the

Word of God. It is important for us to listen to this Word, and Mary, who is Our Lady of Yes, teaches us how to listen. Perhaps this is the part of the Mass which should be given more importance. In any case, Vatican Council II has re-established a valuable and most comprehensive Lectionary, with very rich and varied readings from the Word of God. Unfortunately, this is perhaps the part of the Mass most neglected by the faithful, not only because many arrive late for Mass, but particularly because of the lack of attention paid to the Word of God. I like to recall the text of Origen (Father of the Church who died in 253) that states: “just as no one allows a single morsel of the precious body of the Lord to fall to the ground, so too is it sacrilege and blasphemy to let a single word of the Word of God slip away.” The Word of God has no less value than the precious body of Our Lord. Negligence in listening to the Word of God is as reprehensible as negligence in venerating the Blessed Sacrament. This is a call for us, then, to be vigilant in listening to the Word of God.

THE HOMILY

After she had listened, the Blessed Virgin asked a question: “*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*” It’s very significant that the first words from the Virgin Mary are in the form of a question. Christians, especially young people, often wonder if it is acceptable to ask questions, thinking that if people begin to ask questions about their faith, it means that they no longer believe! It is a source of worry. We know that it is legitimate and normal to ask questions. However, it depends on how questions are asked, for example: I don’t understand this idea, or how can this idea be understood? That is what the Blessed Virgin did. She asked the question: “how can this be?” This is the purpose of the homily, which is to ask the question: “how can this be?” In other words, how will the Word of God that we have just heard be brought to reality in a concrete way in the life of each of the faithful? How is this Word of God going to be put into practice? This is what the homily is. The homily is not a theology course, it is a friendly conversation. This word “homily” which is Greek in origin, means “friendly conversation.” (In Greece, there are signs posted in the buses behind the driver that say: homilies with the driver are prohibited, meaning entering into conversation with the driver.) I wish we could rediscover this style of homily. We no longer live in the time of the Church Fathers where the people and the speaker engaged one another in questions and answers. What used to take place among the people of God were open-ended dialogues on various topics. Today, homilies are very formal!

Let us return to this friendly conversation and ask the question about the text: how can this be? How does this Word of God concern me and how am I going to put it into practice?

THE EPICLESIS: “*THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL COME UPON YOU*”

We know that the response to “how can this be?” is: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you.” This is also the answer to all our questions of how. How can I evangelise those around me? How can I bring the Gospel to all the non-believers I encounter? The Holy Spirit will come upon you. How will I ever be able to forgive this Sister who is so unbearable and continues to make my life miserable? The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The Holy Spirit is the answer to all our questions of “how”.

In the Mass, at the time of the Epiclesis, we call on the Holy Spirit. How is this bread and wine going to become the body and blood of Our Lord? The Holy Spirit will come down upon them. How will this crowd of various and assorted faithful become the people of God, brought together into the one Body of Christ? The Holy Spirit will come down upon them.

AMEN! FIAT!

What follows is the determining moment of the Fiat, Mary's "Yes". It is probably the most noteworthy moment in all human history. The Word of God became flesh when Mary said Yes. Cardinal de Berulle said that the effects of Mary's "Yes" were more significant than when God said Yes at the beginning of the world when light was created (Fiat lux), which marked the beginning of God's great masterpiece of creation. The Fiat of God at the first moments of the world brought forth what was created, the light, while the Fiat of Mary brought forth the Creator, the Word of God coming into our world.

Pope John Paul II made a connection between Mary's Fiat and the "Amen" that all the faithful are invited to say when they receive Holy Communion: "The Body of Christ! Amen!" I strongly encourage everyone to pronounce the word Amen very distinctly and emphatically, because Mary did not say her Fiat half-heartedly. The verb *denoito* in Greek transmits a sense of enthusiasm: "Oh yes! Let it be done according to your word." It is with this same enthusiasm that we receive the Body of the Lord, uniting ourselves fully to this Lord who gives himself to us. John Paul II says in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, "*There is a profound analogy between the Fiat which Mary said in reply to the angel, and the Amen which every believer says when receiving the body of the Lord.*"

THE INCARNATION

As soon as Mary utters her Fiat, and not a moment before, the Word becomes incarnate in her.

Incidentally, in the Angelus as it is recited today, Mary's Yes has been short-circuited. *The angel of the Lord declared to Mary. And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.* Mary first of all said "Yes". It was not because the angel announced it that the Lord became flesh. It was because Mary said "Yes". In the past, Mary's "Yes" was held in greater esteem.

THE VISITATION

THE SENDING FORTH

According to the text of the Annunciation story, as soon as Mary said "Yes", the Word became flesh and the angel left Mary. This was the time of sending forth. It is important to recall that the Mass (*missa*) is essentially a sending forth as the name indicates. Immediately, Mary set out in haste to serve her cousin Elizabeth. The scene of the Visitation begins here. And Mary, as the evangelist Luke tells us, goes to Elizabeth right away. The Fathers of the Church have wondered about her haste. The

first theory is that Mary went to verify the sign that the angel had just given her: *“now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; ...she who was said to be barren.”* Very quickly, however, the Church Fathers discounted this idea. Mary had no need to verify the Lord’s message because her faith was absolute; she is blessed because she believed without having seen. This haste can only be explained by charity, as in the words of the apostle: *“Caritas urget nos”* (Charity urges us). Mary goes out in haste in order to be of service to her cousin Elizabeth.

This is significant because it is the way Mary teaches us how the Eucharistic leads us to serve our brothers and sisters. Moreover, there is no better sign of a “good communion” than this eagerness to serve our brothers and sisters. We know that the Mass has borne fruit when we are eager to serve others. A lack of interest in serving those in need is a sign that we have not received the Eucharist of the Lord as we should have done. As the Church Fathers have said, and as is repeated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist leads us to serve those who are poor. The Eucharist commits us to those who are poor. In order to truly receive the body and blood of Christ who has been delivered up for us, we must recognise Christ present in our poor brothers and sisters. In his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum caritatis*, Benedict XVI speaks of Eucharistic consistency. Saint Augustine said, *“It would be inconsistent for us to be nourished by the Poor One and not feed those who are poor.”* We need to be nourished by the Poor One in order to be able to nourish poor persons. In other words, the Eucharist guides us towards our poor brothers and sisters.

Here, we might mention the 5 “P’s” of the presence of Christ (five words that begin with the letter p in French; Peuple, Pretre, Parole, Pain, Pauvre):

- Christ is present in the **People of God gathered together in God’s name**
- Christ is present in the **Priest**, the minister who presides
- Christ is present in **his Word**
- Christ is present in the **Eucharistic bread**
- Christ is present in the **Poor Person** with whom he identifies himself.

BEARERS OF GOD WITHIN

Mary hurried through the mountains of Judea, travelling along the heights. The Lord gave her the swiftness of a gazelle, as it is said in Scripture. She is carrying Heaven within her, so it is natural for her to travel along the heights. *“She is the first tabernacle in history; she carries out the first Eucharistic procession in history.”* These expressions come from John Paul II and Benedict XVI. She is the *theophore* Virgin, (that is, one who “carries God” within her).

We might ask ourselves if we are as ardent and as enthusiastic when we go out from Mass. The Cure of Ars had a very striking way of speaking about this. He said, *“Christians should return home after Mass as happy as the three Kings would have been if they could have taken the Infant Jesus home with them.”* We, too, are like the Blessed Virgin, bearers of Christ when we receive communion. We carry God within us and we bring him with us in our daily visitations. In living out the scene of the Visitation after Mass, we encounter other people. Imagine a husband saying to his wife as she returns home after Mass: “Why should someone bearing God pay me the honour of coming to me?” Pope John Paul II writes, *“When, at the Visitation, Mary*

bore in her womb the Word made flesh, she became in some way a 'tabernacle' – the first 'tabernacle' in history – in which the Son of God, still invisible to our human gaze, allowed himself to be adored by Elizabeth, radiating his light as it were through the eyes and the voice of Mary: 'Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?'"

I really like the words in Scripture in the book of Exodus when God said to Moses: *"Have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them."* Christians who go out from Mass after receiving Communion can note these words. We are the sanctuary that allows God to dwell in the midst of humanity. In a family celebration that brings many people together who have given absolutely no thought to sanctifying Christmas by going to Mass, the Lord will be present because the elderly aunt in the family has gone to Mass and brings God to this family which has forgotten the meaning of Christmas.

THANKSGIVING

Mary is greeted by Elizabeth as "the Ark of the Covenant". We know that the story of the Visitation is completely modelled on the Ark of the Covenant being carried up to Jerusalem when it stops at the house of Obededum and these same words are uttered. And Mary proclaims her Magnificat. Just as Miriam, Moses' sister, proclaims the great song that exhorts all the people to praise God, Mary also calls us to praise. She is the "tambourine player" of the Church, the abbess of the Church who leads the entire Church in prayer and praise. Pope John Paul II said: *"The Magnificat expresses Mary's spirituality, and there is nothing greater than this spirituality for helping us to experience the mystery of the Eucharist. The Eucharist has been given to us so that our life, like that of Mary, may become completely a Magnificat!"*

When we read the Magnificat, we notice that what Mary did was to give thanks to God; she celebrated the Eucharist since Eucharist means thanksgiving. We come to Mass to give thanks. Mary gives thanks in her canticle of the Magnificat by commemorating what has taken place. The verbs used in the Magnificat are in the past tense (although, unfortunately, the French tradition does not make this obvious). The Lord has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty, etc. The Magnificat calls to mind, or commemorates all the works of the Lord and gives thanks for them. Giving thanks by calling to mind or calling to mind by giving thanks, that is the Mass. When we go to Mass, we give thanks through this commemoration: *"In memory of his death and resurrection"*. We give thanks, and it is important to remember that the purpose of the Mass is to express gratitude. Origen said: "Christians celebrate Mass because they are grateful." We express our gratitude to God through the Eucharist. *"How can I return to the Lord all the good I have received?"* in the words of the psalmist. We all know the response in the verse that follows: *"I will lift up the cup of salvation."* The Eucharist is the way that Christians can give thanks, for the Eucharist is Christ's expression of gratitude to his Father: "I give you thanks, Father, because I know that you always hear me." The Mass is a time to give thanks to the Lord for all that he does for us.

This is Jewish spirituality at its best, and Mary shows that she is a true daughter of Zion since Jewish spirituality is marked by frequent interjections of blessings and praise for all circumstances of life. Mary teaches us to make our lives

Eucharistic acts. “*To give thanks to God at all times,*” Saint Paul said, in psalms, hymns and songs of praise; to give thanks even when difficulties occur, for there is always some aspect of life for which we can give thanks. To say with Saint Paul: “what I am, I am by the grace of God.” How much more is Mary able to say this.

THE NATIVITY

Next, we come to the **Christmas** stories and the infancy narratives that conclude the cycle of the Nativity. The connection between Christmas and the Eucharist is of course well known. I do not need to insist on it:

- Jesus was born in Bethlehem (in Hebrew, Bethlehem means the house of bread),
- Jesus was born in a manger, showing from the beginning that he wanted to give himself as food, that he is the true bread of life.

The visit of the shepherds and the Magi takes place next. Here again, if we examine the account of the epiphany according to Saint Matthew, there is a form of Mass taking place. What do the three kings do? First of all, they come together, then they listen to Scripture (in Jerusalem, the book of the prophet Micah), and then they adore Jesus who is with Mary in the stable. They bring gifts, they take part in an offertory and they receive the presence of Christ Jesus. When they bring their gifts for Jesus, obviously it is not Jesus who takes them, but Mary. Their gifts pass through the hands of Mary. The Blessed Virgin receives the gold, frankincense and myrrh, and in turn gives them to Jesus. We also can pass him our gifts through Mary’s hands. Whatever we bring to Jesus can be passed to him via Mary.

EUCCHARISTIC ADORATION

The Epiphany is also like a Mass that leads into adoration, since the Magi came to adore Jesus. Here again, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI offer a clear invitation to rediscover the meaning of Eucharistic adoration. In *Sacramentum caritatis* n° 66, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that Eucharistic adoration is very appropriate, despite the idea that the Eucharist was made to be received and not to be adored. The Pope quotes Saint Augustine who even in his time showed that we consume the Eucharist because we adore it. Likewise, we adore it because it is also designed to become our nourishment, and there is a connection between adoration and consumption of the Eucharist. The Magi bow down before the Infant Jesus. Do we have this sense of adoration? Even before we speak, our silent gestures, our manner of bowing or kneeling can express our spirit of devotion.

THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

THE EUCHARIST IS THE SACRIFICE OF THE WHOLE CHURCH

Here, it is the Virgin who offers her infant son, who becomes the presenter, for the Presentation is not a presentation in the sense that the Virgin Mary presents her son to God. It is rather the sense of offering. The temple is the place of sacrifice, as

the two small doves remind us. We are already entering into the sacrificial dimension of Eucharist. The Eucharist is the sacrifice of the entire Church: Jesus offers himself to his Father and Jesus is offered by the Church, by the Virgin Mary who represents the Church.

Are you aware that the sacrifice of the Mass is the sacrifice of the entire Church? In other words, we are ourselves “offerings” whenever we are at Mass! In fact, the Eucharistic prayer says: “May the Holy Spirit make us an everlasting gift to you”. The sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist is obviously an essential part. What do we come to Mass to do? We come to offer ourselves to God with Christ who offers himself. At Mass, we do not just give a bit of money, but we give ourselves entirely. The collection is a symbol of this offering of ourselves. At Mass, we use the “Christological elevator”. In effect, the Mass is the offering that Christ makes of himself to his Father. And we attach ourselves to Christ to offer ourselves with him. The Cure of Ars, with his very individual way of bargaining with God (like Abraham), would say to God the Father when he celebrated Mass: *“I give you your Son but you must give me what I ask of you.”* And he would obtain everything! At each Mass, we offer ourselves with Christ to his Father.

At the Presentation, Mary understood very well how much of herself she would have to offer along with her son when the priest Simeon said to her: *“and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”* This offering of ourselves, then, is expressed not only in our words but is also symbolised by a gesture. A small drop of water is added to the chalice, a small detail that often goes unnoticed, but which represents all of us: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ...” In the third century, Saint Cyprian said to the Aquarians, members of sects who wanted to celebrate Mass only with water: “Mass must be celebrated with wine, but a bit of water is added to the wine because this water represents us.” If we offer only wine, it is God that is offered up without us. And if we offer only water, we are being offered up without God. With the drop of water in the wine, we are joining with the Lord Jesus to be offered up to God his Father.

The Second Vatican Council placed great emphasis on the need for all the faithful to participate consciously, actively and fruitfully in the Eucharist. Very often however, this has not been sufficiently translated into practice. The fact that Mrs. X does the reading, Mr. Y plays the guitar and Mrs. Z takes up the collection falls very far short of what the Council intended. That is not what conscious, active and fruitful participation means. Rather, it means inculcating in all Christians the understanding that when they are at Mass, they are never there as spectators but they are offering themselves. Conscious, active and fruitful participation is the same as saying: “this is my sacrifice; I am offering myself with Christ.” We are participants in Christ’s sacrifice.

CANA

INTERCESSORY PRAYERS OFFERED WITH CONFIDENCE

The next scene is **Cana**. The Mass is a place of community prayer; for example, a Mass may be offered for particular intentions. Here Mary shows us how to intercede. At Cana, she said to her son: *“They have no more wine.”* Mary’s way of

praying is very striking. Prayer should never be a matter of telling God what God must do. Our prayer is often like this: “My God, may my will be done!” Prayer cannot be a case of saying to Jesus: “Do everything that I say!” Mary shows us exactly the opposite when she says: “*Do whatever He tells you.*” Prayer cannot consist of saying to God: “Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking.” Rather, prayer means saying: “*Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.*” We often need to reverse our way of praying. We cannot pray in the form of commands, saying: “Lord, do this, do that.” Mary does not give orders when she speaks to Jesus. She says: “Lord, they have no more wine.” The Lord is big enough to know what he must do. It is something similar with Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. They do not come looking for Jesus to say: “Lord, do something, Lazarus is sick, come and heal him.” Rather, they say: “*Lord, he whom you love is ill.*” We present the situation to God, who knows what is best for us. And in the case of Lazarus, Jesus acts, not by healing Lazarus, but in a way that is even more glorious and more powerful, for He knows what is best to do.

BAPTISMAL PRIESTHOOD

Mary, who has not yet witnessed any miracles, can nevertheless spontaneously say with complete confidence: “*Do whatever he tells you*” and knows that she has only to say to Jesus: “*They have no more wine*” for him to intervene. Mary trusts in her son and is concerned about our needs. In the story of Cana, Mary intervenes even though no one has asked her to do anything, and perhaps no one else had yet noticed that there was not enough wine. She, however, had noticed this human distress and presents it to her son. And if Mary intervenes in this way for those who have not asked anything of her, how much more will she come to the aid of those who, each day, say to her: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.”

At Cana, Mary has a priestly role. She speaks to God in the name of humanity: “*They have no more wine.*” and she speaks about God to humanity: “*Do whatever He tells you.*” She is a bridge, she creates the connection. Similarly, the priest creates the link between heaven and earth. We who are marked by baptismal priesthood, what do we do? When we are in the presence of God, we speak to God about people, about those we have met; we pray for one another. When we are among people, we speak about God. We create connections. This is what baptismal priesthood is about, bringing earth to God and bringing God to earth.

“DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME”

In saying “*Do whatever He tells you,*” Mary echoes the fidelity of Israel who, at the time of the covenant at Sinai, repeated in chorus: “*Everything that the Lord has said, we will do.*” This is said repeatedly. As soon as Moses proclaims the words of the Covenant, all the people affirm: “*Everything that the Lord has said, we will do.*” Mary, who is faithful Israel, says: “*Do whatever the Lord tells you.*” Very clearly, Pope John Paul II draws the connection between the words of Mary: “*Do whatever He tells you,*” and those of Jesus: “*Do this in memory of me.*” There is a link between these two commands, and whenever we celebrate the Mass in memory of Jesus, as he has told us to do, we carry out and respond to the recommendation of the Blessed Virgin: “*Do whatever He tells you.*”

THE WEDDING FEAST OF THE LAMB

With the motherly concern that Mary shows at the wedding feast of Cana, she seems to be saying to us: do not doubt, have confidence in the words of my son. He who is able to change water into wine is equally able to change bread and wine into his body and blood. Obviously, Cana is a Eucharistic miracle: the water changed into wine prefigures the wine changed into blood. This is in some way the first transubstantiation, and it is important to also remember that at Mass we have wine as well as bread. We have bread that is necessary for life and wine that creates the feast. It is good to recall that Mass is also the wedding feast of the Lamb.

In the early days of the Church, the Eucharist was connected with community celebrations or *agapes*. The Christians would come together (discreetly, since it was the time of the persecutions) to share a meal in community and at a certain moment, the presider of the gathering would rap on the table and say: “*Sursum corda*” which means “Let us lift up our hearts” and the actual Eucharist would begin. It is important to return to this festive and especially community-centred aspect of Eucharist. It is an *agape* of brothers and sisters; it is the Lord’s meal shared in an atmosphere of joy.

Incidentally, if we only have a very small amount of wine in the bottom of the cruet, how can we imagine the abundance of the Messianic feast? Our sacramental signs are often reduced to such small details that they become imperceptible. The same idea applies to baptism or confirmation. To signify the abundant outpouring of divine grace, the priest baptises the person with three miniscule drops of water! For confirmation, the oil should “run down the beard of Aaron,” but often the bishop places only a small mark. The sacraments are signs that bring about what they signify, but if the signs are reduced to practically nothing, there is no longer a sacrament. It is important, then, that signs be signs.

AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

A SWORD WILL PIERCE YOUR SOUL

From the beginning of the Gospel, the smallest actions and gestures of Jesus hint at the idea of the Cross. It is everywhere mysteriously proclaimed. The paschal drama is but the climax of the combat that Christ engaged in throughout his earthly ministry.

That is why it is quite difficult to say just where the Lord’s Passion begins.

At his birth, he lies in the depths of a cave wrapped in swaddling clothes like a mummy in his tomb. The Magi bring myrrh, prefiguring his burial. Herod seeks to bring an end to him. Simeon predicts that a sword will pierce the soul of the Blessed Virgin, his Mother. Rachel mourns in Rama the death of the Holy Innocents. Joseph is forced to lead the Holy Family into exile...

As he grows up, it is as if Jesus is buried in this tiny and insignificant village of Nazareth. He hardly ever appears in the sight of men who see him as the son of a

carpenter. He wanders away and his parents search for him in anguish for three whole days, a parallel with the three days of his death.

When he begins his public life, John the Baptist points Jesus out as the Lamb of God, the one who is required for the sacrifice. He descends into the depths of earth and emerges from the waters indicating with this baptism what he will later accomplish (cf. Luke 12:50). The dove, the animal offered in sacrifice as his ransom, signifies the Spirit by which he will make an offering of himself to the Father (cf. Heb. 9:14), and the voice of the Father designates him as his beloved Son, as the new Isaac...

Whenever he performs miracles, his accusers only try harder to condemn him. When he teaches the crowds, they treat him as a blasphemer. When he goes to wedding feasts, they look on him as a drunkard or a glutton...The elderly Simeon was certainly correct when he prophesied to Mary: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel".

Mary meditated on these words throughout all the events that were beyond her human understanding but which she knew in faith were the fulfilment of God's will. At the foot of the Cross, Mary could not have helped but remember the day when she and Joseph went up to the Temple to present her first-born son. This presentation was an offering in itself. In Israel, the law required that the first of everything be offered to God: the firstborn of the flocks, the first fruits of the harvest, the oldest child in the family. This was a way of being aware of returning to God everything that had come from God. "Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have these gifts to offer..." This is the same action of the Mass: the Eucharistic sacrifice through which we give thanks.

THE SACRIFICE OF THE CROSS

Mary, at the foot of Cross, as she was earlier in the Temple, is the Virgin who offers. In *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (n° 56), John Paul II writes: "*In her daily preparation for Calvary, Mary experienced a kind of 'anticipated Eucharist' – one might say a 'spiritual communion' – of desire and of oblation, which would culminate in her union with her Son in his passion.*" She helps us to enter into the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist. She is completely united to the sacrifice of her Son. She represents the Church which, at Mass, offers itself with Christ. The role of Mary at Mass is related to her role in the redemptive sacrifice since the Mass is the same as the sacrifice of the Cross.

This unique role that God confided to Mary, one she continued to have throughout her entire life, especially at Calvary, is what John Paul II called "collaborator in the Redemption".⁴ Each time the Eucharistic sacrifice is celebrated, "the work of our salvation is accomplished." With that in mind, there is no doubt that Mary participates in each of our Masses.

THE SACRIFICE OF THE WHOLE CHURCH

⁴ cf. John-Paul II – General Audience of April 9th, 1997

In reality, the Mass is the sacrifice of Christ in his totality, that is, from Christ as Head to Christ as Body. Moreover, the Body of Christ, which is the Church, completely united to Christ as Head, offers itself with him. That is why the priest says: “Pray, my brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.”

Mary, from the time of the Annunciation, “gave of herself fully, espousing with her whole heart the divine will for our salvation.”⁵ At Calvary, she is the admirable symbol of the Church who offers and is herself offered by what she offers. She teaches us to participate in the sacrifice of the entire Church for the glory of God and the world’s salvation.

Certainly, it is Jesus who offers himself to his Father, but we offer ourselves together with him, as members of his Body. Christ offers his Church, which is symbolised on the level of ritual by the small drop of water that the priest pours into the chalice, mixing with the wine. We are this drop of water. When the water mixes with the wine in the chalice, the people become one with Christ.

In the Eucharistic prayer, the verbs are in the plural forms: “We pray, we offer...” In the Eucharistic sacrifice, we have the possibility of being associated with the actions of Christ as he offers himself to his Father. In the words of Saint Paul, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Rom. 12:1) When Catholics go to Mass, they offer themselves to the Father on the altar with Christ.

THE MEMORIAL

The faithful are at the foot of the altar as Mary stood at the foot of the Cross. The Mass is the sacrifice of Calvary made sacramentally present. It does not consist merely of calling to mind the events of the Passion and death of the Lord; it is the sacramental “re-presentation”. In the words of Vatican Council II, “He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries.”⁶ The elevation of the host represents the raising of Christ on the Cross and the rising of Jesus in glory. At Mass, we commemorate the death and resurrection of Christ.

THE LAST SUPPER AND THE CROSS

How did Mary participate in the Last Supper? Was she present when Jesus instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice? The Gospels do not say. We can think it likely that she was in that upper room that evening, since we find her the following day in Jerusalem following her Son to Golgotha.⁷ But it can also be said that she had no need to participate in the prefiguration of the sacrifice, since she was so closely linked with the sacrifice itself.

On Holy Thursday, Jesus prepared for his disciples beforehand, the food that is necessary for eternal life. In recreating humanity through the Resurrection of

⁵ cf. *Lumen Gentium* n° 56

⁶ cf. *Sacrosanctum concilium* n° 47

⁷ cf John-Paul II, Letter to priest for Holy Thursday 1995

Christ, God wanted to ensure that this new human race would have what it needs for sustenance. For this reason, on the night before he died, Christ instituted the nourishment that this new world would need. The Last Supper and the Cross are inseparable in God's plan. The Eucharist flows from this unity.

THE UNIQUE SACRIFICE OF THE CROSS

The Mass is truly the sacrifice of Christ himself, for this is a unique sacrifice. The Mass is the actual event; it is not something additional or a substitute. It is the one and only sacrifice of Calvary made present now. The Mass brings about once more the event of the Cross via the celebrant (not the repeater), celebrating this event in reliving it (not only by commemorating it). We can say that the Mass "represents" the sacrifice of Calvary on the condition that we use the verb "represent" in its strongest sense: to make present.

Vatican Council II expresses this truth in one striking sentence: *"As often as the sacrifice of the cross in which Christ our Passover was sacrificed, is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried on"*⁸. This shows how present the Immaculate Virgin Mary is in every one of our Masses, for in her *"the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of the redemption"*⁹.

"AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS STOOD HIS MOTHER (Jn 19:25)

With these simple words, the Gospel teaches us that the Mass, from its origins, cannot be celebrated without Mary being present. Since the Mass is the sacrifice of Calvary, the Blessed Virgin is there standing at the foot of our altars, and it is she, symbol of the Church, who offers her Son for the salvation of the world.

She experienced what John Paul II called "the deepest 'kenosis' of faith in human history"¹⁰. In fact, she represents the exact opposite of what the angel Gabriel had announced to her. The one who was to be great was ridiculed by all, the one destined to take the throne of David was condemned to death, the one who would reign without end was to die on the Cross. Nevertheless, Mary believed that God's promises announced by the angel would be accomplished. She believed! She believed despite appearances, as we believe that Christ is present in the Eucharist despite appearances. Those who receive communion must also accept this kenosis of faith. We believe the words of Jesus: "This is my body" even though from all visible evidence it seems to be bread.

"WOMAN, HERE IS YOUR SON" (Jn. 19:26)

As he did at Cana, Jesus addresses his mother as "Woman", a term that shows her to be the Woman above all women, the new Eve. In receiving the beloved disciple in the place of Jesus, Mary accepts to be stripped of her divine maternity.

When the Roman soldier thrust the spear into the heart of Jesus who was already dead, it was Mary, standing helpless at the foot of the Cross, whose soul was

⁸ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* n° 3

⁹ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n° 103

¹⁰ *Redemptoris Mater* n° 18

pierced as the elderly Simeon had prophesied: “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” It was Mary’s pierced heart that mystically received the blood flowing from the pierced heart of Jesus.

Mary is at the foot of the Cross representing the Church in communion.

FROM EASTER TO PENTECOST

The Gospels tell us nothing about Mary on the day of the Resurrection. Even if we can imagine that she was gifted with an Easter appearance of the risen Lord, it is not mentioned. On the other hand, Scripture does indicate the presence of Mary in the upper room, gathered with all the Church, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14).

MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

She who gave birth to the Saviour at Christmas would be the one to give birth to the Church at Pentecost. In fact, Pentecost is a form of “birthing” for the Church. If the Church was conceived from the beginning, in the sense that it is “the intention of God that all be saved”¹¹, on the other hand, it came to birth at Pentecost. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church came forth from the upper room as if coming into the world. Mary presided at this birth; she is the Mother of the Church which is the Body of Christ. Certainly it is quite significant that the place where the Church was born on the day of Pentecost is the same upper room where the Eucharist was instituted. The Church was born from the Eucharist. Eucharist makes the Church. In our Eucharistic liturgies Pentecost corresponds to the second epiclesis where we ask the Holy Spirit to make of us one body. Mary experienced the first epiclesis at the time of the Annunciation, when the Spirit overshadowed her so that the Word would become incarnate in her. Here, she experienced a sort of second epiclesis as the Spirit conferred on her the special role of Mother of the Church.

It can truly be said that each Mass is a mini Pentecost in which the Church assembles in order to be filled with the Spirit, to strengthen the bonds of charity and to be sent into the world. The faithful should go out from the Eucharistic celebration in the way that the apostles left the upper room on the day of Pentecost: overflowing with joy and proclaiming the wonders of God to one and all. The Eucharist makes the Church apostolic and missionary.

At the Eucharist, source and summit of Christian life, we are assembled in order to be sent. The Church is this endlessly beating heart of charity.

THE CHURCH UNITED!

What was Mary’s experience in the midst of this first Christian community, where, as the book of Acts tells us, “they devoted themselves to...the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42)? What were her feelings and attitudes when she participated in the Eucharistic celebration, presided over by the Apostles? How did she, who had been so intimately associated with the Lord’s Passion, celebrate its *memorial*? “*What must*

¹¹ Clement of Alexandria paed. 1,6

Mary have felt,” Pope John-Paul II asks, “as she heard from the mouth of Peter, John, James and the other Apostles the words spoken at the Last Supper: ‘This is my body which is given for you’ (Lk 22:19)? The body given up for us and made present under sacramental signs was the same body which she had conceived in her womb! For Mary, receiving the Eucharist must have somehow meant welcoming once more into her womb that heart which had beat in unison with hers and reliving what she had experienced at the foot of the Cross.”¹²

The Acts of the Apostles paints an attractive image of the early Church, this community where “everyone was of one heart and soul”. This unanimity was born out of dedicated participation in the “breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42), the sacrament of unity for the Church.

THE BREAKING OF BREAD

This gesture of breaking bread in the Jewish rituals is one that Jesus carried out on several occasions (Mt 14:19; 15:16; Mk 8:6-19). It was through this seemingly simple gesture that the disciples at Emmaus recognised the Risen Christ (Lk. 24:31).

Why did Jesus break bread? As well as being a practical action, this gesture carried with it sacrificial significance: not only sharing but immolation. This bread is in fact Jesus himself. In breaking the bread, Jesus showed that he would be broken and crushed because of our sinfulness like the suffering servant the prophet Isaiah had spoken about (Is. 53:5). This is the sacrifice offered at each Eucharist.

The rite of the breaking of bread certainly exists in our Masses: the priest breaks the bread during the Lamb of God. The general instruction of the Roman Missal states: “This rite is not so much for practical reasons, but to signify that we who are many, in receiving Christ, the one Bread of Life in communion, we become one body (I Cor. 10:17).

The breaking of bread, then, represents the unity of the Church, the principal purpose of the Eucharist.

The peace greeting expresses the ultimate effect of Eucharist, “to create Church”, to make the Church a communion of saints: the communion of holy people bound together in communion for holy purposes. The ultimate effect of Eucharist is the unity of the Church. The “purpose” of Eucharist is not primarily to make Christ present on the altar or in the tabernacle, but much more importantly, “to create Church”. Our communion with the Body of Christ is to make us one in Christ, all of us, so that we become more and more closely united, linked by the bonds of charity coming from the Holy Spirit with whom we are imbued through the Eucharist.

It is the Eucharist that makes the Church able to be more and more “the sacrament of unity for all humanity” according to the beautiful definition from Vatican Council II. Moreover, the Church contemplates its own mystery in the Blessed Virgin Mary, the immaculate one, virgin and mother. When Mary is taken up

¹² John-Paul II, encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n° 56

into the glory of heaven, the Church recognises that it, too, is called to become an “eschatological icon”.

THE LOFTY HEIGHTS AND THE ASSUMPTION

What happened to Mary after the time of Pentecost? Scripture does not indicate anything explicitly. In the light of the Word of God, however, the Church defined the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. Mary was taken up, body and soul, into divine glory. The transforming power of the Eucharist had its fullest effect in the humble servant of the Lord. She is the indication of the complete and definitive victory that our Lord Jesus Christ will give to us: “*he will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory*” (Phil. 3:21). John Paul II invites us to turn to Our Lady of the Assumption in order to enter even more fully into the deep mystery of the Eucharist, the mystery of Christ and the Church: “let us listen to Mary Most Holy, in whom the mystery of the Eucharist appears, more than in anyone else, as a *mystery of light*. Gazing on Mary, we come to know *the transforming power present in the Eucharist*. In her we see the world renewed in love. Contemplating her, assumed body and soul into heaven, we see opening up before us those ‘new heavens’ and that ‘new earth’ which will appear at the second coming of Christ. Here below, the Eucharist is the pledge of this, and in a certain way, its anticipation: ‘*Veni, Domine Iesu!*’” (Rev 22:20).¹³

There is a mysterious connection between the mysteries of the Assumption and the Eucharist. She who was instrumental in bringing about the Incarnation for us is not among us now in any material sense. The complete absence of Mary’s body on earth, from the point of view of our senses, is the exact opposite of the real presence of the Lord in the Eucharist. Mary, by her Assumption, seems to say to us: ‘It is to your advantage that I go away (cf. Jn. 16:7) because far better is the presence of his Body that my Son has left for you.’ Through the Eucharist, God remains substantially present in the Church. In the Assumption, we contemplate the Church, represented by Mary, already mysteriously present with God. In the tabernacle, God is with us in the present time; in heaven, we will be with God for all eternity.

Conclusion

The Church turns without hesitation towards the Mother of God, finding in her, whom we honour as our own Mother, “a sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth”¹⁴ towards our heavenly homeland.

Father Guillaume de MENTHIERE
Professor of Mariology and Patristical Studies

¹³ John-Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n° 62

¹⁴ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 8

TODAY'S CHALLENGES

Introduction

For the past two years, the section entitled “Today’s Challenges” has been addressing issues related to new forms of poverty that challenge the Company on an international level.

This section will now begin to focus on emerging and innovative forms of service carried out by Daughters of Charity in response to these new challenges. In sharing these experiences and calling attention to current realities in our societies, we will not be mapping out well-charted pathways. Instead, we will be highlighting a variety of creative and courageous advances as the Company strives to reach out more and more to those who are poor, to all poor persons, everywhere.

These testimonies of creative love will also help us to see contemporary cultural changes from other perspectives rather than just in terms of crises and loss of values. These articles will emphasise the creativity that is being implemented in project planning and service and demonstrate how our Sisters seek to be signs of hope to the most vulnerable persons in our societies.

Province of Los Altos Hills, California

Serving with creativity and compassion people who are in prison

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ”

Matthew 25:37-40

“Nothing is more meritorious in God’s eyes than charitable works for poor prisoners.”

St. Vincent de Paul, 1632

In 1640 the Daughters of Charity began their work with the prisoners of Vincent’s day, including the infamous suffering galley slaves. According to Fr. José María Román, C.M., author of *St. Vincent de Paul – A Biography*, the Sisters in the early days of this ministry “were required to purchase the food, prepare the daily meals for the galley slaves and carry the food to the prisons, to wash the prisoners’ clothes, look after the sick, kit the prisoners out when they left for Marseilles, scrub

the cells, and wash and mend the mattresses.”¹ Today’s Daughters of Charity may not be called upon to perform these same tasks on behalf of those in prison, but their zeal and dedication in serving these poor men and women is as great as that demonstrated by their counterparts of old. In this article we will share some examples of creative services offered by today’s Daughters of Charity ministering in prisons throughout the five Provinces of the United States.

In Troy, New York (Province of Albany), the Daughters of Charity provide a multitude of resources for women who have just been released from prison. The Roarke Connection, a re-entry programme begun in 2003 at the request of the staff of the County Jail, seeks to break the cycle of recidivism among the women inmates. Sister Linda O’Rourke directs the Roarke Centre, an outreach/drop-in centre which arranges housing, food and other necessities for the women who come there. Four Daughters of Charity work in this innovative programme (two of whom are in their 80s). Sister Loretta Hoag, an artist and sculptor, comes regularly to the prison to organise a simple art activity within the cell block. As the women work on their art creations, Sister Loretta and another social worker attempt to engage the women in conversation. Slowly, they build a relationship of trust with the women, learning who is about to leave, what the needs are, etc. The women are encouraged to come to the Roarke Centre for assistance when they are released. A caseworker is assigned to each client, who is then seen weekly and receives a weekly phone call as well. The women are provided with food, clothing and personal supplies; if they have no “home” to return to after their release, housing needs are addressed as well. (The local shelter has only 16 beds available.) The Sisters and staff at the Centre also make referrals to drug/alcohol treatment programmes, mental health or educational services and to programmes for job-training and seeking employment. At present, they have a caseload of 80-100 women recently released from prison, and also see approximately 30 per week in the jail.

Sister Linda shares a success story:

“Janice J. who became involved with our services was introduced to the Roarke Connection programme through her local jail. We were able to build a relationship with her through trust building activities. We liaised with the court system and advocated for substance abuse treatment rather than incarceration. The court released her subject to certain conditions: that she finds stability, substance abuse and mental health services, and remains in compliance with court orders. The judge saw a constructive support system in the Roarke Centre and allowed us to provide an alternative to imprisonment.

“Janice is living on a fixed income and has a history of abuse, mental health issues, and substance problems that have plagued her. With the assistance of other local agencies and the Roarke Centre we were able to find her a safe environment which is the basis for success. For the first time in years she gained control of her life again and felt her human dignity respected. However, she is reminded every day she still has a long road ahead of her and one mistake can lead to the possibility of prison. With the help of the Roarke Centre she has learned to cope with her ongoing struggles

¹ Román, Fr. José María, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul – A Biography*, St. Edmundsbury Press, England, 1999, p.497

against abuse, her feelings of emptiness, and an unstable past. To date she has been in full compliance with court and treatment providers and continues to stay free.”

Other Daughters of Charity use **the arts** as part of a holistic approach to rehabilitating prisoners. In her description of *Art Behind Bars*, Dr. Rachel Williams, Assistant Professor of Art Education at the University of Iowa and a nationally known expert in the field of prison art, writes: *“Correctional facilities are places where deprivation, oppression, isolation and disenfranchisement lurk. Art offers one activity that is productive, non-violent, communicative, and insightful for people who are incarcerated.”*²

Sister Maria Liebeck (Province of St. Louis) has been involved in prison ministry since the 1960s. For the past seventeen years, Sister has visited an inmate on Death Row who has artistic talent. She has provided him with art supplies and his work has been shown in displays and galleries in Little Rock, Arkansas. Sister Maria also designed a banner to be flown on the vigil of any execution date at the gate of the Arkansas governor’s house.

Sisters Mary Polutanovich and Angele Hinkey (Province of Evansville) offer a weekly art session with the women of the Milwaukee Medium Security Detention Centre, where there are over a thousand inmates – fewer than 50 of whom are female. A warden who felt concerned that the female inmates were being overlooked invited the Sisters to work directly within the “pod” of the women’s section. The inmates come voluntarily and, using rubber stamps, coloured pencils, markers, and a variety of other supplies, discover a medium for self-expression and an opportunity to make something for themselves or for someone important to them. They genuinely appreciate the art time as a “space of creativity and quiet” so rarely found in the prison setting.

Sister Mary says: *“One of the favourite activities is card- making. Some women are so poor they cannot buy cards at the prison store. Making a card gives self esteem as well as being a way to keep in touch with their children and families.”* When there is a woman who shows an aptitude for art and an interest in artistic expression, Sister Angele arranges to meet her one-on-one for a session of oil painting. She shares the following reflection: *“Every week when I go to the women in the prison, I am amazed that we are there . . . we try to give the women a touch of beauty and truth, during the time we are there. They have discovered that they can do something beautiful and be proud of it. We respect them, affirm them and love them, through what we do with them . . . create. . . I live in the mystery of this calling! But one thing I do know is that it is really authentic . . . I would have never imagined that I would be there . . . ! The fact that it is so makes my heart beat wildly.. I love being there, as rough as it is . . . as rough as they are . . . there is beauty to be found and cultivated and made to blossom . . . even for a short time.”*

Over and over again, the theme of “accompaniment” stands out clearly as one of the primary needs of prisoners. Sister Doris Moore (Province of St. Louis) asked for prayers for a young man who was on Death Row in the Federal Correction Centre in

² Williams, Dr. Rachel, Ph.D., quoted in a description of “Art Behind Bars,” an art-based community service programme for inmates in the Monroe County Detention Centre.

Texas for the murder of a military officer. Through the generous efforts of Sister Margaret Barrett, General Councillor, this plea was forwarded to all the English-speaking provinces. The young man began receiving letters from all over the world, up to 50 letters a day! He eventually experienced a profound conversion wrought by the overwhelming love and concern expressed in this outpouring of correspondence – and most particularly, by the letters of a group of little girls from Spain who wrote faithfully to him until his execution.

Sister Joan Pytlik (Province of St. Louis), who visits at the Brickeys Arkansas State Prison, has been accompanying a man serving a life sentence without possibility of parole, for the past 11 years. During his incarceration, he spoke to Sister about his desire to become a Catholic and was subsequently baptised by the Bishop of the diocese within the prison walls.

Sister Virginia Dunker (Province of St. Louis) offers her time and talent to tutor male inmates at Varner State Prison, helping them to meet the requirements of their G.E.D. (Secondary Education Diploma).

Sister Elizabeth Racko (Province of Los Altos Hills), serving on the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe Reservations in Tuba City, Arizona, writes: *“The most important quality to be stressed in any prison ministry is that the Sister visitor have a non-judgmental attitude and be faithful to keeping going back at the times and days to which she said she would be committed. This is most important for effective accompaniment in prison ministry.”* In her own ministry with prisoners, Sister has helped raise funds for the inmates’ personal needs by printing their work as greeting cards and offering them for sale.

When people are released from prison, the need for accompaniment and support is still paramount. Sister Elizabeth Greim (Province of Emmitsburg) describes an outreach development of the meals programme run by the Daughters of Charity in Baltimore, Maryland. Former inmates who came seeking a hot meal also expressed needs that ranged from the use of a phone to having someone to accompany them to court. Given the high incidence of illiteracy in the prison population, it is no wonder that these men and women would require ongoing assistance in understanding the processes of the legal system, travelling to other locations (how does one follow directions when he/she cannot read?), and complying with conditions laid down by the court.

Through their creativity and compassion, the Sisters and their associates accompany and assist poor prisoners, reminding them of the faithful love offered by our forgiving God.

Let us close with a poem which beautifully expresses this experience of God’s grace, composed by one of the inmates of the Milwaukee Medium Security Detention Centre:

Dependence on God

Sometimes, life’s filled with disappointment,
shattered dreams that have created great pain.

There are times we have to lose it all,
but those are the times when we can gain!

When we have learned to be content,
and let God have contro.l
Then we'll have gained what will bring
peace and contentment to heart and soul!

We tend to want to hold on to that
which, we have always known.
It may be that we fear the thought
of having to face the future alone!

But, our God will never forsake us;
He's faithful and He's just;
He'll see us through the darkest night,
If in him we will place our trust!

He is one whom we can depend on,
And he'll never leave our side.
In him we'll find the strength we need
when at times we are sorely tempted and tried!

When we've reached a place
where we can't seem to cope,
we want to give up, for we've lost all hope.
If we call on his name he will hear our plea
And will cause all the darkness of despair to fle

Sister Christina Maggi
Daughter of Charity

Province of Albany

The International Committee of the Daughters of Charity on human trafficking

Mention the word "slavery" and most people would argue that this horrific practice does not exist in our modern world. The reality is that every year between 600,000 and 800,000 men, women and children are trafficked throughout the world.

Meeting of the International Committee of the Daughters of Charity on human trafficking (Queens, 1st -2nd March 2008)

On March 1st and 2nd 2008, Sr. Margaret Barrett, D.C., Councillor for the English-speaking Provinces, convened the second meeting of the International Committee on Human Trafficking. Representatives from the five United States

Provinces, Great Britain, Ireland and Australia met in Queens, New York (Albany Province) to reflect on this tragedy of human trafficking. Three experts in this field were invited to present their findings to the committee.

The first was **Kathleen Mitchell** from **Phoenix, Arizona**. Ms. Mitchell is a former victim of trafficking. She is the founder of DIGNITY, a programme that assists women who are struggling to recover from a life of prostitution and abuse. She now works as a consultant for the programme and is a national advocate for victims. Kathleen's personal testimony about the terrible reality of the life of victims caught in the web of prostitution and victimisation was, for each of us, a powerful and intense experience.

The second speaker was **Carol Smolenski**, the Executive Director of ECPAT-(End Child prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes) USA. Carol spoke about the tragedy of child prostitution, pornography and trafficking. Her descriptions of the plight of our children throughout the world were heartbreaking. She told the committee about children being kidnapped and sold. They are used as cheap labour in the carpet industry, cocoa fields, prostitution rings. They are used as camel jockeys, domestic servants and sex slaves. The children are beaten and starved. They are without educational opportunities or healthcare.

Sr. Helene Hayes, a Good Shepherd Sister, was the last speaker. Sr. Helene has completed research on the impact of being trafficked. She interviewed 65 women from numerous countries. The women were victims of trafficking. The questions she asked were: What was life like before you were trafficked? What was life like during your trafficking experience? What is life like for you now that you have escaped from the trafficking situation? She also asked the women about the emotional and social impact of being a victim. Sr. Helene reported that the women's lives were devastated by this serious abuse. The experience of being held hostage by the traffickers and forced into prostitution brought the women to the edge of despair. Their journey back to health is a difficult and long process.

Rev. Charles Plock, C.M., from St. John's University and a Board Member of Covenant House, presided at the Eucharistic celebration for the committee. We prayed for the victims of trafficking and that we ourselves would be able to see and hear the needs of these men, women and children and for the wisdom and the courage to respond in the spirit of Vincentian action.

On 2nd March the agenda for the meeting focused on a discussion about the impact the speakers had made on the committee members. The committee discussed what they had seen and heard. They shared the results of their prayer and reflection. Then, the committee members discussed ideas for action on behalf of the victims. Each committee member agreed to bring ideas for action back to her own Province. These ideas for action covered three areas: direct service, advocacy and networking/collaboration.

Commitments regarding direct service included:

- Praying for trafficked persons and those who work for and with them;
- Becoming better informed as well as giving this information to young persons who are most likely to come in touch with trafficked persons,

- Working to prevent trafficking in countries of origin through education. Disseminating resources for trafficked persons through our sisters, ministries, Churches, agencies and (specifically ethnic groups and ethnic-led agencies whose populations may have trafficked persons) was seen as an effective way of educating people.

*We also identified forums where we can advocate on behalf of trafficked persons, and groups with and through whom we can advocate. These included: government, the Vincentian Family, religious groups of women and men, and trade unions. This matter could also be written into the agenda for the American Bishops' Conference. Whenever possible, it is most effective to help victims of trafficking to speak of their experiences as a means of educating people and advocacy. We think that in defending this cause the following measures are essential:

-Advocating policies that affect the treatment of undocumented immigrants, including those who have been trafficked.

-Collaborating with other agencies, institutions, Churches and the United Nations to address the causes of trafficking (poverty, globalisation, etc.)

Action on behalf of those trafficked is most effective when it is collaborative. We are challenged to network with existing organisations, institutions, Churches and governments to provide necessary services. As an international community we are in a position to assist those trafficked to be reintegrated in their home country through the efforts of both the countries that send such people and countries that receive them.

The general consensus about the information we had heard was that education about, and action to, eliminate human trafficking must become a priority for each one of us. We cannot stand by and watch these tragic situations with our arms folded. We cannot turn away from the pain and the reality of our brothers and sisters who are stripped of their dignity and their hope. The time for response is now.

Before and after the formal meeting of the International Committee on Human Trafficking, the committee members were able to visit the United Nations. This meeting of the Daughters of Charity from the English-speaking Provinces coincided with the meeting of the U.N. Commission on the rights of Women. Human Trafficking was discussed and identified as a serious international tragedy that needs to be addressed on a worldwide basis. The Daughters of Charity were able to attend various talks and activities at the U.N.

The committee is grateful to Sr. Margaret Barrett D.C., Councillor for the English-speaking Provinces, for giving us the opportunity to become informed and commit ourselves to collaborating with others to end this terrible crime of human trafficking. We wish to thank Sr. Kathleen Appler, D.C., Councillor (Albany Province) for her hard work in helping to coordinate the meeting. Thank you to Sr. Germaine Price, D.C. (St. Louis Province) for organising the visits to the United Nations. A special word of gratitude goes to Sr. Mary Francis Martin, D.C., Visitatrice of the Albany Province for her gracious hospitality and support for the work of the International Human Trafficking Committee.

Sisters Donna M. Franklin and Joanne Dress
Daughters of Charity

VISIT BY SUPERIORS

Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General,
and Sister Blanca Libia Tamayo, General Councillor

Visit to the Province of Bolivia

February 12th -14th 2008

“*Welcome to Bolivia, Sister Evelyne!*” These were the words that came from our hearts as Sister Evelyne arrived in our Province. After her visit to Peru to celebrate 150 years of Vincentian presence in that country and going to the town of Pisco which suffered so much from the earthquake on August 15th 2007, Sister Evelyne did not forget us either, and gave us the pleasure of her presence for three days, together with Sister Blanca Libia Tamayo, General Councillor for Latin America.

They arrived on February 11th, 2008, feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, and we saw this choice of dates as a sign from Providence. At the airport in El Alto de la Paz, Sister Carmen Toledo, Visitatrice, and the Sisters from the area were joyfully waiting for our visitors.

Cochabamba

Very early next day, Sister Evelyne set off for Cochabamba. Geographically the heart of Bolivia, it is also the heart of our Province, as our Provincial House and several other houses are located there. First our visitors met the Provincial Council. Sister Carmen, with her characteristic simplicity, introduced Sister Evelyne to our little Province, with its strong points as well as its weaknesses, not forgetting the poor persons we serve, people who have to face all kinds of difficulties: political instability, social tensions, the high cost of basic products.

That afternoon, Sister Evelyne and Sister Blanca Libia met the Sisters from Cochabamba, Trinidad and La Paz. Sister Evelyne’s talk was on “The Call to Conversion”. With her customary simplicity Sister Evelyne spoke in Spanish, encouraging us to open the door of our hearts to the Lord, using the words of the book of Revelation: “*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.*” (Rev. 3:20) God does not force his way into our hearts but rather waits patiently for us to open the door. After this reflection, we felt a great desire to open our hearts to the words of the Lord offered to us by Sister Evelyne.

The afternoon included visits to a small village half an hour’s distance from Cochabamba, where several residential programmes and the Seminary are located. The Sisters gathered there had the joy of meeting Sister Evelyne, who shared with them the history of the Company and its current international realities.

On February 13th, after the Eucharist, Sister Evelyne spoke to the assembled Sister Servants and shared with them on “Communication and spiritual

accompaniment of the Sisters”. Her talk was followed by a time for dialogue about our concerns and our difficulties. She concluded by encouraging us to continue to carry out our mission in the light of our Constitutions and Statutes.

In the afternoon, Sister Evelyne met several Sisters from the Provincial Council. She then visited two of the eight centres of the “Amanecer” programme for poor street women and children at risk, serving all ages from infants to the most elderly people.

That evening, the young Sisters and some members of Vincentian Marian Youth Association presented a panorama of our country’s rich folk-lore. And as time inevitably moves on...the next day arrived. After the Eucharist, Sister Evelyne had a meeting with the Council for a sisterly exchange of ideas, projects and dreams to be finalised with the Lord in favour of the poor.

Our Visitatrice thanked Sister Evelyne very warmly because each one of us experienced a sense of renewal in the spirit of the Company. “This is the result of your visit, Sister Evelyne; today we are very grateful for this grace, for God passing among us here in Bolivia. In the name of all the Sisters, thank you.”

Sister Carmen Toledo, Visitatrice, and Father David Paniaga, the Provincial Director, accompanied the visitors to La Paz, where they spent the afternoon. They met the Sisters of the Province who serve poor persons living at an altitude of 4100 metres, as well as a good number of representatives of the Vincentian family (AIC, JMV, SSVF). Afterwards, they had dinner with the Vincentian community who work at evangelising the Indians in this high plateau region in very harsh climate conditions and they face the challenge of inculturation. Thanks to the kind attentions of the Sisters who helped them to cope with the high altitudes, Sister Evelyne and Sister Blanca Libia were very happy with all these meetings.

PHOTO

From Bolivia to Peru

On February 15th Sister Evelyne left for Lima, Peru, while Sister Blanca Libia went to Santiago, Chile. We hold in our hearts the memory of this visit and the commitments we have made. We thank you, Sister Evelyne. We will always remember that you also came to visit us at the difficult time of Sister Teresa Feeley’s illness. We ask God to give you the graces you need to carry out your mission to the Company.

Sister Andrea Emcerita Medina
Daughter of Charity

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of North India

Empowering ethnic young women

Situation of young women from the tribes

In spite of its glorious history and vast natural resources, Orissa remains economically one of the poorest and most underdeveloped States in India. Orissa has a large concentration of tribal people. There are 62 tribal communities in the State, accounting for 22.21 % of the total population. More than one third of the total area has been declared backward and it has a predominantly tribal population. But in some districts like, Gajapati, Kondhomal and Rayagada, the percentage of the tribal population is nearly fifty to sixty percent. In many of the areas which are not easily accessible we find the tribal people leading a most primitive way of life even today.

Generally speaking, the tribal people have remained very backward and vulnerable even up to today and they are subjected to various forms of exploitation. Only 22.31% of them are literate against the State literacy rate of 49%. To safeguard the interests of the tribes people and to help in their development, several important and mandatory constitutional provisions have been made and laws have been passed by the central and the State Governments. The government is carrying out various developmental activities mainly in economic, educational and social spheres but these are a very limited response to the people's many needs.

The Church and various religious congregations are deeply involved in the development and well-being of the tribal people. The Daughters of Charity work in various tribal districts, in education, health and social awareness programmes. The basic problem is poverty and illiteracy. This, together with unfavourable geographical conditions and the people's proverbial ignorance, makes them easy prey to exploitation by different political groups.

In the district of Gajapati where we are serving, there are very large numbers of tribal people. Our main thrust in working for them is the promotion of women and girl children. Education of the tribal girl child is never seen as a priority by the families. They consider it a waste of time and money. Although there are primary schools in most of the villages, girls are not sent to school or they drop out before they complete their primary education. The few who are fortunate enough to continue their education to secondary level are not able to complete this successfully. In our educational system a student has to gain the Secondary School Leaving Certificate before starting university studies. Education is the only means of empowerment for these girls and they do not have access to it. The solution was to open a Centre where the girls can live and prepare for the examinations. Once they pass, they have many options open to them and these options can transform their future. At present we have

two Centres where this service is carried out. One is in Deepthi Sadan, Parlakhemundi, and the other is Marillac Niketan, Gunupur.

We saw this work as a very urgent and particularly relevant service because when the girls have completed their Secondary School studies there are many options open to them in the field of further education. We might ask why so many students fail to gain their Secondary School Leaving Certificate. There are many reasons for this. In the remote villages the teaching standard is very low and the teachers do not come to give lessons on a regular basis. Many of the village schools are run by private persons or groups and the teachers are poorly paid. These places lack the necessary infrastructure.

Every year the Board of Secondary Education in Orissa conducts the Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination. The students from both urban and rural schools have to sit this examination to qualify for the Certificate. Every year when the results are announced we find that students from tribal areas do badly and many of them fail to qualify. They do not have good teachers or educated parents to help them with their studies at home. If they fail they can sit for the examination again but without adequate preparation or coaching they have no chance of passing the examination.

Our education system requires a student to complete the Class X (Secondary School) course and then do two years of pre- university studies. After that they are eligible take up any professional or university studies.

PROVINCIAL PROJECT

After careful reflection and discernment, the Province decided to open Centres where rural and tribal girls can reside and continue their studies for a year. Being town areas, both Gunupur and Parlakhemundi can provide a team of experienced and competent staff to assist these students. Some of our retired teaching sisters are also involved. The communities concerned used various means to make the Centre efficient and welcoming for the students.

Professional training

The communities provide board and lodging for the students who come from distant villages. They had no books and the teachers had to start at basic level. However, the young women were ready to work hard and achieve their goal. They started to respond well and their educational standard began to improve slowly but steadily. At the end of the year, almost all of them were ready to sit for the examination with confidence. They did well, some of them extremely well. The families rejoiced and the young women knew they could do anything they wanted if they only tried and worked hard. All they needed was to be given the means of reaching their goals.

The set up, the atmosphere, the welcome at the Centres and the support of the teachers gave them hope, confidence and the will to succeed. Slowly they discovered their potential and knew they could do it.

Christian formation

As all of them are Catholics, we take care of their faith formation during their stay with us. Many of them come from sub-stations where there is no priest in residence. Many come from villages where there is only a visiting catechist. Some have to be prepared for their First Communion and others for Confirmation.

Catechism, Bible lessons, Gospel sharing, liturgical celebrations were carefully planned so that the girls could take back with them to their homes and to their villages a solid Catholic formation. In many villages today they conduct the prayers, lead the recitation of the rosary and read the Bible to different groups. They have become catechists for their own people. Some of the young women have opted for the religious life, others could not join religious communities because they did not have the requisite standard of education. When they completed their secondary education successfully, they were able to respond to God's call. Some of them have become postulants and others have entered the Seminary of the Daughters of Charity.

Some of the girls are pursuing higher studies in the university and others have started professional courses to become nurses, health workers, primary school teachers etc. It always makes us very happy when they phone us and give us news about how their lives have changed. In the course of time, we hope that the life of the family will also change because of them.

Conclusion

The students say that this Centre has brought light into their lives, hope into their hearts and has enabled them to have a bright future. Their lives have been totally transformed. One thing they are sure about is that if they can stand on their own feet, they do not have to leave the safety of their villages in search of jobs. Our big cities are teeming with thousands of people from the villages searching for jobs, any kind of job, just to survive. It is not a safe place for simple tribal girls from the remote villages. All kinds of exploitation of women are to be found in the cities. Today these young women know the dangers that they will have to face and have become prudent.

It is the aim of these Centres to develop the poor tribal girls' potential, to allow them to become agents of their own development and lead a committed, Christian life spreading the values of the Gospel in their villages and in the tribal community which needs them to be light and salt for the earth.

Sr. Roslie Palayoor

Daughter of Charity

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Motherhouse

Session for Newly Appointed Provincial Directors

Paris, March 26th – April 2nd 2008

"The Provincial Director is a priest of the Congregation of the Mission, who provides for a Province of the Daughters of Charity a service of Vincentian animation and accompaniment ..." (C.75a)

Days and even months have passed since our formation session for newly-appointed Provincial Directors which took place at the Motherhouse at rue du Bac in Paris, but the memories of this experience are still vivid for us. According to the Directory of the Provincial Director, this session takes place every two years for Priests of the Mission who are taking on this role for the first time, while another formation session for all Provincial Directors takes place every ten years (cf. Directory, Ch. I, n° 5. This brief but intensive session (March 26th – April 2nd 2008) was very well-planned and useful. I would like to share some thoughts from these days of *aggiornamento* in our service as Directors of the Sisters.

Arriving in Paris from different parts of the world, we were a group of 14 Provincial Directors: **3 from Asia** (Vietnam, Philippines, South India), **4 from South America** (Argentina-Paraguay, Chile, Peru, Brazil [Recife]), **6 from Europe** (Albania, Spain [Barcelona, Granada], Italy [Rome], Poland [Warsaw, Chelmino]) and **1 from Africa** (Nigeria).

From beginning to end, the atmosphere of the session was brotherly and joyful, not only because it was the Easter season, but also because we knew that these days would encourage and motivate us in our Vincentian service, which would in turn have repercussions on the service of poor persons. The team that organised the session had arranged all the details so that everything would flow as smoothly as possible. The objectives were clear:

- To reflect on the Company today, its spirit and its identity.
- To gain a deeper understanding of the role of the Provincial Director according to the Constitutions and the Directory of the Provincial Directors.
- To study in greater detail certain points in the Constitutions and Statutes of the Daughters of Charity.

These objectives were attained through various conferences, reflections, small group discussions, plenary sessions, personal reflection, open dialogues, celebrations, liturgies, day of recollection, etc. The varied format and excellent organisation provided a positive atmosphere and encouraged everyone to participate.

The animation team was most competent and very attentive to both important and minor details. Chaired by Father Javier Alvarez (Director General), the team consisted of Sister Maria Pia Bertaglia (Visitatrice), Sister Marlene Terezinha Rosa

(General Councillor), and Father Yves Danjou (Provincial Director). Thanks to them, we were able to reach all the goals that had been set. I would also like to mention the ongoing and gracious presence of the General Superiors (Father Gregory Gay and Sister Evelyne Franc), Father Javier Alvarez, the Sisters on the General Council, the speakers, the moderators, the translators as well as all the Sisters of the Motherhouse who worked very hard so that this session would be a memorable experience for us.

So as not to tire my readers with pages of my personal impressions of this gathering, I would like to summarise the proceedings of each day.

On March 26th, the session opened at 9:00 a.m. with the Eucharist presided over by our Superior General. After this the participants were introduced and the programme presented. **Sister Evelyne Franc**, Superioress General, was the first speaker, addressing the theme: "**The Company and its spirituality**" and this led to dialogue. Her presentation was interesting, simple and profound. She gave an overview of the journey of the Company from the first 12 Sisters who came together in 1633 to the present day when 19,937 Sisters are located in 91 countries, 77 provinces and 2322 houses. With their passionate love for God and the poor, and a solid commitment to the Company, the Sisters throughout their history have spread geographically throughout the entire world, impelled by inventiveness to the point of infinity. Sister Evelyne invited us to keep in mind the challenges facing the Company today and the ways we can help the Sisters to continue on this pathway. In presenting the Company, she expressed her certainty that the Sisters are doing their best in serving poor persons, but she also wondered if their love was sufficiently rooted in God. In speaking about the three pillars which support the life of the Sisters: spiritual life, community life and apostolic life, she asked: "are these still prophetic signs?" She shared her concerns with us and encouraged us to help the Sisters resist activism and secularism and to help motivate them to go even farther in terms of mobility, revision of works, vocation ministry, initial and ongoing formation, co-responsibility, subsidiarity, etc. The Provincial Directors have an important role to play in the life of the Company: to help the Sisters to be focused and motivated and to guide and accompany them in addressing the challenges that face the Company today.

In the afternoon of March 26th **Sister Margaret Barrett**, Assistant General, presented the topic "**Identity of the Company in the Church as a Society of Apostolic Life**". She asked an important question: "How should the Company live out its secular spirit without giving in to the temptation of secularism?" With this temptation continually present, we risk becoming lost in today's society. She reminded us that the Daughters of Charity live and serve in the world, but that they are not of the world. They are called to reveal God's love in their service of humanisation and evangelisation. The Daughter of Charity always has a voice that is different, one that is prophetic. Her sole model is Christ; it is he alone whom she seeks to imitate. "*Secularity is in service to poor persons...this secularity enables the Sisters to be sensitive to the calls coming from the world and from poor persons.*" We, as Provincial Directors, need to emphasise this when accompanying and guiding the Sisters in order to help them to live the identity that is proper to their vocation.

On March 27th **Father Fernando Quintano** spoke to us about "**The vows according to the particular spirit of the Daughters of Charity**". With his wide experience, he discussed the origins of this new form of life: a community united for

service with vows in accordance with its specific spirit. He clarified the meaning of the evangelical counsels and the vows: one's baptismal consecration and the 3 vows are lived out from the perspective of service of the poor. He concluded by saying: *"One is not a Daughter of Charity because of making vows, but one makes vows because one is a Daughter of Charity and to always be so more perfectly."*

That afternoon, **Father Javier**, the Director General, presented the topic, **"The Provincial Director according to the Constitutions and the Directory of the Provincial Directors"**. In the light of the history and documents of the Company, he focused on the service that has been confided to us, reminding us not only of our responsibilities as Directors, but also the qualities required for this role: *"The Director must be a good missionary, one who practices the virtues proper to his spiritual and apostolic vocation. He should have a clear understanding of the spirit of the Company and truly appreciate the service that has been confided to him."* He continued by describing the various services that the Director is called to provide: collaboration with government, initial and ongoing formation, formation for Sister Servants, pastoral visits, accompaniment, etc.

On the morning of March 28th **Sister Rosa Maria Miro and Sister Julma Neo**, General Councillors, gave a talk on **"The Provincial Director and his role in the formation of the Sisters"**. Each Sister spoke about the importance of our role in both the initial and ongoing formation of the Sisters. Their presentations featured the documents of the Church and of the Company, taking into account the challenges that exist in today's world: a constantly changing world, the role of women, human development, etc. They showed us a pathway to follow in accompaniment and with regard to formation, taking into account the service of poor persons, the identity of the Daughters of Charity, community life, etc. It is important that formation be well organised, that it take into account the context and the personality of each Sister, as well as the cultural context. All this is necessary to transform the person who receives it. Formation should be holistic: (spiritual, theological, human, cultural, apostolic and Vincentian). Formation that is well-coordinated helps promote discernment. For this reason, the **method of formation** is just as important as the **content**. This will help give meaning to the Sisters' lives and allow them to grow in maturity and freedom.

That afternoon, **Father J. M. Pereira**, Director in Portugal, spoke about **"The Director's role in animating the Province: the pastoral visit"**. He used two Gospel scenes: the Visitation and the Good Shepherd to remind us that our mission is pastoral and Vincentian. The first scene, the Visitation, tells us that the pastoral visit is characterised by cordiality that promotes an atmosphere of joy during meetings and exchanges with the Sisters. The scene of the Good Shepherd provides a model for us to imitate: that we love our service, love our "sheep", give of ourselves unreservedly, and strive to help the local communities be places of faith, hope and love.

Afterwards, **Sister Marlene Terezinha**, General Councillor, addressed the topic of **"The Provincial Director and spiritual accompaniment"**. This brotherly assistance to the Sisters is not therapy, but rather accompaniment. It asks us to be good listeners, who welcome, encourage, clarify and assist the Sisters in discernment, in order to promote self-understanding for the Sisters. The Sister and the Director listen to the Holy Spirit together so that they can discern the Sister's identity, her true

situation and God's will for her in her life. It involves encouraging the Sister to live her vocation in humility, simplicity and charity.

March 29th was a day of intensive work with three speakers:

- **Father Yves Danjou**, Director of France North presented: "**The role of the Director**", **Father Javier Alvarez**, Director General, spoke about "**The Provincial Director in the Council and the Provincial Assembly: assistance in governance**" and **Father Vernaschi**, Director in Sienna, gave conferences on: "**Proper Law in the Company and Matters of Canon Law, the Constitutions and the Directory of the Provincial Director**".

We deepened our understanding of our role as Provincial Directors through the dynamics of listening and sincere dialogue. We received information that clarified issues that are not always clear and we were able to share our concerns. We discovered that even though the role of Director is different now, the assistance, support, active presence and encouraging accompaniment we provide are no less important, but rather a valuable contribution to the governing of the Province and to supporting each Sister.

Sunday, March 30th **Day of recollection accompanied by the Superior General and the Director General**. This was a desert day, a time of silence, with texts and suggestions for reflection to help us to review our lives in the light of the Word of God and the Constitutions... We meditated on the virtues needed to carry out our mission as pastors, servants and animators.

Monday, March 31st **Feast of the Annunciation, Day of Renewal of Vows for the Sisters**: a solemn and festive celebration in the Chapel of the Apparitions brought many Sisters together. Father Javier Alvarez presided over the Mass which was concelebrated by Father Gregory, the Directors and several other Vincentian priests. We were united with the Sisters in singing the Magnificat after their renewal of vows. Father Javier invited the Sisters to live out their vows in prophetic ways. After this very moving Eucharistic celebration, we had breakfast with the Sisters in the Motherhouse. In honour of the feast day, we had the afternoon off.

April 1st was a day of intense activity devoted to studying the theme: "**The Director and the documents of the Company**". In the morning, **Sister Rita Ferri**, the Treasurer General, gave a very clear and detailed talk on the "**Guide for Provincial Treasurers**". She went further and also included a reflection on the administration of goods and the vow of poverty, insisting on a key point: *"it is very important to keep this priority in mind: the service of Christ in persons who are poor."*

That afternoon there was a presentation on "**The Website of the Company**", then "**The Treasures of the Archives of the Company**." These presentations helped us become familiar with what is new and to marvel at the history and the current life of the Company.

On April 2nd we reached the end of this session. Father Gregory Gay's last presentation was: "**The relationship between the Provincial Director and the Superior General**". He discussed important references we should bear in mind in our

service: the Constitutions, the Directory and some practical advice. In an atmosphere of very simple dialogue, points were clarified, concrete examples were given, and important ideas were brought up. Many of our questions were answered not only by the Superior General, but also by others who were collaborating in the session: Father Javier, Sister Evelyne, the General Councillors and the Treasurer General.

We concluded our session with the Eucharist celebrated at Saint Lazare and presided over by the Superior General. In his homily inspired by the readings of the day (Acts 5:17-26, Jn. 3:16-21), he reminded us of the inspiring words in which he urged each of us:

“Let the Sisters evangelise you. In this way, you will help each other to live freely and fully this life to which God has invited you to participate... You are called to work with the Daughters of Charity, to assist them in truly witnessing to the life and love of God, especially to those who are poor in this world...”

Father Fernando Macias Fernandez, CM
Provincial Director of Chili

WORD OF A PROPHET, BEARER OF HOPE

The power of love

“My faith saved me”

Ingrid Betancourt’s first public gesture on coming down from the aeroplane was to make the Sign of the Cross and to kneel down with her mother for quite a long time on the tarmac at the airport, thanking God for her liberation: “I give thanks to God and to the Blessed Virgin... Yes, I have dreamed about this moment for so long, and so first of all I thank God and the Blessed Virgin Mary to whom I so often prayed that I would be set free.”

In answer to a journalist who remarked that she seemed much more religious than she was before her abduction, Ingrid said: *“A few hours ago I was with my children and my first husband and they said to me: ‘Stop talking about religion; everyone’s going to think you’ve become some sort of Holy Joe.’ That’s not true, but what is for certain is that I have great faith. I think my release was a miracle; I really believe that. I had faith before but it was a ritualistic faith. I did believe but I could do without faith. In the jungle, I could not survive without it. It was my strength, and then it became an absolute presence. For me, it’s a reality that is more than real. Just as I see this table and can touch it...I didn’t hear a voice, I didn’t see an image, but I am deeply convinced of God’s love.”*

On Sunday, July 6th 2008, Ingrid visited the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at Montmartre in Paris to give thanks to Jesus and Mary for her freedom. After praying there for some time she gave an interview to the Catholic journal *Pelerin (Pilgrim)*

explaining how her faith was manifested in the most painful moments of her captivity, how her love for Jesus and Mary and reading the Bible gave her the strength not to succumb to hatred for her captors.

“While I was being held captive, I made the resolution that the moment I was set free, I would first of all thank God. Why? Because if I did not have the Lord at my side, I do not think I would have been able to grow through this suffering. Being a hostage puts you in a situation of constant humiliation. You are a victim who is completely controlled by others; you experience the vilest aspects of the human psyche. Faced with this, there are two choices: one is to let yourself be destroyed, to become bitter, vicious and vindictive, to let your heart be filled with hatred. Or you can choose the other option, the one that Jesus showed us. He calls us to: ‘Bless your enemy.’ And each time that I read the Bible, I felt as though these words were addressed to me, as if Jesus was in front of me, that He knew what He had to tell me. And it penetrated right into my heart. Of course, I realise that when the enemy is shockingly cruel it’s difficult to be faithful to these words. However, as soon as I made the effort to say the words ‘Bless your enemy’ when I wanted to say exactly the opposite, it was like magic. It was like a sense of...relief. And the horror would disappear, as simple as that. I could talk to you for days about things like that. I know that a transformation has taken place within me, and this transformation is a result of this contact, this ability to listen to what God wanted for me. It was a constant dialogue with God, through the Gospel....

...

I must tell you about how I discovered Mary. My Dad had great devotion to the Blessed Virgin, whereas for me, I must say that at the time, I found Mary to be a bit...childish. Let’s say that for me she was not really a very appealing image of a woman. And then, while I was being held hostage, I reread the Gospel and felt a great admiration for her. Obviously, that is because in order to understand the Blessed Virgin you need to have had some experience of life and a certain level of maturity. And I began to see how amazing this young woman was; she accepted to have a child even though she had a completely different plan for her life. She risked everything. Many Christians already know all this, but for me it was a real discovery. I found in Mary someone who is strong, intelligent and has a sense of humour...I must say, as the Canadians would express it, I fell in love with Mary on reading the Gospel of Saint John when he writes about the wedding at Cana. I find this dialogue between Mary and Jesus extraordinary. This closeness between the two of them is fantastic. In spite of all the objections Jesus makes to his mother, she already knows that he’ll do what she wants, that he’ll transform the water into wine for the wedding feast out of love for her. When I read this passage, I couldn’t help thinking about my relationship with my son Lorenzo...

Even though I didn’t see Mary as someone separate from Jesus, I thought about her suffering as a mother and I constantly asked her: ‘Please, Mary, take care of my Mom and my children...Let me see them again some day.’ And as I said that, I had a feeling that she heard me. And this helped to calm me.”

*In that atmosphere of spiritual solitude, surrounded on all sides by aggressive enemies, I had to learn not to react as I had in the past. I had to learn to be silent, to keep my head down. The only person to whom I could speak was the Blessed Virgin. Well done, Mary!” (Excerpt from the publication *Pelerin*, n° 6554)*

On Friday, July 11th Ingrid Betancourt continued her pilgrimage of thanksgiving. She went to the Sanctuary of Lourdes with a brief stop at the Chapel at rue du Bac, acting very discreetly in order to protect herself from the swarm of photographers and journalists who had been pursuing her since her arrival in Paris. At the Motherhouse, Sister Evelyne Franc and the General Council had the joy of welcoming her and sharing a privileged moment with her.

This courageous and faith-filled woman wants to continue to take action for the liberation of the other hostages and to seek an end to corruption and violence.

IN ST. VINCENT'S TIME AND IN OUR OWN DAY

In St. Vincent's time.. and in our own day

INTRODUCTION

Beginning with this issue, you will find a series of articles in the section "History of the Company" that come from the *Vincentian Notes* written by Father Morin, CM.

Having lived for many years at the Berceau of Saint Vincent de Paul, Father Morin carried out extensive research on the writings and works of Saint Vincent in order to make Saint Vincent's message his own. He has left us with an important collection of writings in which he shares his discoveries with striking simplicity and in a way that is meaningful for everyone. It would be a great loss if we were to "*abandon these treasures under the dust of the years,*" as Father Andrew Sylvestre would say.

We believe it is important to make these valuable reflections available to the entire Company. Translated into various languages, these texts will allow us all to appreciate the spiritual insights of our Founder and to continue to deepen within us as Daughters of Charity our Gospel spirit of serving Jesus Christ in persons who are poor.

We would like to thank our brother Vincentians for allowing us to publish these texts in the Echoes.

Vincent de Paul and the Holy Spirit

I. HOLY SPIRIT, WHO ARE YOU?

Living in today's world where the media have so much power and influence, I spend a good part of my life reading and rereading the fourteen volumes of the correspondence, conferences and documents of Saint Vincent de Paul. Sometimes I dream...

If Vincent de Paul had lived in our times...with the press, interviews, radio and television...he who, in spite of the limited means of communication in the 17th century, was at the time of his death known throughout the kingdom of France as well as in Italy, Poland, Scotland, North Africa and even Madagascar, a country so far away that it took a voyage of seven months at best to reach it!

I am well aware that historians dislike this type of question, rightly considering it anachronistic, a sort of unforgivable sin. Nevertheless...wouldn't it be interesting to corner M. Vincent and get him to reveal the source of his extraordinary energy! We might ask him, for example: M. Vincent, what was the origin of this charism with regard to the poor? Where did you get this insight that an encounter with Jesus Christ would come via the person of the poor? Who gave you this instinct for detecting situations of misery and injustice and discerning their causes? Where did you find this deeply held conviction for motivating and bringing together so many people of good will, people who had sometimes been paralysed by custom, selfishness or indifference?

Let us imagine, if you will, M. Vincent's response. I repeat: Imagine! In fact, though, we don't need to imagine anything. To know more about his reply we need only draw from the writings and other testimonies of our great saint from the Landes region, that have been preserved.

M. Vincent, would have given the substance of his thoughts in the following reply: **The secret** of what you call my energy, the secret of my social and charitable realism, the secret of my ability to motivate and bring people together... is quite simply **the Spirit of Jesus Christ**.

The Spirit of Jesus Christ...this expression comes frequently from the lips and the pen of Saint Vincent, while the expression "Holy Spirit" is seldom used. One day, however, on December 13th 1658, he explained the subject very clearly during a conference to the Missioners: "The rule says...to tend to our own perfection, we must clothe ourselves with the Spirit of Jesus Christ. O Saviour! O Gentlemen! What an undertaking! To put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ! ...but what is this spirit that is diffused? When we say: 'The Spirit of Our Lord is in such a person or in such actions,' what do we mean? Is it that the Holy Spirit in person is poured out on them? Yes, the Holy Spirit, in person, is poured into the souls of the just and abides personally in them. When it is said that the Holy Spirit acts in someone, we mean that the Holy Spirit, dwelling in such a person, bestows on him the same inclinations and the same dispositions as Jesus Christ had on earth, and causes him to act in the same way. I do not say with equal perfection, but according to the measure of the gifts of this Divine Spirit... But what is the Spirit of Our Lord? It is the spirit of perfect charity, replete with the marvellous esteem of the Divinity and with an infinite desire to honour it worthily, knowledge of the greatness of the Father so that it may be admired and extolled unceasingly." (Coste XII, p. 626-627, 1963 ed.)

Contrary to what some people have incorrectly supposed, M. Vincent undertook extensive theological studies during his seven years at the University of Toulouse. Moreover, in contrast to many of his illustrious contemporaries, he had the gift of being able to translate theology into simple and dynamic language, because of his frequent contact with the poor and marginalised. He was like someone who had “the same inclinations and dispositions that Jesus Christ had on earth, one who was clothed with the Holy Spirit.”

This, then, is Saint Vincent’s approach. This is the response he would give to our question: HOLY SPIRIT, WHO ARE YOU? The Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus Christ. It is the spirit that gives us light and strength to follow Jesus Christ today, to imitate him, to have the same inclinations and dispositions as those of Christ in the Gospel. This approach and definition may seem a bit simplistic. What is certain, however, is that M. Vincent understood the theology of the Holy Spirit and firmly believed it. On more thorough reflection, we can find the entire mystery of the Holy Spirit in the response made by Saint Vincent.

First of all, we find affirmation of the existence and the presence of the third person of the Trinity. We then find affirmation of the vibrant and logical relationship of the Spirit, to Jesus Christ and to the Gospel. We also find affirmation of the Spirit’s role and action in individuals, society and the Church. This action gives light and strength for the Gospel to enter into present day realities, to guide us to experience what Jesus Christ experienced, and to have the same mindset as Jesus. As Saint Vincent used to say, such persons are “clothed with the Holy Spirit.”

This is how M. Vincent spoke about the Holy Spirit. You may well be thinking that I could develop this theme at some length, using numerous quotations and references. For the purpose of this talk, however, I would prefer to focus on the personal experience of Vincent de Paul, for I am certain that in the response that he would have given us, he himself would have insisted particularly on the question: What experiences do we have or have we had of the Holy Spirit?

Vincent de Paul would have appreciated these words! As a good peasant from the Landes region, he preferred questions based on experience rather than knowledge, responses rooted in reality.

Let us not forget that in the first half of the 17th century, in M. Vincent’s time, there were many famous preachers and masters of the spiritual life who were at times rather abstract! Because of his origins and his commitment to poor people, M. Vincent kept his feet on the ground...even in the presence of the Holy Spirit. He liked to prove and test faith through experience. This is why one day in a letter to a confrere who had asked his advice, he spontaneously concluded: “This is my faith, this is my experience!” Perhaps this was the best way ever to sum up, in a manner both thorough and concise, his spiritual journey: “My faith...my experience.”

I tell you this so that you may agree that, out of all the questions we have asked this evening, M. Vincent would have spent a great deal of time on the following one: What experiences have you had of the Holy Spirit? I even suppose, being the Gascon he was, he would have considered the plural nature of the question a bit ironic,

recognising that a single experience in one's life could be more significant and decisive than all the others.

Let us return, then, to this simulated interview and to our question: What experiences of the Holy Spirit have you had? Let us allow M. Vincent to speak to us...

I couldn't count them all...However, it took me a long time to understand that a simple meeting, such as an encounter with a poor person, a sharing of prayer or something unexpected confided to me, could be the presence and sign of the Holy Spirit. For a long time, I met the Holy Spirit without really knowing Him. Then, one day during an enlightened year, I found Him in my encounters with poor people, and finally I recognised the Holy Spirit. After that, I never ceased to find the Spirit at all hours, on the corner of every street, so much so that at times I judged him to be intrusive and demanding. I even said one day, at the conclusion of shared prayer: "I remember—should I say this?—that, in the past, when I'd come back from giving a mission, it seemed to me that, when I reached Paris, the gates of the city were going to fall upon and crush me; and seldom did I return from a mission without that thought coming to mind." (Coste XI, 391)... I had left so many poor persons behind. At those times, the Holy Spirit continued to call out to me, even though I had reached the limits of my strength.

To sum up my experiences and encounters with the Holy Spirit, I can say that I recognised the Spirit first of all in the faith of my parents and my family. I then found him in my studies, although I also found him in other places, too. After a period when things were difficult, I tried to understand the Spirit better through the great spiritual masters. Here, however, it was more a refuge than a search. Finally, I met the Spirit in a poor person and ever since then we have never left each other, even at those times when I found the Spirit to be intrusive and demanding.

I recall (this has been stored in your Archives) that just a few hours before my death, a confrere, Fr. Dehorgny asked me: 'Do you believe in the Holy Spirit'? and I responded, Yes...yes." After all I had experienced, it was no longer a matter just of faith, I had the evidence: "this is my faith, this is my experience!" Let us go back, though, to the stages of this process, in them we can all recognise something of our own experience.

I first became aware of the existence and the presence of the Holy Spirit in my parents' faith, a faith that was oh so simple and traditional!

At that time, priests in the Landes region, often provided only a minimal spiritual service, that is to say, they celebrated Mass on Sundays. They were not involved in catechesis. It seems that I have become known in the history of the Church as an innovator and promoter of catechesis! However that may be, everything came from my parents, the prayers that they taught me and that we would recite as a family, especially in the evenings. Of course, as soon as I learned how to make the Sign of the Cross, I heard the Holy Spirit mentioned and I prayed to him.

In 1653, at the age of 72, I had the opportunity to teach catechism to the poor people at the Holy Name of Jesus Hospital. I quickly rediscovered the type of

catechesis that was familiar to me from my childhood, using comparisons to teach people: “Just as the sun has three characteristics but these three elements do not make three suns, so in the Holy Trinity there are three Persons, but all three make only one God. So then, there are three elements in the sun; namely the substance of the sun, light and heat. The substance of the sun is that beautiful star we see in the heavens. The light is what shines down on us and on everyone on earth, dispelling the darkness of the night and, in a word, it is what gladdens all hearts; for, if we were in darkness, what joy would we have? The third element in the sun is heat, a great heat proceeding from the substance of the sun and from the light. It is this great heat that ripens fruits and other things on the earth. When you feel stifling heat, as happened when we came in here, it is from the sun that this comes. From this comparison you can see how there is only one God and three Persons in God who are inseparable from one another, just as the sun is inseparable from the light, and the light from the heat.” (Coste XIII, 176).

Some people might think this was a very poor and rudimentary method of teaching doctrine. That is true. Later, however, when I could understand the relationship that exists between the Holy Spirit and charity, it did not seem much different from the heat of the sun, as represented by the early religious teaching I had in my family.

The Holy Spirit, the sun’s heat...that causes fruit to ripen...the little boy from the Landes understood this. This was my first experience of the Spirit.

When I was 15, I was sent to the little school of Cordeliers in Dax (located on the site of the present day central post office). I lived with the de Comet family who lived on the street named rue des Fusillés. My family had chosen this path of studies for me and made great sacrifices for it. Acutely aware of this, I decided to succeed at any cost, in order to repay my family well for the opportunity they gave me.

At the age of 18, I began my studies at the University of Toulouse and once again encountered the Holy Spirit, in a much more serious and profound way than my childhood references to the heat of the sun.

We studied the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas at the university, and I recall that the part dealing with the Holy Spirit was very deep and very rich in content, too rich, even, for someone like me whose mind was preoccupied with other concerns.

Nevertheless, I graduated as a bachelor of theology, a degree that was much more significant and valued in that era than it seems to be today. If you have the time, look up what wise Fr. Coste has written on this subject (I, 9, 17; XIIIa, 15, 26-27, 28, 45, 47, 66, XIIIb, 20, 63, 65, 92, 93). My goal, however, was always to be more and more successful as quickly as possible, so that I could return to my native region in order to have there “the means of an honourable retirement and spend the rest of my days near my family” (Coste I, 15).

Holy Spirit, who are you? In those days, I swear that I knew the Spirit quite well theologically, but at the same time recognised his presence less and less, until finally not at all. I could speak about the Spirit, almost as well as Saint Thomas did...I

believed in the Spirit, but to be honest, even with all that, I felt in no way committed. I lived my life with a firm hope of returning to my own region, something that I considered a duty, a matter of justice that was more important than anything else.

This was also the time of that adventure which led me to Marseilles, Rome, then on to Avignon and Paris, more precisely into the neighbourhood of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where the Gascons lived, people from my part of France. With the help of these good connections, I obtained a position as chaplain in the court of Queen Marguerite de Valois. I then acquired an abbey near La Rochelle and I thought this would be very much to my advantage. Not long before that I had written a letter to my mother that arrived in February 1610 at Ranquines, my home. I expected to return there soon, once I had made my fortune!

Suddenly, however, the winds of success changed without my realising that the Holy Spirit could be there for a purpose! I was unjustly accused of theft and at the same time, the profitable arrangement that I thought I had made with the abbey of La Rochelle turned into a disaster! At every turn there was failure. In November 1611, at the age of 30, I took refuge (this word is no exaggeration) with Fr. de Berulle, who founded the Congregation of the Oratorians during that same month.

The texts and other writings that you have preserved relating to this foundation clearly show that this was for me a time of fervour that was rather charismatic, as you would call it today. It was the first fervour of a beginner and Fr. de Berulle, with his austere temperament and particular spirituality, was familiar with it. Did I perhaps need this shock to make me react?

Holy Spirit, who are you? I certainly encountered the Spirit in the company of Fr. de Berulle and his first disciples, but doubtless through my own fault, I never really recognised this Spirit. A language that seemed a bit excessive and abstract perhaps did not suit my temperament and was beyond me. When the first opportunity presented itself, I left, as do all unsettled people in a time of crisis. I became pastor of a little country parish in Clichy. I only remained there sixteen months, but as I very vividly recall, this was the place where I discovered how near the Holy Spirit really was. Fleeting, I felt the Spirit's presence among a group of Christians. I know that records of this experience have been preserved. Among them is this sentence that I recall having said: "I don't think the Pope himself is as happy as a Pastor in the midst of such good-hearted people" (Coste IX, 507).

"A Pastor in the midst of the people..." In order for you to understand clearly all that this sentence meant for me in terms of discovery and wonder, I must remind you that at this time I had been a priest for twelve years, and until the day I arrived in Clichy, I had never had a pastoral role among the people. Yes, I had carried out advanced studies in theology; I had a very significant spiritual experience living in the presence of Fr. de Berulle. Being "a Pastor in the midst of the people..." however, was something completely different. I felt happier than the Pope. And I said this at a time when I was still dreaming about promotion, about finding success and returning to my homeland. The unfortunate proof of this is that I wasted no time in leaving "such good-hearted people". What does it matter! With hindsight, I am convinced now that the Holy Spirit was there. He gave me a sign and once again, I pretended not to recognise him. An excellent post was offered to me, to be tutor in the de Gondi

family, one of the richest and most powerful families in the kingdom. I accepted, abandoning my parishioners who were so good-hearted. I was not aware that this was the final step before returning to my homeland, as well as the first step towards an astonishing evolution in my spiritual life.

Soon after my arrival in the de Gondi household, I experienced a time of confusion, tedium, anxiety and doubt; a doubt that spread like a virus, to the point that I was no longer capable of saying the smallest prayer, nor even reciting the Creed. While I possessed all the material security I needed, I had never felt so poor, so dejected and so anxious. Holy Spirit, who are you? Where are you?

You know the rest of the story. I will only give a summary of it, emphasising one coincidence, something that happened during this period of darkness.

As tutor for the de Gondi family, I accompanied them from one chateau to the next. Someone came to me one day asking for a priest to visit a poor man in his last agony, a poor, lonely and abandoned man. I went to him. The joy that filled this man on seeing a priest before his death deeply moved me and prompted a response. This took place in Gannes in Picardy on January 24th 1617. I was 36 years old and had been a priest for just over 16 years. That day, this old abandoned man caused me to discover deep within me “the inclinations and dispositions that Jesus Christ had on earth.” I felt like someone “who had been clothed with the Holy Spirit,” or rather, someone who was at last conscious of the Holy Spirit’s presence within him. It had been for a long time...since the day of my baptism on April 24th, 1581 in the little church in Pouy.

I don’t want to weary you; I’m not going to tell the story of my whole life. Moreover, from that day on, life became tiring and backbreaking, and at the same time simple and wonderful. In fact, from that day onwards, I found the Holy Spirit continually, on every corner of the street, and even as far away as...Madagascar.

Notice that this didn’t take place in the course of a single day. It took me six full months of reflection, hesitation and consideration. It is true that I experienced this enlightenment at Gannes and that I recognised the presence of the Holy Spirit in the person of this poor man. But there was also the question of those twenty-two years invested in finding a secure post and ensuring that I could return to the land of my birth, where I could finally fulfil my duty to my family as they expected from me.

Yes, it took six months, as well as a second invitation from the Spirit. In August 1617 I fled the de Gondi estate to take refuge in a small parish in the diocese of Lyons.

I had been there for three weeks, and already the Holy Spirit was waiting for me. A poor family, destitute and abandoned by everyone, had fallen seriously ill. When I learned of this, my new parishioners and I did what was necessary to care for this family and at last...I understood! I discovered the Holy Spirit in the need and the trust shown by these poor sick persons. I also found the Spirit, as I had at Clichy, in “such good-hearted people”. I understood, as we had said in my family at Ranquines; that the Holy Spirit is warmth, as Love is. I believe that there is nothing more that can be added.

Also, I don't want to try your patience, since I think I have mentioned the essentials. The rest, since the month of August 1617 until the day of my death when I affirmed my faith in the Holy Spirit, the rest was nothing but a long and wonderful companionship, even if it was not always a smooth and easy relationship. I will let your speaker bring this to a conclusion. Goodbye, my sons and daughters!"

Now put yourself in my place: fancy having to follow on from M. Vincent! I tried to take up as closely as possible what he has said or written about his experience of the Holy Spirit. And since he has invited me to conclude, I would stress for us today the four phases through which the revelation of the Holy Spirit has passed: the family setting, the theological approach, an experience that is charismatic and finally the discovery of the Spirit within the Church and in the person of the poor.

I. THE FAMILY SETTING

In Gascony in St. Vincent's times, in the little parish of Pouy or at Ranquines, the methods of handing on the faith were as basic and random as those used today. Not for the same reasons, of course! There were many priests, but their formation was often minimal, especially in rural areas. In families at that time, atheism didn't exist, but Protestantism was a very recent and strong challenge to people's faith, especially in these regions. Family traditions had not yet become routines that would be considered more or less old-fashioned; they were often full of conviction and courage. We need to remember that this is the context in which the young Vincent made the Sign of the Cross for the first time: in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! Even though we know their tradition was simple and basic, even though the Holy Spirit was simply compared to a "heat that ripens fruits"... now that we know the life journey of Vincent de Paul, we can ask ourselves about the immense value of this first stage in seeking and encountering the Spirit. The family, when it is a place of unity, is certainly a privileged setting for the Spirit, especially for children. At first, it does not involve knowledge, but begins with experience. And I believe that it is important, good and natural to have the experience even before penetrating the mystery of God and understanding the mystery of the Spirit.

The more I study Saint Vincent, the more impressed I am by the importance of his early experience in his family. When Vincent finished his studies and abandoned his career ambitions, he discovered poor people and the meaning of his vocation, he discovered them because of his roots, from the simple and solid faith of his early years.

The Holy Spirit of Gannes-Folleville and Chatillon is clearly the same Holy Spirit of Ranquines, the Holy Spirit of his first Sign of the Cross, the Holy Spirit of his family's faith. This is certainly true, for in his writings and conferences that date from this period, we find more and more frequent mention of the memories of his childhood. What is called the "conversion" of Vincent de Paul was certainly a rediscovery of his roots and his early experience of God and the Spirit, lived out in a modest and simple family setting that was also very united, balanced and conducive to growth. When people don't have the opportunity and grace that Vincent had, the Spirit reveals and animates by other means, fortunately. Saint Vincent de Paul's

experience allows us to stress the importance of this first stage, and the influence that the family has at the beginning of someone's life.

2. THE THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

This was the second aspect of the Spirit's coming into Vincent de Paul's spiritual life. It was a theological approach that involved a serious study of the thinking of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Nevertheless, it developed over a long period of time and took place against a background of mixed values. Vincent had entered the Church which he encountered largely as a hierarchical institution. Certainly he had faith but his plans and ambitions did not lead him towards an authentic encounter with the Spirit. Of course he studied the Holy Spirit, increasing his understanding so that he was able to talk about the Spirit. After gaining his degree, he was even able to teach the subject. But this knowledge was in no way experiential, and his concept of the Church and priesthood continued to be limited and commonplace. Poor people had no place in his human outlook, and in his life, the Spirit hardly needed to be more than an article of faith or a line in the Creed.

This theological approach that was part of the life experience of Vincent de Paul can also challenge us. We believe in God the Father, Son and Spirit. For us, however, is this mystery simply a matter of adherence, experience or conversion? Understanding is indispensable, whether this be biblical, theological or catechetical. Vincent's nine years of study would become very useful for him. But in light of his journey, we can be more aware of the importance of giving priority as far as possible to both understanding and experience.

A great deal can be said, for example, on the subject of catechesis. Experience must accompany knowledge and perhaps even precede it, as I said in reference to the family stage of development. Doubtless this is one of the reasons why one day in 1611 M. Vincent took refuge with Fr. de Berulle's Oratorians. He felt the need for an authentic, deep and utterly committed experience.

3. A CHARISMATIC EXPERIENCE, with all its nuances

Fr. de Berulle's primary purpose in founding the Congregation of the Oratory was for the Church to provide priests with a renewed sense of the ideal of holiness. In the company of Fr. de Berulle, Vincent quickly became involved in the fervent stage that marks the beginning of a foundation, with frequent periods of prayer and meditation, within the framework of a regular and austere lifestyle. Imagine Vincent, at 30 years of age, leaving the setting of the court of Queen Marguerite de Valois, one of the most well-known, popular centres in Paris. It must have been a tremendous, upsetting, shocking and almost stifling experience. We know that after about six months, Vincent jumped at the chance to leave here and became pastor at Clichy.

It would be a serious anachronism to compare the charismatic movements that exist today with this short-lived experience of M. Vincent. Nevertheless, in taking into account the essential differences that exist between these movements and his experience, it seems to me that we can see a sort of coincidence or areas of

convergence between the experience of Vincent and certain aspirations in today's world.

M. Vincent sought refuge with Fr. de Berulle at a time when the former was troubled, burdened and overwhelmed by concerns about advancement (Coste I, 15), his worries about his work and "an honest retirement." At the same time, he sensed his priestly identity, and after eleven years, he felt again the need for a radical and pure experience: he threw himself into it.

In today's society, in our contact with young people, we are at times quite astonished by the way they are attracted to experiences or movements that can be described as charismatic. These young people commit themselves to several days of prayer, song, sharing, a time to get away from a society that they sense is too bound by self interest and convenience.

It is curious and interesting to note that M. Vincent at the age of 30 also felt this need, and wanted to immerse himself in such an experience. I believe that this is a need that everyone, especially Christians, experiences at some point in life. This, however, was not the major step in terms of his experience of the Spirit. This was waiting for him elsewhere, in the concrete realities of life with the poor. For M. Vincent, what I would label as a charismatic experience was a sort of escape, but an escape forward, towards experience and discovery.

4. DISCOVERY

After this experience that we could call charismatic, came the experience of Clichy, an experience of Church, an experience of people who were so good-hearted. Then, the idea of advancement and finding a secure position once again came into play, and Vincent became tutor for the de Gondi family. This was a golden opportunity...but it was also the beginning of a time of darkness which would be resolved later through an encounter with a poor old man in his last agony, abandoned in every sense of the word, at a moment when the Spirit chose to be manifested in the heart of the Church and in the shape of a poor person.

In the heart of the Church and in the shape of a poor person: these two elements seem to have been essential ingredients for Vincent de Paul, for his experience of the Holy Spirit. His theological studies were beneficial for him, as was his charismatic experience and his family, regional and social background. The determining and definitive encounter, however, took place in the Church and in the presence of people who were poor. These would be the two essential marks of the Holy Spirit in the life and actions of M. Vincent.

In the Church... because at Gannes-Folleville, as at Chatillon in 1617, (the year of his conversion), Vincent's experience took place among a group of lay people assembled with a priest, not with a small group or with the elite. In short, it was a part of the Church in which everyone was committed. From that time on, the **Holy Spirit** would be for Vincent the heart and soul of the people, the spirit that animated the Church, for it is the **Spirit** who **mobilises, gathers and unites**.

We see how far Vincent had come from the time he looked on the Church as a hierarchical ladder to be climbed in giant strides. The Church had become missionary in his eyes and heart. The Holy Spirit was the driving force that did not lead him to become a bishop, but which guided him towards a passion for Madagascar, so that he dreamed of spending his last days there, at the other end of the world. It was poor people who revealed the Spirit to him; poor persons who were everywhere, all the way to Madagascar...Poor people guided him without his knowing it, stripping him of his ambition and his projects, even the most legitimate ones...although he did not know it, poor people had polished him and made him available, full of potential and energy, he who had been such a complicated and perhaps even at times a rather disturbed character.

From then on, it is clear that the poor would occupy a central place in the life of M. Vincent, because they had served to liberate him.

Finally, with regard to the **Holy Spirit** we know very well that we are in the presence of **mystery**, and that M. Vincent can only give us certain starting points for approaching and living with the Spirit. I think I have told you that the Spirit is made manifest in people who make up the Church, especially poor persons, often the poorest of them.

Saint Vincent would again say to us that to come together, to be in the Church, to focus the Church's attention and love on those who are poor, is without a doubt the best answer that could be given to the question: Holy Spirit, WHO ARE YOU?

(to be continued)
 Father Jean Morin, CM
Vincentian Notes, III/2

Cover

VINCENT DE PAUL AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

I – Holy Spirit, who are you?

1. The family setting
2. A theological approach
3. A charismatic experience
4. Discovery

II – Holy Spirit, what are you doing?

- 1. Institutional Church / Hierarchical Church**
- 2. The poor person and the laity**
- 3. The Church of the Spirit**