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Presentation of the Instruction

“The service of authority and obedience”

The document on “*The service of authority and obedience*” presented by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has a sub-heading, “*It is your face, O Lord, that I seek.*” (Ps.26, 9). It might seem that the title and the subtitle have little in common and yet the two headings converge throughout the whole document. This seeking for God that the psalmist refers to is also the search process that is part of authority and obedience.

The Instruction is important and interesting even if it does not put forward much that is new, that is not its objective. In Article 3 we read that this document follows on from the four preceding ones: the Instructions *Potissimum institutioni* (1990), *Fraternal Life in community* (1994), the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996) and the Instruction *Starting afresh from Christ* (2002). In these documents we have just mentioned, as well as in the Conciliar Decree *Perfectae caritatis*, we find general guidelines for a renewed theology of obedience. However, in this latest Instruction more consideration is given to the practical aspect of the question and this is developed at greater length. According to the Instruction, both authority and obedience are related to seeking God and discovering his will. If this is disregarded neither authority nor obedience will be meaningful. With this consideration in mind it is logical to speak not of the “exercise” of authority but the “service” of authority, that is to say, authority is not an absolute in itself as the word “exercise” might suggest but it is something related to God and has the very specific objective of serving the community.

The Instruction states very clearly that whatever form the practice of obedience and authority may take, these will always be related in a special way to Jesus Christ, the obedient Servant. Reference to the Son of God and his obedience to the Father is a central point of the document and it is very much in keeping with the sensibilities of consecrated people today. The Instruction also wishes to be of help to authority *“in its threefold service: to help each person called to live their consecrated life (first part); in the building up of fraternal communities (second part); in the common mission (third part)”* (n° 3).

It is interesting to note that the document constantly identifies authority not with power but with service, and this is pure gospel teaching. It places particular value on freedom, dialogue and community discernment as ways of avoiding blind obedience. The three aspects of service that relate to authority are dealt with in a very striking and concrete way.

OBEDIENCE

How is obedience presented in the Instruction? First of all, one thing is abundantly clear: obedience is not something that concerns only the members of the community but it also concerns those who exercise authority in the local communities or the Provinces. In the past, obedience was reduced to obeying superiors or complying with the norms. That summed up everything. Obedience was understood to be a more or less automatic response that was close to “blind obedience.” Today’s concept of obedience is based on a wider perspective and is understood as discovering God’s will and carrying it out. Consecrated life cannot be understood except in this context. This means that the person who obeys has to listen to God and so, too, has the one who commands. Each one has to listen from the point of view of their mission and their responsibility. *“Authority and obedience”* as stated in n° 12 of the Instruction *“are not, therefore, two distinct realities, or even conflicting principles. They are two aspects of the same gospel reality, the same Christian mystery.”* And there has to be dialogue between obedience and authority because, as is frequently stated in the document, this is one of the means we have of ascertaining God’s will.

If people are not willing to listen they cannot be sure that they know God’s will. Section 5 presents obedience as listening. This is the trustful way that a son listens to his father. *“Listen, O Israel,”* (Dt 6,4) are the words used in the Old Testament to bring the Chosen People to obey the Lord. The decision to listen to God in order to know his will is one of the best ways a person can reach maturity. On the other hand, *“when a person says no to God, he frustrates the divine plan, is demeaned to some degree and is doomed to failure”*(n° 5). So it is a question of growing humanly and spiritually in harmony with the divine will, after the example of Christ himself. This is the really deep meaning of obedience.

In listening and searching to know God’s will the principle involved is obedience to the Word of God which means *“adhering to it”* because God reveals and communicates himself through it. That is why daily contact with the Word is important. We find in it the subject matter and the motivation for our obedience. This encounter which takes the form of dialogue between God and the human person is embodied in Jesus Christ, *“the model of all obedience”* (n° 80) and its basis. Indeed his life of complete self-giving, the model of his obedience to the Father, is for

all consecrated people an admirable and definitive model. Following the obedient Christ, therefore, will always be an irrefutable sign of fidelity in the religious life. So this obedience of Jesus Christ is, for consecrated persons both an example and a path to be followed (cf. n° 8).

Another important aspect of obedience, and one that is surely the most characteristic of the consecrated life, is that of human mediation. We obey God when we seek his will and carry it out but let us not forget that the consecrated person is committed to learning what God's will is through certain forms of mediation. In fact, the history of salvation is the story of mediations. The Instruction made reference to some of them: "*The Rule, ... Superiors, ... the community, ... the signs of the times ... the hopes expressed by people, especially the poor*" (n° 11), and just laws and directives. The Daughters of Charity also have the Company, the teachings of the Founders and the Constitutions and all these are excellent and indispensable means they can use in their search to know God's will. Article 96 of the Constitutions, for example, reminds us that these are an expression of God's will for all the Daughters of Charity. The list of mediations mentioned in C. 31b is very similar to those presented in the Instruction.

AUTHORITY

The Instruction develops the concept of authority in much more detail than the concept of obedience. This is not surprising because authority is concerned with every aspect of the consecrated life. The same can be said for obedience but the concept of authority has more implications for community matters. On the other hand, the Instruction recognises that there has been a change in the way people perceive and live out authority and obedience. This is due to those factors listed in article 3; a very strong awareness of the value and dignity of the human person, the importance of a "spirituality of communion" and a new and less individualistic way of understanding mission, together with greater collaboration with the laity.

The Instruction speaks of "the service of authority" and the Constitutions use the same type of language (cf. C. 31b). In what does this service consist? In number 1 we are given a condensed definition: the service of authority means being a sign of unity, it guides people in their search to know and do God's will. On the basis of this definition the Instruction presents us with a reflection on authority in each of the traditional aspects of the consecrated life: consecration, communion and mission.

1. AUTHORITY AND CONSECRATION

In number 13 we are told that authority is, above all else, a spiritual authority, in the widest sense of the term. That is to say, authority places itself at the service of the Spirit, it becomes a docile instrument for Him to accomplish in each Sister His work of sanctification in accordance with the charismatic project He inspired in the Founders.

Saint Vincent makes us see the importance of the spiritual life when he declares: "*The spiritual life is absolutely essential and we must strive after this; if anyone fails in the spiritual life he will fail in everything.*" (Coste XII p. 131). In the spiritual life we have to build our lives on solid gospel convictions. Failure to do this is at the root

of many community problems and lack of meaning in our lives. Basing one's life on the Gospel means that this will be an irreplaceable point of reference for motivating and discerning how we are to act and use nothing more and nothing less than the Gospel for evaluating this. This will give rise to spontaneous attitudes of forgiveness, conversion and total gift of one's life in the service of the poor. In order to animate this spiritual life the Visitatrice with her Council, the Director and the Sister Servant, can count on all the means offered by the Constitutions (cf. C.19-23). But the Instruction gives us to understand that authority cannot promote the spiritual life if it does not first of all cultivate it itself, through prayer and a deepened understanding of the Word of God (cf. n° 13). A weakened prayer life can bring authority to focus all its attention on the work of administration and relegate to a lower level the aspects of its service that are essential.

On the subject of this first aspect of authority, it is clear that in the consecrated life the person in authority should, by reason of his or her mission, be the first to obey; the first to be faithful to the will of God in order to be able to live in the disposition and spirit of service. We have mentioned this already with regard to obedience. It is important that those in authority should humbly maintain a disposition of seeking God's will and that their attitude should clearly show always that their actions are prompted only by God and his perceived will. (cf. n° 12). When the Sisters can see in authority an echo of the voice of God, then obedience which "*even in the best circumstances is not easy*" (n° 21) will become less difficult.

Some priorities in the service of authority (cf. n° 13)

In one way or another, their objective is to animate a person or a community in its response to its given vocation. Visitatrices, Sister Servants and Directors would do well to reflect on specific ways that these priorities concern them. The Instruction lists the following actions: "*Those in authority are called to ensure that their community has the quality of prayer and the time to devote to it: Authority must promote the dignity of the person...Those in authority are expected to give courage and hope in difficult circumstances: they are called to keep alive the charism of their religious family; They have the duty to accompany people on the path of ongoing formation.*" (See the explanation the Instruction gives in n° 13 for each of these actions).

2. AUTHORITY AND FRATERNAL LIFE

In this second part the Instruction starts by making two statements: "*Fraternal life in common is indeed a constituent element of the religious life.*" (n° 16). Secondly, "*There can be no authentic communities without fraternal love.*" These two principles (the need for fraternal life and the call to live according to the commandment of love) show us clearly the importance of authority. Those in authority are at the service of the community just as Jesus Christ washed the feet of his disciples so that they, in their turn, could serve the Kingdom (cf, Jn 13, 1-7) But those in authority cannot build up a community on their own, they have to do it with the people entrusted to their care. This calls for co-responsibility and it is something that is stressed throughout the whole document but most explicitly in n° 20b. Without the mediation of those in authority, the various members of a community, in their desire to seek God's will, could do this in as many different ways as there were

members and this would end up fragmenting the community (cf. n° 18). In other words, if there is no authority figure in the community it will break up and disappear.

In the chapter on community life, it seems logical to speak of a “spirituality of community” and a “community sanctity.” The Instruction does this very well in n° 19). One can and should be able to expect that a “spirituality of communion” would lead to a “community sanctity.” Church documents have not said much about this but put greater emphasis on personal or individual sanctity. But over the last 30 years when the new feature of a community plan has been in place, local communities are asking themselves more and more how they can better live out their charism. This is a way of raising the question of community sanctity. This community sanctity can offer a great Christian witness to the world (cf. n° 19). In our day, community witness has more credibility than personal testimony. John Paul II said this very clearly to the Company during the General Assembly of 1985: *“If individual witness has its value, that of a religious community extends to a remarkable degree the scope of gospel witness and adds greatly to its impact.”*

The document draws our attention to the danger of using authority for one’s own ends in ways such as: putting oneself forward, asserting one’s authority to gain one’s own way, using authority for one’s personal advantage. This danger may be due to the influence of ways that authority is exercised in civil society but it is far removed from the model of authority we find in the Gospel. The Instruction ends this reflection by reminding us of the words from Mt. 20, 27-28: *“Anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* When those who practise obedience see those in authority (Sister Servant or Visitatrice) as servant, then they will find it easier to obey them (cf. n° 21.) I find this idea very relevant and also very practical. Obedience always involves a struggle. What we must avoid is needlessly adding to the difficulty.

The role of those in authority in promoting the growth of fraternity (cf. n° 20)

As it did earlier, the Instruction presents a series of actions that those in authority can and should take in order to promote a better community life, while keeping in mind that the term “community” includes individual persons who need help. I find *“The Service of listening”* particularly important. The person in authority, that is to say, the Sister Servant, the Visitatrice (with her Council) or the Director, must really give all their attention to this service of accompaniment through listening. They must always find the time for this. This listening to others will never be time wasted but rather, as the Instruction tells us, time well used. *“Community discernment”* is another important activity. Today discernment is of major importance given the difficulty of seeing God’s will in our complex world. Social values and counter-values exist side by side and are not always easy to spot. Teilhard de Chardin said that we can be sure to find out God’s will only after we have made all human efforts to do so, and not at the outset. The Instruction points out some indispensable attitudes we need to have if we are to discern; paying attention to the signs of the times, being free from prejudice, being determined to seek nothing else but God’s will, knowing how to listen to Sisters.....Discernment does not negate the authority which has the final say in decision making. The document mentions other forms of action: *“Creating an atmosphere that is favourable to dialogue, to sharing*

and to co-responsibility; Encouraging everyone to participate in matters that are of general concern; authority being at the service of people and of the community; Fraternal obedience (see the explanation for each of these in n° 20 of the Instruction).

3. AUTHORITY AND MISSION

From a biblical point of view there is a very close connection between mission and obedience. In the Gospels, Jesus is always portrayed as *“the One sent by the Father to do His will”* (cf. Jn 5, 36-38; 6, 38-40). From this biblical standpoint, the Instruction maintains that it *“is impossible to think of mission being unconnected to obedience”* (n° 23). However, there can be no doubt that a sense of mission makes obedience easier and this obedience opens up mission because the person concerned wishes to do what God wants them to do (cf. n° 24). The ceremony of “sending forth” or commissioning which takes place at the end of the Seminary period is important because it reminds the Sister, and confirms, that the service confided to her is an authentic mission proposed by God himself. Each year there should be, for example, a celebration to remind the Daughters of Charity that their service is a mission and that all members of the Community have been sent by God. This strong sense of mission promotes understanding, esteem and many other Vincentian values such as availability and the common mission.

As well as being responsible for animating the community, the role of those in authority is to coordinate the different works carried out by the community, having due regard always for the functions and responsibilities of each Sister. Authority cannot and should not do everything but ultimately the Sister in authority bears most responsibility for the community’s mission. She should, of course, always respect the responsibilities of each Sister (cf. n° 25). This same section 25 describes the way that the concept of authority has evolved in recent years with regard to the mission of the community: *“In the past, the danger might have been that those in authority were generally more concerned with administering the works with the consequent risk of neglecting people; today the risk is just the opposite and may stem from an excessive fear on the part of authority figures that they might wound people’s feelings or from a diminution of competence and responsibility which weakens the convergence towards a common objective and even renders useless the role of authority.”* (n° 25).

Tasks that authority can be expected to undertake in this third aspect of mission

Everything that contributes to motivating service, to achieving the desired balance between “coming together” and “dispersal”, community and service, and to promoting the common mission. It might be a good idea to have “apostolic sharing” on all the actions listed in number 25 for this is one of the best means the Company has at its disposal for energising the mission (cf. St 11). (See the explanation given in n° 25 of the Instruction).

THREE POSSIBLE SITUATIONS

There are 3 more or less delicate situations that can arise in consecrated life. The Instruction deals with them in the chapter on Mission. That may be the easiest context in which to place them but similar situations can also arise in community living.

”Difficult obedience” (cf. n° 26). We understand by this term a situation where someone in the consecrated life is asked to give up their own ideas and projects. In such circumstances the person obeying may feel a sense of rejection of authority. It must be acknowledged that a certain attachment to one’s own ideas and convictions is normal and only to be expected. It is good, therefore, to keep to them and defend them in the course of a straightforward and constructive dialogue but we must not forget, either, that our model is Jesus Christ who during his Passion asked God that his will, as Father, be done and did not shy away from death. It is in saying yes in difficult circumstances such as these that obedience can be seen as a supreme act of freedom made in imitation of Christ who was obedient to the Father even to the extent of dying on the Cross.

”Obedience and objections of conscience” (cf. n° 27) Here one could ask: “Can there be situations in which it would seem that a person in consecrated life could not in conscience follow the directives of those in authority?” Paul VI had already raised this question. How is it to be answered? While it is true that conscience is the ultimate norm of morality for every Christian, this does not necessarily mean that it can be taken as the voice of God. It is necessary to consult other people, among them those in authority over us, and to practise prayerful discernment to be sure that we know God’s will. If someone simply clings to their own judgment they can fall into subjectivism which distorts reality. Having recourse to mediations always ensures that the person is objectively seeking for God. This is how the Instruction responds to the question: *“The consecrated person, then, will have to reflect for a long time before concluding that it is not the obedience received but what is sensed within him or herself that represents the will of God. He or she will also have to remember to keep the law of mediation that is in force in all cases, preventing him or herself from making serious decisions without subjecting them to challenge or to verification. Nobody can deny that what counts here is to come to know and fulfil the will of God, but it ought to be likewise beyond question that the consecrated person is committed by vow to accept this holy will through determined mediations. To say that what counts is God’s will and not the mediations, and to accept these only on the basis of what is pleasing, can take away the meaning of the person’s vow and empty their life of one of its essential characteristics.”*(n° 27).

”Difficult kinds of authority” (cf. n° 28). The Instruction makes reference here to situations where the person in authority is confronted by resistance on the part of some members of the community, or by problems that seem insoluble. He or she can be tempted to cave in and to think that every effort to improve the situation is useless. What we see here is the danger of those in authority becoming inhibited and simply *“managers of the routine”*, resigned to mediocrity, lacking the courage to intervene and point out the motivations and objectives of authentic consecrated life. What are we to say in such circumstances? It would be good to listen once again to the words of St. Paul: *“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints”* (Rom 12, 12-13). *“The silent interior struggle that accompanies fidelity to one’s particular task, marked at times by solitude or misunderstanding on the part of those to whom one gives oneself, becomes the way of personal sanctification and a means of salvation for the persons on whose account they are suffering.”* (n° 28).

CONCLUSION

After reading and carefully studying the Instruction, the first thing that I would like to stress is the importance of the service of authority, be it that of the Visitatrice (with her Council) or the Sister Servant (with hers). This is the conclusion I have come to after reflecting on the beautiful mission that persons in authority exercise within the Community: they are a living reminder of the charism, they devote their time and efforts to dialogue and to animating individuals or the group, they inspire and coordinate apostolic discernment and they have the final say in how things are to proceed. It is absolutely true that there can be no Community without people in authority. The same can be said of the Visitatrice in relation to the Province.

Saint Vincent compared Superiors to pilots who were able to steer the ship safely to port (cf. IX, 859). This image might lead us to think that he had a vertical concept of authority, one that was prevalent in his day, but it also lets us understand that without the pilot the ship will not reach any port, and without persons in authority the Community or the Province will not get very far. This is how the Constitutions present the office of Sister Servant: *She animates and leads the local community and maintains its unity. She strengthens its bonds with the Company and with the Church and, together with her Sisters, is responsible for the accomplishment of their common mission.*”(C.82). Similar statements are made in C.73 with regard to those who have authority over a Province.

There has to be appropriate formation for the office of Sister Servant. Saint Vincent said, *“The Sister Servant should have a good understanding of everything pertaining to her office.”* Many Provinces organise courses and sessions to prepare newly designated Sister Servants. I think that they all bring their Sister Servants together once or twice a year for a formation meeting. To my mind these initiatives are both useful and necessary. However, there are some things that cannot be learnt at a session, things that are fundamental for carrying out the office of Sister Servant, such as the ability to dialogue with others, to listen, to pass on information, to be part of the common searching and to be present to her Sisters.

Sometimes problems of obedience stem from the way that authority is exercised, either because the person in charge is authoritarian or because she is reluctant to use her authority. It is not easy to exercise authority in a balanced fashion but it is very necessary.

I would like to go back to an expression we find in the Constitutions where they deal with the office of Sister Servant: she is *“responsible, together with her Sisters”*. We have already stated clearly that a local community cannot exist without a Sister Servant but the Sister Servant cannot do anything if her Sisters do not accept and support her. This sense of responsibility is much in evidence in the Instruction and is very clearly expressed in the Constitutions. The local community is based on this interaction which should also take into account the needs of the Sister Servant. Neither she nor the Visitatrice are superwomen who have no need of other people. If the Sister Servant sees to the needs of her Sisters it is only logical that they should see to her needs, too. This reciprocal care does not in any way affect Sisters’ roles or offices in the community; it is simply a response to the new commandment of love. Co-responsibility should also lead the local community to animate, and to make up for

any deficiencies on the part of the Sister Servant. And if it should prove necessary, they ought to correct her but always through respectful and sisterly dialogue. This will be the sign of a mature community.

Let us say a few words about obedience. The Instruction has presented this in a very precise and balanced way using points made in *Perfectae Caritatis* 14 and *Vita Consecrata*. In our times difficulties in practising obedience do not generally stem from confrontation, from different ways of understanding mission or from those who have different ideas and who cause arguments in the community which can lead to divisions and even formal disobedience. All that belongs in the past. Today, attacks on obedience come from individualism, from personal projects that a Sister holds more important than anything else, even the Community Plan. Something of this is referred to in number 3 of the document which at the same time points out the influence that our culture has on such a mentality. The search for self-fulfilment and wellbeing at all cost are pointers to that same reality; one's personal project is more important than the Community Plan. So, in these circumstances the objective of the local community gradually becomes blurred and the common mission becomes more and more complicated. Ongoing formation can be a help in restoring balance between the individual Sister and the community and consequently between authority and obedience. I feel that paying a lot of attention to basic principles during initial formation can lead to building up in a harmonious way the whole edifice of consecrated life.

I think this Instruction could profitably be read in community and used as a basis for sharing on authority and obedience. I think that the sections on authority, numbers 13, 20 and 25 are of particular interest and practical importance.

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BISHOP JEROME BEAU

**Authority of the Church,
Authority in the Church**

Notes taken during a talk given by Bishop Beau at the formation session for the Chapel Pastoral Team.

I was very surprised at first to see the topic you suggested for my talk but then I told myself that it would lead us to think about the words of yesterday's gospel: "Who is this man who speaks with authority so that even the spirits obey him?" What sort of authority did Jesus speak with when he cured the man with an evil spirit on the Sabbath in the synagogue at Capharnaum? Before going on to speak about the

authority of the Church and authority within the Church it would be good to ask ourselves what is the Church or rather who is the Church?

Our view of the Church and of authority is distorted if we take it to be an associative structure which functions as a hierarchy. The question, “who is the Church” takes us back to the place of the sacrament of Holy Orders in the Church. Is the priest, the deacon or the bishop a delegate of a community or a group, or does the sacrament of Holy Orders bring about another type of relationship? In order to be able to reply to the question of authority we have to think about the identity of the Church and of the sacrament of Holy Orders within the Church.

Most people that we meet make a distinction between the Church which has Christ as its head, and the “personnel of the Church.” The Person of the Church is distinct from the “personnel” of the Church: on the one hand we have the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and on the other hand there are the bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated religious. In the important writings of the XXth century we have seen how this distinction could be dangerous and it does not frame the question of the Church’s identity in the right way.

What does the Gospel tell us about the Church?

It is presented in the form of three symbols; the body, the vine and the bond between the bridegroom and his bride. We have to start with these three aspects before we go back to the question of the Church’s identity. Later we will see the place of the sacrament of Holy Orders. Then we will ask the question about the nature of the Church’s authority or authority within the Church and we will see the relationship between Christ and that authority as the relationship between every baptised person, whatever their function in the Church may be, and this authority, and how it can be exercised in truth.

1. WHO IS THE CHURCH?

The Church, the Body of Christ

We are very familiar with the meaning of this image, the head cannot be isolated from the body and the body lives by the grace that comes from its head. The body of Christ, which is the Church, lives by the grace that comes from “Christ the head” who is both the heart and the origin of the Church. Christ has no need of the Church but he willed it to exist. You will recognise a way of interpreting the phrase used by the Council: “*Man is the only creature who was freely desired for himself by God*”; he is loved gratuitously for what he is, loved as a man. The Church in its relationship of body to “Christ the head” is gratuitously loved by God for what she is, for no other reason than gratuitous love. So we are first of all in the realms of this relationship of gratuitous love, the Church was not a basic need that God had. It is an act of freely bestowed love, just as the creation of man was an act of gratuitous love.

The whole life of the body comes from the head and it leads us to gradually share in the personality of Christ which is, by extension, communicated to the rest of the world. Christ became man so that man could share in his divine nature. In the

divine reality of the Church, the divine nature shares, through the Incarnation, our human nature.

The Church cannot be regarded as a human entity but as a divine creation in the world. When we say that the Church is the body of Christ, we are at the centre of this exchange, at the very heart of the Incarnation. God became man so that man could become God. The glory of God is the living man who sees God. We are part of that free exchange between God and man. Our sharing in the divine nature is purely the result of grace.

This sharing in grace is the way that we receive the life of God. Every member of the Church finds their divine dimension by receiving Life through the sacraments. “Christ the head” gives his life to the body, the Church, which allows us to become part of this exchange, the heart of the Incarnation, by means of the sacraments. “*I have come that you may have life in abundance,*” said Jesus in the gospel of St. John. This divine life at the very heart of the divine reality which is the “Church body,” finds its significance within the sacramental system. So the Church can express, feel the effects of and perceive God’s will at the heart of pilgrim humanity. This aspect of the body can also be applied to its numerous ministries, its complementarity and unity.

The Church, the Vine

This image speaks to us of the profound union between Christ and the Church and the extent to which Christ is present in the Church. This symbol tells us in a striking way the strong, inseparable link that exists between Christ and the Church, it is a life-giving bond. The branch that is cut off from the sap of the vine becomes dead. How are we to understand this unity? The best passage in the gospel to help us understand this is the one that tells of Mary standing at the foot of the Cross with the Beloved Disciple as they watch blood and water flow from Christ’s side. At this moment the Church is born in its divine identity; in this pierced side we see the heart of this vital unity between God and man, between Christ and the Church. “*The Spirit, water and the blood*”, three elements unite to give witness to this unique divine and human love.

The image of the vine reminds us, as Benedict XVI has done in his encyclical *God is love*, that we must not dissociate human love from divine love. There is only one source of love, the love that comes from God. The first part of this encyclical lets us see – and this is something liberating for our present day society – how to channel all the force of man’s love, not in frustration to make way for divine love, but towards a divine love so that everything that makes up our humanity becomes the burgeoning of God’s love. There is a unity between divine love and human love as this is at the heart of the Church which is made up of men and woman who experience the power of God’s love.

The greatness of our God is seen in his divine choice of humanity: giving human beings the power to know God. It is extraordinary. The invisible God becomes visible in the face of man, in the history of humankind, in the face of Abraham, in the face of the Church. This face, like that of every member of the Church, is the image of the invisible reality of God, not just in consecrated persons but in all the people of

God. Each one bears and is the expression of that divine reality, this is our vocation; our daily human life becomes the gospel of flesh that is written in human history and by which Christ's gospel and the face of the Father are rendered visible. (2nd Epistle to the Corinthians). This is the image of the vine, of that contemplation of the Spirit the water and the blood that witness to unity.

This bond with the Church makes a twofold call on us. The human person is responsible for revealing the identity of God. The unity between the head and the body means that each, by reason of what they are, expresses a reality which is not just human but also divine, the divine identity of the Church. Each of us has the responsibility to make visible the One who is invisible, this is what we find in the image of the vine.

The Church of Christ, Bride/Bridegroom

Consecrated Virgins are a witness to this very close bond: their ministry to be a spouse of Christ and their links with the bishop speak to us of "Christ the Bridegroom" who comes to unite himself with his bride. This is a way of saying that the Church is a person whom the Lord loved and for whom he gave up his life. In giving himself up for the Church (there is no frontier between the Church and the rest of the world), He gave Himself to the Church so that the Church could give Him to the world: connection with universality and mission. We do not have the monopoly of this gift of love; "The Church Bride" is not the sole owner of the gift of the Bridegroom. She has to pour out into the vessel that is the world, the superabundance of that love which she never ceases to live by and which keeps her united to "Christ the Bridegroom." This flowing of love is the Church. The danger could be that the Church might forget that this superabundance of charity is given to her not for herself alone but for the world, so that this charity may shine far beyond the boundaries of the Church.

This link between spouses points to the Eucharist: "*This is my Body, given up for you.*" We see this betrothal gift, too, in the sacrament of marriage where the couple exchange vows, "*I give myself to you and I take you to love you for as long as we live.*" The marriage bond between the couple, this total gift of self, is the image and the visible expression of the relationship between Christ and the Church: "*This is my Body given up for you.*" The sacrament of marriage is one of the visible expressions of what we celebrate at every Eucharist, the married couple are its sign and manifestation and this happens at the exchange of marriage vows.

There is a personal encounter, a mutual loving glance between Christ and the Church. This total gift takes place very strikingly on the Cross. On the Cross Christ gives himself completely for the whole of humanity and this brings us to a second aspect of the Church's identity; she does not appropriate this love just to herself. In Latin there are several forms of the verb *to love*. When St. Augustine says, "*Love and do what you will*" he does not use the Latin verb "amare" but a verb that means giving something away, the gift of self. The Church's identity as the Body of Christ means that she does not keep the love of Christ to herself, but gives it away to the world and this shows how important it is to have love at the heart of the world; freely-given love which speaks of the gratuitous love given by God, the gift of himself, the identity of Christ on the Cross. The relationship between the Church and the world

mirrors the relationship between Christ and the Church in the betrothal link between God and his Church. This is not always easy to live out. It means that our relationship with the world must be rooted in this powerful concept of charity. This link between Christ and the Church determines our relationship as a Church with the world.

The divine nature of the Church is not like the identity of an association. I sometimes wonder whether the Church is not regarded as simply an association of people, a human structure; some individuals would be priests from preference and not from a vocational calling “A career Church,” we might say. So it is important to base the question of authority on the question of the Church’s identity.

2 THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY ORDERS

Let us now see how this authority is to be exercised. This question affects the bishop first of all and it takes us back to Christ’s words to the Apostles. We find there the answer; the bishops who are the successors of the Apostles, find their mission and their role in what Christ said to the Apostles. This is the working method that the Council put before us: Scripture study is the soul of theology. It is not a matter of producing a treatise on the episcopate or on the sacrament of Holy Orders but of going to Scripture and Tradition to see what these have to say about the ministry of an Apostle.

THE BISHOP, WHO IS BOUND TO OBEY THE SOVEREIGN PONTIFF, IS AT THE SERVICE OF UNITY WITHIN THE WHOLE CHURCH

The work of unity

The service given by the bishops means that they have to be in communion with the successor of Peter and be responsible for this communion. We all need to work for unity and communion. Authority within the Church derives from the fact that the baptised who make up the Church are a resurrected people: “*You who were all buried in death are risen in Jesus Christ*”. The Body of Christ, which is the Church, already has this divine identity, we are already living the life that we look forward to having on the last day. It is an essential part of the Church’s hope; to be “one “in God. “*Father, I pray that they may be one as we are one*” (Jn 17): to be gathered together in the unity of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in life eternal. Our present life is only a deposit on life in all its fullness, the life that we will have in the future.

This working towards unity does not simply mean having good relations with one’s neighbour. For this unity to be achieved authentically it has to be expressed in charity. It is the face of our desired unity and the answer on earth to Christ’s prayer to the Father. That is what we mean by the ministry of unity. This service of being the answer to Christ’s prayer to the Father by our work for communion finds its efficacy in the bonds that we create with others. So it is not a question of establishing good relationships and avoiding conflict but of working for the truth of that unity which is in Christ.

The authority of the Church is shown in the Salvation already given by Christ and it demands that truth should be related to charity so that unity may be authentic

and not simply a good way of covering up divisions and differing opinions. *“That they may be one, as we are one,”* that is the ministry of unity.

The work of government

“Christ gave his Apostles the command and the power to teach all nations, to sanctify humankind in truth and to guide the flock. In addition, through the Holy Spirit given to them, the bishops were made into true and authentic teachers of the faith, pontiffs and pastors.”

You do not choose your bishops; they are not chosen by the community but are designated by the Holy Father, just as parishioners do not choose their parish priest even though they may have their own ideas about this! This means that through the sacrament of Holy Orders our life is always affected by a love that goes ahead of us and which is also a call. Our human life is a vocation. There is nothing more liberating in faith than the discovery that we build our lives but we also choose to be chosen by Someone, to be given back to Someone who writes the story of our life when we never stop trying to write it day after day.

There are many contradictory movements of the heart: when we are asked to go where we had not expected to go, we can always say that the superior is wrong but this may not be the right response. The correct response is that our life is given to Christ, it is a vocation. The story of our life is written to the extent that we allow this love to write it and when we accept the reality of the Church even in its members who have responsibility for governing it. So we must be prepared to see in the call that is made to us- even if it is different from what we expected – the reality of God who knows and writes the history of humankind and who achieves his designs in a mysterious manner in the Church.

This means we have to give up our own ideas about our life’s journey. That does not mean to say that we shouldn’t enlighten our superiors. We must say what needs to be said but contingency events and discernment mean that if a different decision is made we have to accept it lovingly and not grudgingly. We have to give ourselves totally to the divine reality which is the Church which works through its members, in the reality of the sacraments which constitute the unity of the Body and to recognise that God fulfils his plans through the most specific calls that can be made on us.

Why did the Ark of the Covenant take a particular direction on its journey to Jerusalem? There was no other way to go. God willed that it should take that path but we, with our knowledge of geography, would have taken a different route. The person who follows God’s way is not asked to take a route that it is impossible to follow, he takes this path with all the contingencies of the material conditions that confront us, trying to see this path as clearly as he can as something coming from God who speaks to us through the events of daily life. That is how life is organised by government.

The work of sanctification

This is the sacramental aspect of the Church and particularly the sacrament of Reconciliation. We say that there are three persons who are without sin: Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Church. This is what we believe in faith. Some people protest when the Church is described as sinless because all the members of the Church are sinners. How can we say that the Church is holy when I am a sinner? The same may be said about obeying superiors, one's bishop.....one's parish priest...for these are all sinners.

A sinless Church whose members are sinners is what makes us love the Church. The powerful bond of love is essential with regard to authority/obedience, communion/unity, because people do not obey without love: to obey without love would be to disobey. Loving is not something complicated, it is a commandment, it is not a choice made by the heart, we should not be astonished that many couples break up. If love is not a commandment which comes within the scope of loving obedience it is simply a choice dictated by sentiment and this fluctuates.

To understand this relationship between the sinless Church and a Church made up of sinners, we have to think of the sinless Christ coming up out of the waters of the Jordan and taking on himself the sins of the world. St Paul has this awesome phrase, "*He who was sinless became sin for our sake.*" This helps us to understand something of this holy, spotless and sinless Church which has become sin for our sake just as the sinless Christ bears the sin of all humanity. In like manner, the sinless Church bears the sins of people, the baptised who are its body.

Jacques Maritain, in *The Church of Christ*, speaks of the boundary which crosses over humanity and rejoins that innocent and spotless part of us that we are in God as the image and likeness of God that we, as sinners, carry within ourselves. This boundary of the holy and spotless Church bearing the sins of its members, crosses all our human lives and personalities: a body of grace bears our graceless body.

SO WHAT AUTHORITY?

We can consider it from the angle of absolution because this is very much the authority given by Christ, "*Whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and what you have loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*" There is an action by those in authority which saves, pardons and brings us to be reintegrated into full communion with this holy and spotless Church. These words of absolution demonstrate another type of authority. The authority of the Church is the authority of Christ who gives himself in each of the sacraments and is at work in every baptised person. This sacrament has a "before" and an "after" because something is happening in our life history. These are saving words of absolution, "*Arise, take up your bed and walk.*" "*Then the evil spirit went out of the possessed man from Capharnaum and the people asked one another, "Who is this man who speaks with such authority?"*

What sort of authority is it?

This authority comes from the recreating power of God, from the action of God's creative Word; when God speaks, God acts, "*Let there be light, and there was*

light.” This Word-Action of God is the Word of Christ, his Word is the Action of God. Christ is creator, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit and we see this in the calming of the storm when He says to the tempest “*Be still!*” and the winds die down. At that moment he shows himself to be master of creation.

The Church’s authority which is shown in the sacraments, comes from its participation in God’s creation because we are all the result of his creative act. This authority is at the service of humankind, it brings people the hope of Salvation, it is the authority of a God who never ceases to create humanity, to create us, to create the world until such time as all things are brought together in Him.

This requires of us one single and simple disposition, that advocated in the Epistle to the Philippians: “*In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus. His state was divine yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are. He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him up and made him Christ the Lord.*”

Loving obedience to the benevolent designs of the Father who is divinely present in the Church, allows God to act for the good of all through the service of authority accorded to the different members of the Church, each according to their position. The Church’s Canon Law allows each one to find the path of starting again in order “to go down into the depths of death” as total gift for their brothers and sisters, for all humankind, and to give this gift back to the Father for “his path of resurrection and life”, not just for the individual or for the Church but for the whole of humanity.

Bishop Jerome Beau
Auxiliary bishop of Paris

BENEDICT XVI

Lourdes, 15th September, 2008

Homily of Pope Benedict XVI during the Mass for sick persons on the Esplanade of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary, Lourdes

In 2004, Lourdes welcomed Pope John Paul II, with others, who like him, were ill. This year, Pope Benedict XVI came to Lourdes as a pilgrim on the Jubilee Way marking the 150th anniversary of the apparitions. In the vast meadow in front of the grotto of Massabielle, the Pope celebrated Sunday Mass on September 14th. The following day, his homily was directed in a special way to those who are ill, as he

assured them that they can find the strength to live out what faces them by contemplating the Virgin Mary's smile.

Monday, September 15th 2008

Dear Brothers in the episcopate and the priesthood, dear friends who are sick, dear carers and helpers, dear brothers and sisters!

Yesterday we celebrated the Cross of Christ, the instrument of our salvation, which reveals the mercy of our God in all its fulness. The Cross is truly the place where God's compassion for our world is perfectly manifested. Today, as we celebrate the memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows, we contemplate Mary sharing her Son's compassion for sinners. As Saint Bernard says, the Mother of Christ entered into the Passion of her Son through her compassion (cf. Homily for Sunday in the Octave of the Assumption). At the foot of the Cross, the prophecy of Simeon is fulfilled: her mother's heart is pierced through (cf. Lk 2:35) by the torment inflicted on the Innocent One born of her flesh. Just as Jesus wept (cf. *Jn* 11:35), so too Mary certainly cried over the tortured body of her Son. Her self-restraint, however, prevents us from sounding the depths of her grief; the full extent of her suffering is only suggested by the traditional symbol of the seven swords. As in the case of her Son Jesus, one might say that she, too, was led to perfection through this suffering (cf. Heb 2:10), so as to make her capable of receiving the new spiritual mission that her Son entrusts to her immediately before "giving up his spirit" (cf. *Jn* 19:30): that of becoming the mother of Christ in his members. In that hour, through the person of the beloved disciple, Jesus presents each of his disciples to his Mother when he says to her: Behold your Son (cf. *Jn* 19:26-27).

Today Mary dwells in the joy and the glory of the Resurrection. The tears shed at the foot of the Cross have been transformed into a smile which nothing can wipe away, just as her motherly compassion towards us remains unchanged. The intervention of the Virgin Mary in offering succour throughout history testifies to this, and does not cease to evoke, in the people of God, an unshakeable confidence in her: the Memorare prayer expresses this sentiment very well. Mary loves each of her children, paying particular attention to those who, like her Son at the hour of his Passion, are prey to suffering; she loves them quite simply because they are her children, as Christ on the Cross wished them to be.

The psalmist, seeing from afar this maternal bond which unites the Mother of Christ with the people of faith, prophesies about the Virgin Mary that "the richest of the people ... will seek your smile" (Ps 44:13). In this way, prompted by the inspired word of Scripture, Christians have always sought Our Lady smile, this smile which mediaeval artists were able to represent with such marvellous skill and show to advantage.

Mary's smile is for everyone; but it is directed most particularly to those who suffer, so that they can find in it comfort and solace. To seek Mary's smile is not an act of devotional or outmoded sentimentality, but rather the proper expression of the

living and profoundly human relationship which binds us to her whom Christ gave us as our Mother.

The desire to contemplate this smile of the Virgin, does not mean letting oneself be carried away by an uncontrolled imagination. Scripture itself reveals it to us through the lips of Mary when she sings the Magnificat: “My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit exults in God my Saviour” (Lk 1:46-47). When the Virgin Mary gives thanks to the Lord, she calls us to witness. As if by anticipation, Mary shares with us, her future children, the joy that dwells in her heart, so that it can become ours. Every time we recite the Magnificat, we witness her smile.

Here in Lourdes, during the apparition of Wednesday 3rd March 1858, Bernadette contemplated this smile of Mary in a very special way. It was the first response that the Beautiful Lady gave to the young visionary who wanted to know who she was. Before introducing herself, some days later, as “the Immaculate Conception”, Mary let Bernadette see her smile, this being the most appropriate preparation for the revelation of her mystery. In the smile of the most eminent of all creatures, looking down on us, we see reflected our dignity as children of God, that dignity which never abandons the sick person. This smile, a true reflection of God’s tenderness, is the source of an invincible hope.

Unfortunately, as we know only too well: having to endure suffering can upset the most balanced life; it can shake the firmest foundations of trust, and sometimes even lead people to despair about the meaning and value of life. There are struggles that we cannot sustain alone, without the help of divine grace. When speech can no longer find the right words, we need a loving presence: we seek then the closeness not only of those who share the same blood or are linked to us by friendship, but also the closeness of those who are intimately bound to us by faith. Who could be more intimate to us than Christ and his holy Mother, the Immaculate One? More than any others, they are capable of understanding us and grasping how hard we have to fight against evil and suffering. The Letter to the Hebrews says of Christ that he “is not unable to sympathise with our weaknesses; for in every respect he has been tempted as we are” (cf. Heb 4:15).

I would like to say, humbly, to those who suffer and to those who struggle and are tempted to turn their backs on life: turn towards Mary! In Our Lady’s smile there lies mysteriously hidden the strength to fight against sickness and for life. With her, too, is found the grace to accept without fear or bitterness to leave this world at the hour chosen by God. How true was the insight of that great French spiritual writer, Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, who in *L’âme de tout apostolat*, recommended the devout Christian to gaze frequently “into the eyes of the Virgin Mary”!

Yes, to seek the smile of the Virgin Mary is not pious infantilism, it is the aim, as Psalm 44 says, of those who are “the richest of the people” (verse 13). “The richest”, that is to say, in the order of faith, those who have attained the highest degree of spiritual maturity and know precisely how to acknowledge their weakness and their poverty before God. In the very simple manifestation of tenderness that we call a smile, we grasp that our only treasure is the love God has for us and which comes to us through the heart of Mary who became our Mother.

To seek this smile is first of all to have grasped the gratuitousness of love; it also means being able to elicit this smile through our efforts to live according to the word of her Beloved Son, just as a child seeks to make its mother smile by doing what pleases her. And we know what pleases Mary, thanks to the words she spoke to the servants at Cana: “Do whatever he tells you” (cf. Jn 2:5). Mary’s smile is a spring of living water. “He who believes in me”, says Jesus, “out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water” (Jn 7:38). Mary is the one who believed and, from her womb, rivers of living water have flowed out to irrigate human history. The spring that Mary pointed out to Bernadette here in Lourdes is the humble sign of this spiritual reality. From her believing heart, from her maternal heart, flows living water which purifies and heals. By immersing themselves in the baths at Lourdes, so many people have discovered and experienced the gentle maternal love of the Virgin Mary, and have drawn close to her in order to bind themselves more closely to the Lord! In the liturgical sequence of this feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, Mary is honoured with the title *Fons amoris*, “fount of love”. From Mary’s heart, there springs up a gratuitous love which calls forth a response of filial love, which is meant to grow deeper and more loving.

Like every mother, and in a better way than every mother, Mary is the teacher of love. That is why so many sick people come here to Lourdes, to quench their thirst at the “spring of love” and to let themselves be led to the only source of salvation, her son, Jesus the Saviour. Christ imparts his salvation by means of the sacraments, and especially in the case of those suffering from sickness or disability, through the grace of the sacrament of the sick. Every person finds that suffering is always something alien. It can never be tamed. That is why it is hard to bear, and harder still – as certain great witnesses of Christ’s holiness have done – to welcome it as an important element in our vocation, or to accept, as Bernadette expressed it, to “suffer everything in silence in order to please Jesus”. To be able to say that, it is necessary to have travelled a long way already in union with Jesus. Here and now, though, it is possible to entrust oneself to God’s mercy, as manifested through the grace of the sacrament of the sick.

Bernadette herself, in the course of a life that was often marked by sickness, received this sacrament four times. The grace of this sacrament consists in welcoming Christ the healer into our lives. However, Christ is not a healer in the way that the world understands healing. In order to heal us, he does not remain outside the suffering that is experienced; he eases it by coming to dwell within the sick person, to bear it and live it with him. Christ’s presence comes to break the isolation which pain brings. Man no longer bears his burden alone: as a suffering member of Christ, he is conformed to Christ in his self-offering to the Father, and he participates, in him, in the coming to birth of the new creation. Without the Lord’s help, the yoke of sickness and suffering weighs down on us cruelly. By receiving the sacrament of the sick, we seek to carry no other yoke than that of Christ, strengthened through his promise to us that his yoke will be easy to carry and his burden light (cf. Mt 11,30).

I invite those who are to receive the sacrament of the sick during this Mass to have this kind of hope. The Second Vatican Council presented Mary as the figure in whom the entire mystery of the Church is typified (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 63-65). Her personal life journey anticipates that of the Church, which is called to be just as attentive to those who suffer as she herself was. I extend an affectionate greeting to

those working in the areas of public health and nursing, as well as those who, in different ways, in hospitals and other institutions, are contributing to the care of the sick with competence and generosity.

I should also like to say to all the medical staff, the *brancardiers* and the carers who come from every diocese in France and from further afield, and who throughout the year tend the sick who come on pilgrimage to Lourdes, how much their service is appreciated. They are the arms of the servant Church.

Finally, I wish to encourage those who, in faith, welcome and visit the sick, especially in hospital infirmaries, in parishes or, as here, at shrines. May you always sense in this important and delicate mission the effective and fraternal support of your communities as you serve as witnesses to God's mercy! (cf. Mt 25:39-40) In this regard, I greet and thank in a special way my brothers in the Episcopate, the French Bishops, Bishops and priests from afar, and all who serve the sick and suffering throughout the world. Thank you for your ministry close to our suffering Lord. The service of charity that you offer is a Marian service. Mary entrusts her smile to you, so that you yourselves may become, in faithfulness to her son, springs of living water. Whatever you do, you do in the name of the Church, of which Mary is the purest image. May you carry her smile to everyone!

To conclude, I wish to join in the prayer of the pilgrims and the sick, and to pray with you a passage from the prayer to Mary that has been suggested for this Jubilee celebration: "Because you are the smile of God, the reflection of the light of Christ and dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, because you chose Bernadette in her lowliness, because you are the morning star, the gate of heaven and the first creature to experience the resurrection, Our Lady of Lourdes", with our brothers and sisters whose hearts and bodies are in pain, we pray to you!

Pope Benedict XVI

Lourdes, 15th September 2008

PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

Province of the Philippines

Working with migrants' families in their homeland

INTRODUCTION

Many Filipino migrants leave family behind to go in search of better opportunities for them. The “exodus” continues with even more intensity today. The immediate cost to family relationships and the bringing up of children left behind started to alarm us when we realised that every single school, hospital, social service institution and parish we serve has wives, husbands and children of migrant workers. Jen is a typical example.

“ Poverty had obliged me to leave my family and find greener pastures, and I thought that I could do this by working abroad. I wanted to give my family a better life, provide a good future for my children, and let them experience what I had missed in my younger days. I started with high hopes but found the exact opposite in my workplace (little food, overwork, payment of my salary delayed and my wages reduced from the sum that was agreed on, just to mention some of the problems). The war enabled me to go home even if I had to return home even emptier- handed than when I left.” Jen, 34 years old

“Storm Signals”

Young children at the beginning of their schooling come to the school clinic especially on Mondays, after the weekend, for all sorts of aches and pains which often have no real medical basis. Informal conversations with the children revealed that weekends used to be “family days” that now they badly miss these because “they are away”. There is a marked increase in rebellious and delinquent behaviour as well as low academic performance among teenage students. The absence of a mother’s care and the firm guidance and discipline of a father has resulted in feelings of insecurity, instability and a lack of belonging. Some children, as young as pre-school age are not even cared for by extended members of the family but by nursemaids. Marital infidelity and irresponsibility in using money sent by migrant spouses added to the seriousness of the situation. Returning migrants, especially those who are sick, have legal cases pending. Estranged from their families, they need help to re-integrate with their families.

RESPONSE MADE BY THE PROVINCE

It was immediately apparent to us that we are facing a “new poor” – a group of people who did not initially fit our old categories of poverty. We had to think of new ways of serving them effectively. The decision to focus on the care and accompaniment of migrant families came from the realisation that the normal life of Filipino migrant families has become so dysfunctional that it is crying out for healing and renewal. All our institutions (schools, hospitals and social service) made a survey and an assessment of the needs of students and collaborators be these children, wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, mothers, or fathers of migrants. From now on, just about all our institutions- more than 20 of them- have a Directory of Migrant Families, their needs and situation are enough to form a basis for a programme of counselling and accompaniment for them.

After identifying this situation as one of four Provincial Priority Ministries during the 2nd Philippine Provincial Meeting in 2005, the different institutions and local communities began the ministry where they were and “as needs were revealed” to them.

Although the ministry is all-embracing in its scope, for our purposes we specified two particular levels:

A. MINISTRY TO MIGRANT FAMILIES WITHIN OUR OWN INSTITUTIONS

Feelings of alienation, disconnection, non-belonging and abandonment are very intense among children of migrants. The search for ways of “alternative parenting” has moved some institutions to build within the school small groups of 5 youngsters or teenagers to make a “**circle of belonging**” where the young people can talk to their peers about their difficulties, troubles and how they are feeling. An adult (a parent, or teacher, or sister) is part of this circle to provide presence and guidance. These groups meet on a regular basis. But the more important effect of this initiative is that the “circles of belonging” have led us beyond the schools into the homes, affirming the **home-school partnership**.

A spin-off from these circles is the **network of parents and Sisters** who assist the teachers and guidance counsellors in accompanying the students. The assurance that there are adults they can count on, and being convinced that (notwithstanding their difficulties and situations) they are important, has begun to give the children a sense of belonging, stability and security.

The effort to **renew links and strengthen bonds with migrant parents** has also encouraged extra attention and time being given to special seasons of the year. Making gifts and cards during Christmas, Valentine Day and birthdays as a **supervised school activity**, has become a ritual that parents, children and teachers look forward to with happy anticipation and excitement.

The migrant parents of a child in nursery class (4 yrs old) received a postcard with greetings written in their daughter’s childish handwriting. Touched and with tears in their eyes, they said that “appreciate” is an understatement of how they feel about the programme for families of migrant workers in the school that provides a means for students to communicate with their parents working abroad.

School-initiated activities that provide formation and information about the rights of migrants bring migrant spouses together and encourage bonding among them. Shared situation and common concerns give them opportunities for mutual support, exchange of ideas about single-parenting and comfort in shared faith. A member of a migrant family had this to say, *“The school is really a second home for migrant workers and their families. Meetings like these bring us deeper awareness of the rights, privileges and benefits of migrant workers and their families. It also enables us to raise questions and voice our concerns. We realise that we are not alone.”*

Because of the “alternative parenting” and “alternative fostering” situation where the children are entrusted either to grandparents, uncles, aunts, and nursemaids who often are unprepared to take real care of the children beyond giving them money, there are continual efforts to give a special ongoing formation to this group. Questions of discipline, proper use of money (*“I can afford anything... my mother sends money...”*), poor eating habits, low academic performance, disrespect for authority (*“You are not my father!”*) are only a few of the problems faced by “foster parents” and guardians.

B. Ministry to returning or repatriated migrants and their families

The Lebanon war saw thousands of Filipino migrant workers unprepared to return to their country and facing many difficulties (sickness, money to pay their fare back to their provinces, reintegration into the family and the workforce of the country, unemployment, etc.) a programme for returning and repatriated overseas Filipino workers and persons with HIV-Aids and their families was started by one of our social service institutions, Asilo de San Vicente de Paul in Manila. This programme is known as the ***Good Samaritan Programme***. It focuses on re-integration, rebuilding the person's life and problem-solving skills. This is done through an integrated and developmental programme that includes:

1. Case Management. This service explores with the migrant and his or her family, the kind of help they need. It also decides with them the intervention that can be made to overcome barriers to the normal functioning of the individual and the family.

Vivian, a woman sexually abused by her employer, was repatriated pregnant. Referred by a government agency to the Asilo de San Vicente de Paul, she attended some counselling sessions and the Social Workers explored with her what the possibilities for the baby might be after birth, as well as the question of re-integrating Vivian with her family. Her baby was handed to another institution for adoption but initial attempts to seek support and acceptance from her husband failed. Continued efforts at counselling, medication for depression and dialogue with her family finally resulted in a new and successful reunion. She now lives with her parents and has taken up her life again. A local community of Daughters of Charity situated a few towns away, follows her up and gives her spiritual and moral support.

2. Dormitory and pastoral care services provide a half-way home as well as religious animation and counselling for returning and repatriated migrants and their families, who have no safe place to stay while they are having medical treatment or awaiting the outcome of legal processes.

3. Temporary residential care is for distressed migrant families. This happens particularly when a dead migrant is brought home, when a sick migrant worker comes home, or in cases of mixed culture marriages, or of children who have been abandoned by their guardian, or are victims of abuse by the adults to whom they were entrusted for care.

With love that is infinitely inventive

The many “unexpected” situations and needs of migrants and their families have led to “new challenges”, “new ways” of service and “new forms” of partnership for the Migrants Bureau of the Philippine Province created in 2001.

At present the Bureau networks with many religious and Church groups, NGOs and government offices at national and international level to provide a holistic service for migrants and their families – pastoral, cultural, economic, social, political and legal assistance.

Sowing the seeds of empowerment

While education and advocacy remain basic in the ministry to migrants, the complexity of their needs has led to the drawing up of programmes for their formation in faith, cultural values and community service. This kind of formation has produced leaders and formators among the migrants themselves who now serve their compatriots who need support and encouragement.

“ ... Although I have recovered from being raped by my employer, I always go back to the Daughters of Charity Migrants Bureau because they never judged me by my past...I was given the support I needed to find healing. I found a home and a new family, one that taught me my rights and how to stand up for myself. At no cost I was able to join in the days of recollection, retreat and counselling sessions at the Provincial House for almost 2 weeks. During my retreat a Sister got in touch with my family to prepare them for my reintegration. Our family being reunited was for me a deep experience of God I was asked to attend seminar workshops and skills training sessions where I met other migrant returnees and their families. These opportunities gave me back my self-esteem and confidence. I was brought to a lawyer to help me claim my salaries. Sister accompanied me throughout the legal hearings and spoke for me when I became emotional. In gratitude for what I've experienced with the Migrants Bureau, I was given the chance to replicate the experience with the poor. With a heart overflowing with gratitude, I volunteered to take care of the sick daughter of a migrant who died in hospital. I was inspired to motivate distressed migrants and their families. I value my work now here in the Philippines through the Migrants Bureau. God is really good. In His own time, He puts everything in its proper place. I may have lots of difficulties as a single mother with aging parents but all those difficult experiences have helped me become a stronger person. I may not have succeeded in providing a prosperous life for my family but I know that we will survive and that I will continue my volunteer work helping and inspiring other migrants.” Aida, aged 28

Putting an end to the cycle of migration

“I started with hopes for a better future and ended up returning to the Philippines with nothing. I was given new hope when I was chosen to be one of the students for the six-month Caregivers Course offered by the Centre attached to the Provincial House of the Daughters of Charity. Every month I attended the formation sessions and received an allowance for food and transport costs until I finished my course. Last January 2008 I passed the TESDA examination (Technological Educational Skills Development Administration) and became a registered caregiver. I am now gainfully employed as a licensed caregiver through the referral of the Daughters of Charity Migrants Bureau. With my salary I am able to send my children back to school and assist my ailing parents. My life as a migrant worker is over. I am now active in the affairs of our community and I am always available for the service of distressed migrants.” Jen, 34 years old

Since **jobs are scarce** in the country, the Migrants Bureau has widened its collaboration with different agencies for job placement for migrant returnees and young men and women thinking of going abroad. Twenty-eight of them have been successful in finding work in the country

Living life to the full and with gratitude

During their second year in operation the days of prayer and recollection facilitated by a team of Daughters of Charity for 20 migrants who come home with HIV-Aids enabled the PWAs (Persons with Aids) to express their pains, their fears, and to turn these into hope. Finding God in the midst of this affliction, appreciating life as a pilgrimage, embracing death as a very real event are undeniable signs of hope that inspire the Sisters, too, and give a new impetus to the ministry.

More workers for the Lord's vineyard

There are an increasing number of Sisters and lay mission collaborators who have expressed their desire to participate in the ministry for migrants and their families and this has been a great source of inspiration and support. They start by welcoming migrants who are passing through, sit with them and listen to their stories, volunteer to visit them at home, accompany them to court, and do many other little things with them and for them. Small streams make big rivers...

Sisters Maria Teresa Mueda and Teresita Laguna
Daughters of Charity

PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

Province of Vietnam

The way that the Daughters of Charity view their mission at the Mai-Hoa Centre for AIDS sufferers

In a country facing great strife and poverty, God's call to share and to serve those most in need seems to resound constantly in the hearts of the Daughters of Charity in Vietnam. However, the decision to engage in caring for HIV/AIDs people was not an easy option for us in our culture and at a time when our society, which was ill-informed about AIDS, looked on this disease with fear and revulsion.

However, the call for help continued to come. In 1994, Fr. Maloney, during the meeting with the Visitatrices assembled in Paris, expressed his wish that the most vulnerable people have a special place in the heart of every Daughter of Charity, in each Province and in the Company. This wish was taken seriously by the Visitatrices in Asia and so care of HIV-AIDs patients became one of the important topics discussed when they met in 1995 in Bangkok. Two years later, the Daughters of Charity in Vietnam saw the opportunity to take up this service after an appeal by the Vietnamese government. For the first time in the history of the Socialist Republic country, the government invited the private and religious sectors to join government organisations in dealing with this pandemic. Up to that time, the government had the monopoly of all socio- educational and health activities in the country.

Events are signs from God and the Daughters of Charity were convinced that it was time for the Province to respond to God's design so that his suffering people could be served. The road to implementing such a project was by no means a smooth one because we had to win the support of the local people and to apply for the necessary authorisation from the local government officials whose attitude was different from that of the Central Government. It took three years of hard work before the project could start. On 20th March 2000, Mai-Hoa community was officially created: four Daughters of Charity came to live among the terminally ill HIV/AIDS patients at Cu Chi, a district of Ho Chi Minh City. With some lay staff, most of whom are HIV patients themselves, the Daughters of Charity are in charge of four wards that admit around 30 adults and 20 HIV-AIDS children whose parents died at Mai-Hoa.

The first patient admitted was a young man 22 years old who was dying. He was rejected by his family because of his drug addiction. He had threatened several times to burn down his house before he left it and became homeless. After being admission here and living for some months in Mai-Hoa, his hardened heart was finally touched by the devotion of the Sisters and by the friendly reception received from all Mai-Hoa's members. He asked to be instructed and eventually he was baptised in the Church. He wished to speak to his mother before he died. The mother refused to face the patient, but with the Sisters' continued persuasion, she agreed to come to Mai-Hoa. When she saw her son, she cried out loud "Son, you have been taken care of as a human person." She said this because she had seen him in his worst state when he lay homeless in the street.

After the son died, the father confessed that he was a Catholic; in the last 20 years, he had hidden his religious identity to join the communist party. The death of his son in the loving care of the Church touched him and soon after his son's burial he and his wife returned to the Catholic faith and got married in the Church.

The story of this young man seemed very consoling for those who took care of him. However before he discovered the faith that gave him peace and that led him to forgive himself and his family which had rejected him, he had gone through a long journey of pain, frustration, violence, vengeance and attempts to commit suicide. The Daughters of Charity and the staff at Mai-Hoa kept praying for him and spent time and effort to help him through these difficult times. They also spent time and energy visiting his family in order to seek their cooperation in helping the patient.

In a spirit of faith the Daughters of Charity recognise Christ's agony in the patients' sufferings and despair. This recognition gives the Sisters the courage and strength they need to accompany the sick in their trials. Indeed, the HIV-AIDS patients have been very difficult and demanding Masters. It takes a deep love for, and a close relationship with, the crucified and resurrected Christ, for them to carry out the daily services to the patients. These would often vent their frustration on the staff who could not always alleviate the patients' physical and psychological suffering or meet their expectations. A feeling of powerlessness with regard to the suffering of the patients has led the Sisters to have a stronger faith in the saving power of God who alone can lessen our anguish and give hope. And so they continue to struggle every day to find creative ways to make the patients feel God's love for them.

Outsiders who come to visit the patients at Mai-Hoa, often wonder why the Sisters show so much concern and loving care for these sick people who cannot recover their health and become useful citizens.

PHOTO

At first they thought it a waste of time and energy on the part of the Sisters to care for people who could no longer be productive. However, as they spend more time with the patients and listen to them sharing their renewed hope and peace that came from the caring devotion of the Sisters, then they understand the Sisters' mission.

The Sisters help the patients to know that they are God's children and to regain their self-esteem in spite of their feelings of guilt and helplessness. Inspired by the Holy Spirit they have started a "Programme for prevention against HIV-AIDS." The patients agree to recount their personal experience of how they contracted the disease, their hopelessness and frustration, their attempts to end their life and how they overcame these trials to become aware of the possibility that they could still lead useful lives by being able to help others. They are trained to speak about different ways of preventing such diseases and how to deal with HIV people without being overly fearful of getting infected.

Thanks to this "Prevention Programme" at Mai-Hoa, many people who come to the Centre for a pastoral visit or out of curiosity, learn the right way to prevent HIV coming into their life. They also learn not to discriminate against the HIV-AIDS people through fear of contamination. They have also found the sharing of experiences by the patients credible and convincing.

At the beginning of their mission at Mai-Hoa, the Sisters and staff found it hard and frustrating when they encountered fear and discrimination among the people who came into contact with the patients. People were disdainful and avoided contact with them. With the "Prevention Programme", there have been changes in the attitude of visitors. However, the Sisters still have to struggle to have the educational rights of the HIV-infected children recognised. These children are not welcome in any state school. So the Sisters tried to lobby for the right of the child to have a normal education with other children. Repeated requests to enrol these infected children in nearby schools were sent to various authorities. After two years of intervention, the Sisters received only a promise. They were told to hold classes at the Centre so that the children there would have no contact with others. The Sisters continued to send out requests and refused to keep the children in special classes. These are normal children who need to socialise with their peers for their personal development. Fortunately, the Sisters' efforts were finally rewarded. A new law was passed obliging all schools to accept even HIV children. Finally the children were admitted to a school and their dream of studying with other children was fulfilled. When this law was finally implemented, the school officials with whom the Sisters had been in communication, asked the Sisters to come to their schools and speak about HIV-AIDS and the plight of infected individuals. The Sisters took the opportunity to engage in wider cooperation in order to educate the people about the prevention of HIV-AIDS.

When the Daughters of Charity began this mission with HIV-AIDS people, they needed to put all their trust in God's providence. All patients admitted at Mai-Hoa are

poor persons whose families cannot afford to assist them. To date, God has not disappointed us in our hope to have enough resources for the care of these sick people. People who come to the Centre to visit the patients bring a box of noodles, a few cans of sardines and ten kilograms of rice. Each person who comes shares their limited resources to help their brothers and sisters in need. We receive no government aid and yet the people at the Centre lack nothing that is basic. Donations also come from different religious denominations: Buddhist people and monks, Protestant Pastors or Catholic Priests are welcome. They can freely meet and conduct their religious services for the patients who wish to attend. So Mai-Hoa has become a centre for inter-religious cooperation for the benefit of HIV-AIDs patients.

CONCLUSION

With the eyes of faith, the Daughters of Charity see God in people who seem less than human and have lost all their personal dignity. They firmly believe that these suffering people could be powerful messengers of God's plan for our salvation. The Sisters have demonstrated their commitment to stand fearlessly by the side of people who face discrimination from society. Yet these same people can often become a threat to the Sisters themselves, the Sisters run the risk of being deliberately contaminated by some frustrated patients. The possibility of martyrdom like that of Sister Lindalva is not a complete fantasy. However, the Sisters are ready even for this.

Sister Tue Linh,
Daughter of Charity

VISIT BY SUPERIORS

Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, and
Sister Wivine Kisu, General Councillor

Visit to the Province of Eritrea

26th July- 4th August 2008

HISTORY OF THE PROVINCE OF ERITREA

“You are the masters of my life. Now that I have opened my heart to you, I have handed over to you the keys to my heart. Now you know who I am. I will be not only your friend but your servant.” St. Justin de Jacobis.

St. Justin de Jacobis CM, the Apostle of Abyssinia, (now Eritrea, an autonomous region of Northern Ethiopia), was the first to call for the Daughters of Charity to go to Eritrea. For 20 years he asked for them to come and join his mission but this did not happen during his lifetime. His wish was granted in 1878 when the

first Sisters arrived from France. Sr. Louise Lequette, came as a missionary to Eritrea with other Sisters when her mandate as Superioress General came to an end.

The Sisters were in Keren and Massawa. They worked in an orphanage, a school, a clinic, had an apostolate with the Children of Mary and cared for the sick and the elderly in their own homes. However, in 1895 because of colonial expansion by the Italians, French missionaries, including the Daughters of Charity and Vincentian priests, were expelled from Eritrea. Their mission was taken over by other congregations of Italian missionaries. 53 years later, in 1948, Sr. Stinga and Sr. Tereza, two Italian Daughters of Charity, had come from Mekele, Ethiopia, to start a new mission, the “Divine Providence House” in Hebo, with St. Justin de Jacobis as its patron saint. In 1985 we became a Region, in 1995 a Vice-Province and in 2001 a Province.

At present we are 76 sisters serving in 11 local communities in all parts of Eritrea. Our works include home-based care for the elderly and sick, including HIV/AIDS cases, running an orphanage, schools, and clinics, engaging in pastoral work, providing support for various groups, animating the Vincentian Youth Movement, the promotion of women’s interests, and caring for disabled children in collaboration with the Liliane Trust funded by the Netherlands.

SISTER EVELYNE’S VISIT

On 26th July, 2008 our Province was granted the grace of a visit from Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, who was accompanied by Sister Wivine Kisu, General Councillor. They were warmly welcomed at Asmara airport by the Visitatrice, Sr. Lettegebriel and her Council, the Provincial Director Abba Rufael Mehari CM, Sister Servants, a number of Sisters of the province, representatives of the Congregation of the Mission, and other members of the Vincentian family.

At St. Catherine Laboure Provincial House we shared our joy together at this special time as St. Justine said, “...*call me and I will come at any time of day or night I am completely at your service*” .

PHOTO

Next day, on 27th July 2008, we celebrated Mass together with Vincentian family representatives and the poor. Fr. Weldemariam Zerayohanes and the Provincial Director officiated. During his homily, Fr Weldemariam said that Sister Evelyne’s presence among us is a sign of encouragement and he urged us live authentically our mission as Vincentians.

After Mass Sr. Lettegebriel, Visitatrice, welcomed Sister Evelyne and expressed her joy at her being here, pointing out that Sr. Evelyne is the third Mother General to have visited us. Then all the branches of Vincentian family presented different symbols representing their Vincentian identity.

- A missionary dressed in the traditional costume that St Justin would have known; offered a Bible.

- The Provincial Director presented her with incense, symbolising the fragrant perfume of our Christian and Vincentian life.
- Three Daughters of Charity wearing the former habit and cornette, presented an apron as a symbol of service
- The poor brought white flowers as a sign of thanksgiving.
- Members of the Vincentian Marian Youth Movement brought a Miraculous Medal as a symbol of their Marian spirituality.
- The St. Vincent de Paul Society presented a candle as a sign of God's presence in today's world.

After these symbols had been offered Fr. Rufael spoke about the living conditions of our people and their thirst for peace and security as well as mentioning the different services of the Vincentian family here. Sister Evelyne responded, "You have a very rich tradition, a solid faith, one of the earliest forms of Christianity; I encourage all of you, specially the young people to be true to this deeply rooted tradition in order to overcome present difficulties." She ended by saying, *"Always try to see the poor as your lords and masters."*

Later she met the Sister Servants, encouraging them to keep up their role of spiritual animation of their local communities, preserving unity and uniting their Sisters with the Company and with the Church. She met the Council in the afternoon and visited the seminary, Marguerite Naseau House.

On July 28th, she travelled to Providence House in Hebo. On the way she visited St. Justin de Jacobis School in Dekemhare. At Hebo the people from 5 nearby villages (Christians and Muslims) gathered to welcome Sister Evelyne and accompany her to the Mariam Zion parish where St. Justin is buried.

Next day, after solemn Mass in the sanctuary of St. Justin, Sister Evelyne set out on a very long journey to Blessed Ghebre Michael house in Monoxeito on the Ethiopian border. The people of Monoxeito welcomed her, singing songs to the music of drums and they accompanied her to the parish. In his speech of welcome, a representative of the people of Monoxeito mentioned all the services offered by the Daughters of Charity and he asked for these to be continued. Sister Evelyne thanked them all for their warm welcome saying, *"This welcome shows the love you have for the Sisters living among you. Be assured that the whole Company is praying for your country that is suffering such hardship."*

On July 30th, Sister Evelyne and Sister Wivine left St. Joseph's House, to go to Awhne, visiting the Hawazu Clinic on the way. When they arrived near Awhne, a big crowd of people, Catholics together with persons of the Orthodox religion and headed by Orthodox priests, accompanied the visitors to the Orthodox Church of the Blessed Trinity. Then the bell began to ring, the church door was opened and the visitors were invited to enter the church after the priests.

In accordance with our liturgical rite, Sister Evelyne and Sister Wivine took off their shoes and went into the Church with all the Sisters. After the service, Catholics and Orthodox Christians went together to the Catholic parish of Mary Covenant of Mercy. One of the Orthodox priests quoted Rm.10.12 *"For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon*

him.” He went on to say, “*The greatest faith is to have love for one another. That’s why we are all united here today to honour the presence of our dear sisters.*” Then Mother expressed her happiness at seeing the unity between Catholics and the Orthodox Church in that village.

Later, Sister Evelyne set off again for Halay where St. Vincent House and St. John Gabriel Perboyre House, two Vincentian foundations are situated. Then she continued in the direction of Asmara and visited the Provincial House of the Congregation of the Mission. In the afternoon she met the Bishop of Asmara diocese and they talked together. In the course of this conversation the Bishop told her how much he appreciated the presence of the Daughters of Charity, especially in the most remote areas.

Next day Sister Evelyne left for Keren where there is an ancient church of St. Michael that was built by the Vincentian Fathers. Then she visited the grave of the Sisters who had served in the orphanage there from 1878-1895. Later on she had a meeting with the Bishop of Keren diocese.

After that Sister Evelyne visited:

St. George’s Health Station where 30,000 people of that region benefit from the services of the Daughters of Charity in Walicu. Most of the people in the surrounding areas are Muslims. The local administrator who is a Muslim came with all his Muslim officials to welcome with dancing, and with singing in their local dialect which is a mixture of Arabic and Eritrean.

Mariam Zion House at Halhal and the Centre offering different forms of care and managed by the Sisters who have a good relationship with the Muslim fundamentalists.

Finally, that evening at Keren, the members of the Vincentian Marian Movement gave a presentation of the nine ethnic Eritrean groups with their traditional costume and regional dances.

On 2nd August, 2008, Sister Evelyne attended Mass at the shrine of Mariam Daarit (Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal).

PHOTO

A brief history of Mariam Daarit

When the Sisters came to Keren in Eritrea in 1878, they opened an orphanage, a school and a clinic. They engaged in pastoral work, organised the Children of Mary and cared for elderly and sick people in their homes. With the arrival of the Daughters of Charity, devotion to the “Miraculous Medal” flourished more and more. Shortly afterwards the Vicar Apostolic for Abyssinia donated the huge property of Daarit to the Daughters of Charity for their orphanage. “We also had the idea of setting up a place of pilgrimage in honour of the Blessed Virgin2.

A statue of Our Lady was placed in the hollowed out trunk of a baobab tree by the Vicar Apostolic of Abyssinia, on 18th July 1881. Eventually Mariam Daarit became a popular shrine for Christians and Muslims.

In 1941 a very heavy bombardment split the baobab tree but the Italian soldiers who had taken refuge in its hollow were not injured. The hole left by the bomb can still be seen.

On August 3rd, after a private meeting with the Sisters of the two local communities she had not been able to visit because of strained political relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sister Evelyne went with Sister Wivine to the Provincial House. They shared with the Sisters gathered there news about the Company and expressed their gratitude for the welcome they had been given. They stressed the important role of Sisters who accompany young people and prepare them to face the difficulties that arise from the political situation in the country. They also give witness by being close in heart and in life style to the poor who suffer hunger and lack of freedom.

At the end of the day they visited the House of Formation for pre-postulants and postulants in Embagaliano.

Next day, August 4th, after a meeting with the Council, Sister Evelyne and Sister Wivine caught a plane to Paris.

We can't now find the words to express our joy and our gratitude to Sister Evelyne and Sister Wivine for their great sisterly presence, for the way that they listened to us and for their interest in everything connected with our Province. How good it is to be a member of this wonderful Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Sisters of the Province of Eritrea

Sisters' Testimonies

Province of San Sebastien

Mission in Chad

Collaborating with our Protestant brothers and sisters

Located in the heart of the continent of Africa, Chad has an estimated population of 7 million, over 50% of whom are Muslim and 35% of whom are Christian.

At the invitation of the bishop, in 2002, the Sisters came to Bebaem, a city in the southwest of the country, to serve in the Catholic Mission. The bishop, who was

born into a Protestant family, understood the milieu very well. He explained to us that in this small, predominantly Protestant city, the Protestants were having difficulty relating to the Catholics, especially within the hospital founded by the Evangelical Church. Any Catholics who were in need of care or who wanted to enrol in the nursing school were first required to attend catechism classes. The Catholics preferred to take their sick family members to the local healer or witchdoctor rather than go to the hospital.

In this sensitive situation, we began by trying to establish relationships with the people in the neighbourhood. The electricity, plumbing and other businesses were run by Protestants. We called on them for minor services and for the repair of the doors and windows in the school and nutrition centre in the Catholic Mission. This allowed us to get to know one another better and to develop relationships of mutual respect. We also met the hospital personnel in order to establish a rapport with them. We first of all agreed to follow their decisions and attempted to defend the hospital against criticisms that we heard from others.

Having always lived in a Catholic milieu, we had to learn to live in a setting characterised by diversity. Even though we had previously read about and attended conferences on ecumenism, until that time these concepts remained purely on the intellectual level. Day by day, we learned to live this reality of religious diversity with as much humility and simplicity as possible. We knew that the others were going through the same process, and were also becoming accustomed to this concept of ecumenism. Little by little, we became closer to one another and relationships improved. The situation has changed for all those involved: Catholics now have the right to health care and young people are able to enrol in the nursing school without any problem.

One day, the Director of the hospital asked if we would collaborate in the service of those who are sick. In October 2006, he made a spoken request to the Catholic Mission for two Sister nurses to come and work at the hospital. We presented this request to our superiors who discussed it with the bishop. The latter insisted that the request be made in writing. However, the National Directors of the Evangelical Church refused to do this.

The Director of the hospital continued to ask for our help, but we were unable to give a positive response at that time. Finally, in February 2007, the National Directors of the Evangelical Church wrote to the bishop regarding the hiring of two Sisters as part-time nurses. On March 23rd, the bishop himself met the Director of the hospital in Bebaem to sign the contract.

We began our work in the hospital on 1st April, 2007. It was a day of great rejoicing for us because in 2007, that was the day that the feast of the Annunciation was celebrated. This was a sign for us from the Blessed Virgin, and with her, we were happy to say yes to this new mission which represented a real step forward in the process of ecumenism.

The hospital lacks medication and sufficient qualified personnel, but the atmosphere that exists there is very supportive, and those who are ill are listened to and cared for in the best way possible. The students in the school of nursing are well

trained and ready to accept any guidance given to them. We serve in pediatrics and surgery, collaborating with respect and kindness even though at times we are distressed by the lack of resources to care for the poorest persons among those who are ill. The patients contribute to paying their expenses according to their means and we assist those who have no financial resources.

Each morning before beginning work, the hospital employees gather for prayer. We also participate in their time of prayer, especially on Thursdays. Afterwards, the hospital staff pray with the patients as they serve them.

Interpersonal relationships continue to flourish. The patients are happy to meet us in the hospital and we follow the directives of the supervisor.

Since the Community opened the Infant Nutrition Centre in the Catholic Mission, collaboration with the pediatric department in the hospital has intensified. In fact, the children who come to the Nutrition Centre often have to be taken to the hospital if they suffer from severe malnutrition.

This way of living ecumenism on a daily basis has helped us to broaden our perspectives and to love in more respectful and selfless ways. These efforts at collaboration help to bring about the unity of the disciples that Our Lord prayed for: *“That they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”* Jn 17:21

The Community of Bebaem

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of Warsaw

The happiness of serving children with learning disabilities

One of the ministries of our local community is the management of a specialised Centre for children and young adults who have learning disabilities. When we tell other people about this work they often ask us: *“What hopes do you have for these children?”* Our answer is this: *“We are happy to work with them, especially when we are able to help them to overcome their disability and accompany them on their journey of faith. We have to say, too, that we receive a great deal from them: they often teach us true Gospel values.”* In this article, we would like to share with you how one of our children, Dorotka, evangelised us and her family through her goodness and the witness of her simple faith.

Dorotka arrived in our Centre three years ago. Before that, she had gone to the local school. One day, however, she met some of the children from our Centre and quickly became friends with them. She asked her parents if she could come and stay

in our Centre, and when they agreed, Dorotka came to us, only returning to her family at weekends.

She arrived at the Centre when the children were preparing for their first Communion. Dorotka wanted to share in preparing for this sacrament but she had not been baptised. After discussing the matter with her parents, a Sister catechist prepared her for baptism. The Sister gave Dorotka instructions on one condition, though: she had to come to Mass each Sunday. The parents respected their daughter's wishes and agreed to this condition. Each Sunday, they would come to Mass, sometimes accompanied by Dorotka's maternal grandmother and Katarzyna, her youngest sister.

It took two years to prepare Dorotka for baptism. During this time, the family got to know us, and one day they admitted that the mother and the daughter Kasia had never been baptised either, that the father had not made his first Communion and that the grandmother had stopped practising her faith a long time ago.

On Good Friday, 2007, Dorotka's grandmother came to Mass with us, her face full of joy as she said: *"Sister, after so many years, I received the Sacrament of Reconciliation. If you only knew how happy I am, how relieved my heart feels."* From that time on, the grandmother became closer to Dorotka and accompanied her to Mass each Sunday.

In April 2007, Dorotka was baptised in our chapel. The following June, she received her First Communion along with a group of children from the Centre. The following week, the whole family was with Dorotka. Her mother, seeing how happy her eldest daughter was, said: *"Maybe that day will come for us, too..."*

At the end of the summer vacation, Dorotka's parents asked us to prepare them for the sacraments. We directed them to a parish in Warsaw where the Dominican priests prepare groups of adults each year for baptism. The parents faithfully attended their catechism classes along with their daughter Kasia.

During the Easter Vigil in 2008, a beautiful celebration took place in the church of the Dominican priests in Warsaw. Dorotka's parents and her younger sister Kasia were baptised, confirmed and received their First Communion. They were so happy that they wanted to share their joy with the whole world. Not longer afterwards, Dorotka's parents received the sacrament of marriage in our chapel. Their family, friends and neighbours were there to share in their joy. Truly, for God all things are possible.

How had all of this been possible? Dorotka's mother told us: *"It is Dorotka, our little star, who brought us to this point."*

So it was that these parents, who had lovingly welcomed this child with disabilities into their lives, learned to see her as a gift from God. The Lord himself used her to guide the family towards him and to help them discover the happiness of the Gospel.

SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Quasi-Province

Pope Benedict XVI's visit to France

Pope Benedict XVI visited France from September 11th – 15th 2008, on the occasion of the Jubilee celebration in Lourdes for the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of Mary to Bernadette. He wanted to follow the Jubilee Way as a humble pilgrim, but beforehand, he was warmly welcomed by the people of Paris.

Starting with the press conference in the plane that brought the Pope to Paris, the media captured images of a smiling, open Pope, who was well-informed about the political and institutional nuances of France's secular society and he put a across his message in ways that were very acceptable. Benedict XVI had one precious asset: his perfect mastery of the French language, which allowed him to express himself in a most serene manner without the need for translation.

From Paris to Lourdes, these 4 days changed the French people's opinion of Benedict XVI, as well as his views on the Church in France. The charm of the Pope's kindness and friendliness won over the French people. The welcome extended to him by the people of France who warmly greeted him along the streets, as well as the response of French Catholics, went beyond all expectation. The joyful enthusiasm and fervour among Catholics was striking: 250,000 in Paris, almost the same number at Lourdes. The Pope was surprised by the number of young people in the crowds and on leaving France he said how encouraged he was by "the enthusiasm and the affection" of the young people.

In recognition of his position as head of state of Vatican City, he was first met by the President of the Republic of France, Nicolas Sarkozy who welcomed him at the airport. At the **Elysée Palace**, he was able to have a talk with him, and was delighted with the "ease and positive tone of their dialogue". Benedict XVI shared his concerns about marginalised young people who are often left to manage on their own or with "religious communitarianism".

The meeting that followed at the **Collège des Bernardins** was held with representatives from the world of culture. The Holy Father had been expected to present a broad panorama of the challenges facing the modern world. He preferred, however, to give a long discourse on "the origins of Western theology and the roots of European culture". He expounded on the factors in current society underlying a culture that is "searching for God". This culture of truth is a call to flee the idols that distract contemporary men and women from seeking the happiness of life with God. For Benedict XVI, the future of Christianity will be played out in the setting of culture. His complex and academic presentation appealed to the French people. This Pope who is so sensitive to culture could not remain indifferent to the magnificent work of restoration which has recently taken place here. Cardinal Lustiger's insight about making the Church more visible in a secularised society demonstrated the

prophetic aspect of its life. The Pope shared with the bishops of Paris how pleasantly surprised he was by the dynamic vitality he witnessed.

Afterwards, at **Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris**, the celebration of Vespers with the priests, deacons, seminarians and women and men religious was an opportunity for the Pope to emphasise the importance of listening to the Word of God. Then, during the night prayer vigil with young people, he confided to them *“the treasures of Christian faith, which are the Spirit and the Cross.”* The Pope told them that *“the Spirit opens to human intelligence new horizons which transcend it and enable it to perceive that...the Cross signifies God’s wisdom and infinite love.”* The prayer vigil, whose theme was: “Let us go to the source of Life”, was led by the young people and the Brothers of Taizé, with a testimony given by Jean Vanier. How impressive it was to see the young and not so young people gathered together for a common cause. At midnight, all those gathered in prayer went out in a huge candlelight procession towards the esplanade of Les Invalides where the Pope would celebrate a solemn Eucharistic Liturgy the following day. This procession formed a “Way of Light” to symbolise the journey of human life where the presence of the Light of Christ continually accompanies us.

On Saturday, September 13th, Benedict XVI arrived at **Les Invalides** in his pope mobile. The crowds in the streets were very excited to see the Pope and many were touched by his simplicity and his gentle smile. A crowd of 240,000 faithful gathered on the esplanade of Les Invalides for the Mass at which the Pope would preside. Because of the large numbers involved, 5,000 more were welcomed on the other side of the dome of Les Invalides which was equipped with the largest screen in Europe (100 square metres). A choir of 2,000 voices led the singing throughout the celebration. The Eucharistic celebration was a significant moment of communion among this huge number of believers assembled with the Pope. Benedict XVI showed disarming humility as successor of Peter. With his characteristic clarity he spoke about faith during a simple liturgy that was marked by a deep spirit of recollection. This gathering, celebrated in joy, fervour and serenity, was an unforgettable event for all and a testimony to the strong union that exists within the Church.

That afternoon, Benedict XVI set out for **Lourdes** as a pilgrim among the pilgrims. On his arrival, the Pope entered the Sanctuary area by the Saint Michael entrance, the Jubilee Door for the 150th anniversary of the Apparitions. Next, the Pope went to the Grotto of the Apparitions: this was where the Blessed Virgin appeared to Bernadette 18 times between February 11th and July 16th 1858. A child from the locality presented the Holy Father with Lourdes water. Then, after lighting a candle before the Grotto, the Pope recited the great prayer for the Lourdes Jubilee. That evening, the Pope arrived on foot at the terrace of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary overlooking the crowds of pilgrims, each holding a candle. The Pope gave the first discourse of his pilgrimage.

On Sunday morning, the pope mobile brought the Holy Father to the grassy area of the Lourdes Sanctuary where he celebrated Mass. He passed among the pilgrims who were overjoyed to see him. This was the Holy Father’s first “mingling with the crowds” at Lourdes. On this day when the Church celebrated the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, Benedict XVI built his homily round the mystery of the Cross that is present in every life. The Cross was also the first sign that Mary gave to

Bernadette. This “synthesis of our entire faith”, in the words of Benedict XVI, also invites us to make the sign of the Cross with great care. We also begin our meditation on the rosary with this sign, since this prayer is Gospel-based. In the afternoon, the Pope returned to the Sanctuary. He also met the bishops of France in the Saint Bernadette amphitheatre. He encouraged them in their mission and spoke about the challenges the country faces today: lack of vocations, family breakdown, the Church’s role in French society. Each bishop found comfort and support in the Pope’s words. Then the Pope went back to the field in his pope mobile for the Blessed Sacrament procession attended by the crowds of pilgrims. Here the Holy Father joined with the pilgrims in adoring Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament.

On the final day, the Pope went to the esplanade of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary and spent time with the sick pilgrims and disabled people. During the Mass in which the Church celebrated the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, the Holy Father gave the sacrament of the sick to 10 persons. In his homily, he invited all those present to contemplate “Mary’s smile” in the midst of their suffering, a smile which reflects our “eminent dignity as children of God.” With gentleness and kindness, the Holy Father chose words to very delicately call to mind this suffering that “can upset the most stable equilibrium; it can shake even the firmest foundations of trust”.

The Holy Father had come to pray quietly and meet his brothers and sisters in faith. He helped us to experience an extraordinary time of peace, prayer and communion that we will never forget. The spiritual intensity of the celebrations and the quality of silence on the part of the crowds was worthy of note. We thank the Holy Father for his visit to France which roused the enthusiasm of Catholics as well as the other citizens. May this unforgettable event give us the strength to continue to walk with confidence along the path of light.

Sister Marie
Daughter of Charity

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

Province of Sienna

A “Palio” Horse Race to honour the 150 years that the Daughters of Charity have been in Sienna

The Sienna Horse Race (Palio delle Contrade) is the most famous horse race in Italy. This competition takes place twice a year in the city of Sienna. The first one is held on July 2nd, the date that used to mark the feast of the Visitation, as well as a local celebration in honour of the Madonna of Provenzano. The second race, which takes place on August 16th, marks the day after the Assumption and is dedicated to the

Blessed Virgin. The horses and riders represent each of the 17 city districts and display the colours and coat of arms of their district. This popular annual event is deeply rooted in history: the oldest known Palios date back to the Middle Ages. In 1644, these races took on a new form with very specific rules which remain in force today. The Palio is not an event aimed at tourism; rather it is part of the city's festival tradition. A huge parade with standard bearers, drums and the like, precede the race that attracts spectators from all over the world. The procession ends with a parade float bearing a painted silk banner (Palio) that has been created either by a famous artist from Sienna or by contemporary representatives of the city.

This year, the July 2nd Palio was dedicated to the Daughters of Charity in Sienna in appreciation of their 150 years of presence and their service to poor persons.

The mayor of the city, Maurizio Cenni reminded the citizens that *“the Sisters continue today their untiring devotion in their service of the poorest and least able.”*

PHOTO

The painting on the silk banner for July 2nd 2008 was created by Camilla Adami. It shows an image of the Madonna of Provenzano, represented as a woman of the third millennium alongside another and faceless figure in white. As the mayor explained, *This represents the praiseworthy devotedness that the Daughters of Charity show towards their neighbour and the anonymity of their actions that are so important in these times that continue to be difficult for those most in need. This award today is given in solemn recognition of the presence of the Daughters of Charity in Sienna for 150 years of daily service carried out discreetly, as the Sisters live out the charism of Saint Vincent, away from the limelight... We know that the dedication of a Palio is an inadequate way of expressing the gratitude that we owe them but, more than anything else, it is a way of encouraging them to continue to live out their important charism of service to the most vulnerable members of our society.”*

Roberta Ferri, a journalist, gave this interpretation of the Palio painting: *“By not showing the Sister's features we have avoided singling out just one person who gives her life to others. In the oval shape representing the face framed by the cornette that they formerly wore, we can see the face of all the Sisters. Each of us can fill out the image with our own memories and feelings, while at the same time appreciating other smaller images in the picture.”*

The city's recognition of the Daughters of Charity encourages us “to do more,” as Saint Vincent said, and to plough new furrows of hope and love.

The Sisters of the Province

WE LEARN FROM OTHERS

Quasi- Province

My encounter with Benedict XVI

I was in Paris to meet my American friend, Lori, who was coming in by plane at the time that the Pope was also visiting the capital. The hotel where Lori and I were staying was located on Avenue de la Bourbonsais, between Les Invalides and the Eiffel Tower. This meant we were on the very same street that Benedict XVI was to drive along. I must admit that after living in the United States for 40 years, the Pope did not have much impact on my life. Moreover, I certainly wouldn't have counted him among my favorite persons as I found him rather aloof and very strict in his views. This was what I thought until the day I saw him face to face.

Late that morning, after arriving at the hotel, Lori and I decided to take a walk through the neighborhood to admire the monuments. As we left the hotel, we found that the police had set up barriers that prevented us from crossing the street. The police officers explained to us that the Pope was leaving for Lourdes and would be passing by us in his pope mobile. So Lori and I waited at the front of the sidewalk, saying that even though we didn't feel particularly drawn to him as a person, it would be interesting to see him all the same.

When the pope mobile arrived, I was fascinated by this vehicle; then I saw the Pope inside waving his hand in greeting to the people. His welcoming smile was touching. Then Benedict XVI passed by me, and suddenly, I had the impression that he was looking and smiling at me personally. I felt a very strong emotion when he looked at me, as if God was looking at me through him, and my heart was completely changed. A few seconds later, Lori turned to me, saying that the Pope had looked into her eyes. I believe that Benedict XVI has a way of looking intensely at others in order to transmit the love of Christ that dwells within him. This feeling I experienced deep within my heart reminds me of the experience of Zacchaeus who wanted to see Jesus out of curiosity but who, thanks to a look of love from Jesus, changed his way of seeing things and the way that he lived. It has been the same for me as well; ever since that day, my views on the Church and on its spiritual leader have completely changed.

When I saw on television the crowds of faithful who came to celebrate the Eucharist presided over by the Pope at Les Invalides, I understood how important it is for Christians to have a shepherd to support and love them and gather them together. His visit has brought out a great sense of camaraderie everywhere in Paris, stirring up in everyone a desire to share the best of themselves.

This glance from Benedict XVI has truly changed something in my life. I discovered that he is a man who is so passionate about truth that he has the courage to remind our world in very clear terms about the values of the Gospel. I now have a better understanding of the goodness of the Lord who loves us so much that he gives

us a Pope to protect us from a life of excess and chaos, one who reminds us, whether the message is welcome or unwelcome, to choose true happiness which is found in the heart of God.

Liliane

NEWSBRIEFS

Sister Evelyne Franc Auditrice at the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome October 5th -26th, 2008

From October 5th -26th, 2008, a delegation of bishops from all over the world gathered in Rome on the occasion of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church” was the theme for this time of study. Seeking God in His Word was a follow-up topic that came after the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist that had taken place in 2005.

The 253 Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops chosen as delegates represented the 13 Eastern Catholic Churches, 113 Latin Bishops’ Conferences and 25 Roman Dicasters, as well as the Union of Superiors General. 41 experts and 37 auditors also attended the conference, including Sister Evelyne Franc. This was an awesome experience of Church for Sister Evelyne who found herself in the midst of the Pope and bishops from all parts of the world, striving to find ways to serve the entire Church, to help others discover the Word of God and to better live the Word.

This was the first time that the Synod opened in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, to commemorate this year in which the Church celebrates the Year of Saint Paul, on the occasion of the 2000th anniversary of the birth of the apostle Paul.

After the first week of work, several Auditors and Auditrices, one of whom was Sister Evelyne, made interventions during the 14th General Congregation. Sister Evelyne gave her testimony in the presence of the Holy Father, on the subject of the Word of God in the service of poor persons as well as in youth ministry and in popular piety.

NEWSBRIEFS

A star is born

Sister Magdalena Vásquez Trujillo, who founded the Province of Venezuela, celebrated her 100th birthday on November 29th 2007. That same day, Sister Magdalena went with another Sister to Radio Maria to be interviewed and to give a testimony of her love and fidelity to the Blessed Virgin. Sister Magdalena has always shown great appreciation for this Catholic radio station, a non-profit making enterprise whose sole purpose is to explain and nurture Christian faith. Each morning, after Lauds, meditation and the rosary, Sister Magdalena faithfully tunes in to the programmes presented by this Catholic radio station.

One day, as she asked herself how she could continue to serve others despite the physical limitations she now finds to her health. She thought: *“I need to find a way to support Radio Maria financially.”* She continued to think about this: *“Since the stars shine and give off light, I’m going to make a star with five points resembling the stars that encircle the head of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. I’ll write a name on each point of the star. Whose name? I don’t know yet! I’ll talk about it with those around me, telling them that a star costs 100,000 bolivars and a star point costs 20,000.”*

“I telephoned by friend Carmen who said to me: *‘I think you are right; I’ll send you 100,000 bolivars.’* And this is how the first star was born. The next day, I organised my address book. I telephoned the first person on my list and told her my idea. She said: *‘A branch of a star for 20,000 bolivars. That’s not asking much!’* And I answered: *‘I’m asking for a small sum so as to receive a lot of orders’* And that is what happened. Thanks be to God, it worked out very well.”

Sister Magdalena continues her fundraising, and in this way she is able to support this Catholic radio station, not only through her prayers but financially as well. In thanksgiving, she sends Radio Maria the names of her donors so that their intentions are remembered in people’s prayers. Yes, love certainly is inventive!

Sister Bérénice JIMENEZ
Daughter of Charity

IN ST. VINCENT’S DAY ..AND IN OUR OWN TIMES

II. HOLY SPIRIT, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

Let us always remember that M. Vincent was a Gascon. So a question such as: “Holy Spirit what are you doing?” coming from the lips of M. Vincent, could have at least two meanings, depending on the tone of voice he used.

The first interpretation of the question might be that it was simply a request for information or a desire to better understand the role of the Spirit in the Church and the world. It would express the natural desire of a believer to find out something, just as we want to do this evening.

The second way of looking at the question could have been completely different: “What in the world are you doing, Holy Spirit?” This is the kind of question we ask when we don’t understand anymore, when we have the impression that the Spirit is going too far, taking too many risks, no longer acting within reason, becoming almost unjust, perhaps in allowing, for example, the innocent to suffer or to die...Holy Spirit, what in the world are you doing?

Before coming to the particular way that we would voice the question this evening, and in order to remain faithful to Saint Vincent and to our reactions as believers in the face of all the misery and injustice in the world today, I should at least mention some of the moments of rebellion and the cries of protest that were part of M. Vincent’s faith experience. I will give two examples.

On July 24th, 1655, during sharing of prayer, M. Vincent suddenly exclaimed: “There’s war in all the Catholic kingdoms: France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Poland—being attacked on three fronts—and Ireland, even in the poor, almost uninhabitable mountains and rocky areas. Scotland isn’t much better off, and we know the deplorable state of England. There’s war everywhere, misery everywhere. In France, so many people are suffering! O Sauveur! O Sauveur! If, for the four months we’ve had war here, we’ve had so much misery in the heart of France, where food supplies are ample everywhere, what can those poor people in the border areas do, who have been in this sort of misery for twenty years? Yes, it’s been a good twenty years that there’s always been war there; if they sow their crops, they’re not sure they can gather them in; the armies arrive and pillage and carry everything off; and what the soldier hasn’t taken, the sergeants take and carry off. After that, what can be done? What will become of them? They must die. If true religion exists . . . what did I say, wretched man that I am!... God forgive me! I’m speaking in a material sense. It’s among them, among those poor people that true religion and a living faith are preserved...” (Coste XI, 189-190).

Of course you will have noticed that in M. Vincent’s prayer, there was a sense of being overwhelmed in the face of so much misery: Holy Spirit, what in the world are you doing?

On August 24th, 1657, Vincent had just learned that one of his closest friends and most dedicated confreres had caught the plague, and he cried out: “Is that, Lord, the reward You give to Your servants, to this man in whom we’ve never noted the slightest fault, to someone who remained firm as a rock in the place where Your Divine Providence had placed him, despite all the calamities of war, plague, and famine?’ Yet, see how God treats His servants.” (Coste XI, 362). Holy Spirit, what in the world are you doing? Nevertheless, after these cries of rebellion, M. Vincent’s prayer was full of trust.

I wanted to call attention to the special resonance this question can have, while remaining faithful to Saint Vincent. I would also like to relate it to what we often feel

today when confronted by so much suffering and injustice that often strikes innocent people. It is good to know that Saint Vincent's faith and prayer also faced such moments of questioning, anguish, rebellion even, moments that even Christ himself experienced in the garden of Gethsemane before his death. The question for this evening, however, can be interpreted in yet another way: that of believers who want to know more about the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church. I have been asked to present to you the experience and thoughts of Saint Vincent on the role of the Holy Spirit in the institutional Church and even in the hierarchical Church.

At first glance, this may seem to limit our subject, but don't worry. M. Vincent was not a man to be limited and tied down by what was institutional. You can be sure of that. With regard to this particular topic, he quickly brings us beyond structures, institutions and power, towards the rediscovery of Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. For M. Vincent, this was clearly one of the essential roles of the Spirit in the Church and the world: to change our outlook, mentality and conduct in society so that we will be inspired by the Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those persecuted for the sake of justice!

Holy Spirit, what are you doing in the Church? I am working in the hearts of believers to give them a better understanding of the Beatitudes and to bring these into people's lives. Here we see the very core of Saint Vincent's response to the question we are asking. The process he went through to discover the role of the Spirit in the Church was a long one, though, and it had its hesitations and even contradictions. If you agree, let us follow M. Vincent in this process and share his discoveries.

To sum up, it can be said that Vincent de Paul went through three stages:

- He entered the institutional Church, seeing it above all as a hierarchical structure and with the hope of climbing to its highest level as quickly as possible.

- In 1617, at the age of 36 and after 17 years in the priesthood, he made two discoveries almost simultaneously: poor people, and the role of the laity in the Church. This would completely transform his concept of the Church: it was indeed a hierarchical society, but first of all it had a missionary purpose: a Church that is sent, especially to those who are poor.

- After this conversion in the strongest sense of the word, the third stage for Vincent was a long process of maturation and deepened understanding, during which time Church roles were progressively being redefined and reallocated.

From that time on, the Holy Spirit for Vincent was the Spirit of Isaiah, whose words Christ repeated in Luke 4:18: "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." As we know, it is the Pope who has the power to send people everywhere in the world. The Bishop, in turn, is responsible for the Mission in his part of the Church. Priests and the laity, finally, are collaborators and co-responsible with the Bishop for carrying out this mission. How far this is from the Church of power and dignitaries to which the young Vincent de Paul aspired! Let us return once more to this process, taking it step by step.

1. INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH / HIERARCHICAL CHURCH

You will remember, I'm sure, the family reasons that led the young shepherd boy Vincent to enter the Cordeliers School in Dax and then the University of Toulouse. One of Vincent's uncles who had become a priest had been able to help his family. Why couldn't Vincent do the same? He was not the oldest child in the family, and he demonstrated much aptitude and potential. So he was very soon guided towards the priesthood. He received minor orders on December 20th 1596 in Bidache in the diocese of Bayonne when he was only fifteen and a half years old. He was ordained sub-deacon on September 19th, 1598 in Tarbes and deacon on December 19th: he was only seventeen and a half! On September 23rd, 1600, at the age of 19 and a half, he became a priest at Chateau-l'Eveque in the diocese of Perigueux. As you know, this rush towards ordination to the priesthood was a worrying fact for Vincent de Paul's early biographers. They found an infallible and radical way to camouflage this flaw in the painting: they advanced the year of Vincent's birth by five years, thus allowing his priestly ordination to be set at an age that was more in conformity with the Council of Trent! Above one of the side entrances to the Chapel in the Berceau, you can still find this date of birth given to Vincent: 1576 instead of 1581!

Vincent entered a Church in which he had faith, of course, but which he approached from the institutional and hierarchical angle. In 1595 he was only a poor shepherd who owed his advancement to the sacrifices of his family, to whom he wished to return what was due them, by progressing to the highest position possible in the Church as quickly as he could.

After his priestly ordination, the parish of Tilh in the Landes region was offered to him. This benefice was contested, however, and he preferred not to bring the dispute to court. When he opted to study at the University of Toulouse, it wasn't for the purpose of becoming pastor of a small country parish!

In 1604, at the age of 23, he thought he would be able to fill a vacant position as bishop in the region of Bordeaux, but this arrangement was short-lived. After numerous adventures, we find our young Gascon in Paris, with the title of chaplain to the royal court of Marguerite de Valois. He then became pastor in Clichy, and finally, tutor for the de Gondis, one of the most powerful families in the kingdom. At the same time, he maintained the title and revenue from Clichy as well as an abbey near La Rochelle; he had become the owner of it in May 1610. To this must be added the emoluments that came from being canon of Ecouis in Eure, a title which he picked up along the way.

Holy Spirit, what are You doing? At this point on M. Vincent's journey we could very well ask this question in a tone of surprise and doubt. Who would have ever imagined what would follow? Who would have recognised a future saint in this man who was frantically climbing the ladder of success?

But the Spirit of Isaiah and Luke 4:18, who sends us to those who are poor, was at work. The moment that Vincent seemed to have all the cards in his hands was a time of darkness and doubt, a long night lasting three years. It was a time when he questioned everything and called himself into question as well. What brought an end to this dark night was his encounter with someone who was poor.

Vincent was no stranger to poor people. In the first fourteen years of his life, he had been poor himself, but when he became a priest (it's terrible to say this) his social status changed. And so it was that this old man from Gannes, as we have mentioned, had the immense joy of speaking to a priest before dying. This man, without ever realising it, moved Vincent, challenged him, and turned his life around.

It is true that for three years Vincent de Paul had been fretting and questioning. The Holy Spirit was preparing the way, and the simple joy of a poor dying man who was finally attended to, was the sign sent by the Spirit, triggering something in Vincent... "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me... the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor..." (Is. 61:1) After seventeen years as a priest, Vincent finally understood that he had been mistaken. He had always believed in the Church, but along with many of his contemporaries, he had viewed it as a powerful hierarchy. A poor man came along to set him on the right road. Vincent decided to leave everything: he became pastor in the country district of Chatillon-les-Dombes, not far from the parish of Ars in the Lyonnais region.

2. THE POOR AND THE LAITY

These two discoveries were simultaneous and complementary. In August 1617 Vincent de Paul was 36 years old. He had met the poor man several months earlier, a person who had feared dying without a priest. The joy of this old man testified to what was to come for Vincent, challenging and overturning the life of this pastor who for seventeen years had been imprisoned in the "Institution-hierarchy" structure of the Church. The Spirit had always been at work, though...

Having just arrived in his new parish (three weeks after his installation), Vincent de Paul was faced with another situation of poverty. A family, isolated and abandoned on the edge of the village, was decimated by illness. This situation obviously was beyond the resources of this new pastor who had just arrived and did not yet know anyone. But since his encounter with the old man in Gannes, poor people had become a priority for Vincent. He launched a stirring appeal from on high in the pulpit: "I made a strong plea" M. Vincent said, "speaking with such feeling..." (Coste IX, 209). This was for him a second discovery of capital importance: the massive response of the laity. I will let M. Vincent speak: "... I was vesting to celebrate Holy Mass one Sunday when I was told that in an isolated house ... everyone was ill... That touched me to the heart. During the sermon, I made sure to commend them zealously to the congregation, and God, touching the hearts of those who heard me, moved them with compassion for those poor afflicted people. After dinner a meeting was held in the home of a good townswoman to see what help could be given them, and everyone present felt urged to go and visit them, console them with their words, and do what they could to help them. After Vespers, I took with me a respected citizen of the town, and we set out together to go there. Along the way, we met some women who had gone before us and, a little further on, we met others who were returning home. Since it was summertime and the weather was very hot, those good ladies were sitting by the side of the road to rest and refresh themselves. In a word, Sisters, there were so many of them, you would have said it was a procession." (Coste IX, 192) It was in 1646, 29 years later, that Vincent called to mind the wonderful memory of this event and in his words we still sense clearly all the emotion and amazement he felt. Yes, this was his great discovery of the laity in the Church.

Until that time, in his ideas and his personal life plan, he saw the Church as a hierarchical institution, going from the Pope to the priest via the bishop. On Sunday, August 20th 1617, suddenly and in an unexpected way, he understood the importance of the laity, especially in the response they could make to the needs of the poor.

For Vincent, these two simultaneous discoveries were crucial: the presence of poor people in the Church, and the importance of the laity in the Church for the service of the poor. I believe that this was one of the fortunate moments and privileged graces granted to Vincent de Paul. It was also one of the most characteristic aspects of his development and his spirit: discovering at the same time the place of the poor person and the role of the laity in the Church. We should not regard this as just a coincidence. Understanding to some degree the historical and ecclesial context at this time, I believe I can say that this was a turning point in the Church's thinking and practice. In terms of the relationship the Church had towards poor persons as understood by the priests (the 17th century priests who resembled Vincent de Paul prior to his conversion), this relationship was bound to be tainted with paternalism, as we would call it today. On August 20th 1617 at Chatillon-les-Dombes, M. Vincent, without realising it, charted a new course for charity, a charity which has become one of **solidarity**, rather than charitable giving. This movement changed and purified everything. Naturally, force of habit quickly took over. After the experience at Chatillon, Vincent launched the Confraternities of Charity, that is, teams of lay people set up to care for poor persons in each sector and each parish. Nineteen editions of regulations have been preserved and these are still worth studying today, if for no other reason than to see the concern for respect and the social promotion of those who are poor. We should honestly recognise, though, that in spite of Vincent de Paul's efforts, the blight of paternalism affected them to some extent, even among the early teams of lay people who were most often headed by noble women of high standing. Later this would become one of the reasons for founding the Daughters of Charity, who at their origin were mostly young women from the poorer class in society who would serve other poor persons. Yes indeed! Saint Vincent was without a doubt the initiator of the concept of ministry in a particular locality being carried out by those who lived in the area, just as in the 17th century he confided the service and evangelisation of poor persons to those who were poor.

Be that as it may, let us keep in mind that on August 20th 1617 at Chatillon-les-Dombes, Vincent de Paul became simultaneously aware of the priority to be given to poor persons in the Church and the irreplaceable role of the laity. See what progress has been made by this careerist, ordained a priest at the age of nineteen and a half with dreams of quick success! Poor people...the laity...these are the two Vincentian discoveries of 1617. Henceforth Vincent would envisage and experience another Church: the Church of the Spirit.

3. THE CHURCH OF THE SPIRIT

After this famous year 1617 and right up to his death in 1660, M. Vincent continued to deepen his understanding of this early experience. Little by little, by his words, his writings, and above all by his actions, he gave the Church, in collaboration with several other great contemporaries, a kind of new image. It was an image that was more missionary than hierarchical, more activist and servant than proprietor and ruler. Of course, nothing became perfect all at once; the Church has remained a

human organisation. There is no question, though, that a very important step had been taken. Let us attempt to retrace in broad outline the process that led Saint Vincent towards a Church of the Spirit.

When he looked back on his life after the important events of 1617, a text from the Gospel of Luke would often come back to his mind and make its way into his prayer. It served to enlighten him, allowing him to understand what he had just experienced with the poor and the laity. This text that I have already quoted comes from the prophet Isaiah, words that Christ applies to himself at the beginning of his public life: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. This text obviously became the foundation of Vincent de Paul's spirituality, and especially, the basis of his new concept of the Church.

The response to the question we asked: Holy Spirit, what are you doing? is clearly this: everything comes from the Spirit of God The Spirit consecrates and sends... Vincent shows his attentiveness to the message given by Isaiah and taken up again by Christ: The Spirit sends us to proclaim the good news to those who are poor. From this point on, we could say (excuse the metaphor!), we are going from the static idea of SEAT to the dynamic of MISSION.

From a rather institutional and hierarchical point of view, with reference to the Pope we speak of the Chair of Peter or the Holy See; with regard to bishops, we use the term Episcopal See (seat). In this vocabulary and traditional imagery, there are many essential values that Vincent understood, recognised and even defended (especially during this period of clashes with Protestantism). These values included apostolic succession, unity, collegiality, etc. Caught up by the movement of the Spirit sending us out to the ends of the earth, and in reaction to the sense of responsibility often perceived and lived out as Church power, Vincent de Paul redefined hierarchy in a certain sense, at all its levels, from the Pope to the laity, especially at the level of the poor and in relation to them. "Go into the whole world, in mundum universum, and preach the Gospel to every creature. These are the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ, taken from Saint Mark, chapter 16. I think, Messieurs, that these words, which Our Lord said to His Apostles before ascending to heaven, are also addressed to the entire Company and, in particular, to those destined for preaching. O Sauveur! We have the same mandate as the Apostles!" (Coste XI, 237).

Notice the insistence that Vincent de Paul places on the word "sent", on the verb "to send". We are absolutely in keeping with Isaiah and Luke 4:18, and in keeping with the Spirit. For M. Vincent, the Pope is the one "in whom alone resides power to send missionaries throughout the whole world" (Coste XI, 373) with a view to proclaiming the Gospel. Vincent wholeheartedly believed and affirmed this. When the Pope asked him to send missionaries to Madagascar, he accepted without hesitation, even though this was the riskiest undertaking possible. For the Congregation, this was a venture that would decimate the missionaries, often the most talented and the youngest among them: an absolute disaster! No matter...and he was the one to say: there are doubtless a large number of poor persons in your country... but in Madagascar there are many more abandoned peopleso I am sending you there!

In this new Church of the Spirit, as Vincent de Paul envisaged and experienced it, the same applied to the bishop who was responsible for the Mission in the diocese.

Vincent thought that all pastoral initiatives should be studied, decided and organised with the bishop, and Vincent's actions would be based on this. How often did he speak on this subject! When I read certain texts of Saint Vincent, I wonder if he had read the documents of Vatican II!

I will only refer to one of his characteristics. Vincent de Paul founded, among other organisations, an extraordinary group of laypeople, as well as the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Before his time there were many founders, and many more still in the 17th century. Almost all of them, with an untiring desire to serve the Church according to their charism, were greatly concerned with maintaining a certain autonomy in order to preserve their special character and specific features. This was quite understandable given the problems of recruitment, as well as the lack of formation and the conduct of many bishops at that time: the bishops' regional authority was important RATHER than being bishops of the Spirit! Let us not forget that at the age 23 and a half, Vincent very nearly became one of these bishops...

In the works he founded Vincent de Paul always took great care to maintain a vital link with the local bishop. It is in this spirit that in 1631 he wrote to a confrere in Rome whom Vincent had made responsible for arranging the approbation of the Congregation: "You must make it understood that the poor are being damned for want of knowing the things necessary for salvation, and for lack of confession. If His Holiness were aware of this need, he would have no rest until he had done all he could to set things right. It is the knowledge we had of this situation that brought about the establishment of the Company, so as to remedy it in some way. In order to do this, we must live in a congregation and observe five things as essential for this purpose: 1. leave to the bishops the power of sending the Missionaries into the part of the diocese they choose; 2. the above-mentioned priests are to be subject to the pastors where they go to give the mission, for its duration..." (Coste I, 112-113).

You can see the poor level of formation, holiness and generosity that existed among many of the bishops at that time (and even more so among the pastors!) M. Vincent decided to live and work according to the thinking of the Church of the Spirit, wanting always to remain faithful at all costs to those who had authority to send. In the text quoted above, (I, 112-113), M. Vincent was speaking about the pastors of the parishes. This level of the hierarchy, as it existed at the time of Vincent, is worth addressing at greater length, but time is limited.

M. Vincent had very harsh criticism for the priests of his day; he was also one of the greatest promoters and founders of seminaries. Even at this level of the hierarchy, perhaps especially at this level, the Church of power often overrode the Church of the Spirit, and the desire for social advancement was often detrimental to the vocation of evangelising the poor. Of course, our dear M. Vincent must have been remembering a certain young priest aged 19 and a half, so intent on success, when one day he exclaimed during a conference: "O my dear confreres, how earnestly we must ask God for this and exert ourselves for this great need of the Church, which is heading for ruin in many places because of the bad life of priests. For they are the ones causing it to perish and destroying it; and it's only too true that the depravity of the ecclesiastical state is the principal cause of the ruin of God's Church. Recently I was at a meeting where there were seven Prelates who, reflecting on the disorders that

are seen in the Church, were stating loudly that the clergy were the principal cause of this. So then it is priests. Yes, we are the cause of this desolation ravaging the Church..." (Coste XI, 279).

What M. Vincent condemned more than anything else, certainly from his own experience, was that poor persons were being abandoned: "Are not the poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Are they not our brothers? And if the priests abandon them, who do you think will help them?" (Coste XII, 608, 1963 ed.) As Vincent de Paul saw it, the priests are those who work at grassroots level, in contrast to the bishops or the pope. To Vincent's way of thinking, if a priest loses contact with poor people, the entire chain that links the Church together is broken. In that case, the message of the prophet Isaiah echoed by Christ has lost its purpose. Here we see again that Saint Vincent remains consistent and faithful to his concept of the Church of the Spirit.

Have you ever noticed M. Vincent's question in the passage just quoted: "And if the priests abandon those who are poor, who do you think will help them?" WHO? Beginning in 1617, after the amazing experience at Chatillon, Vincent had the answer. Who? It was the laity. Naturally, he in no way envisaged this as a substitute or compensation for the clergy, the opposite is true. The more deeply he understood the Church of the Spirit, the more impossible it was to separate priesthood from laity. He recalled that spontaneous sermon, that came from his heart (with such feeling!), concerning the desperate situation in Chatillon; he remembered the unexpected response of the laity and the first team of ladies gathered together three days later.

To summarise and conclude, I will give just two aspects of Saint Vincent's thinking and development with regard to the laity. These two aspects are quite intriguing, perhaps even revolutionary for that period in history (the era of the Sun King).

First of all, M. Vincent became aware of the vocation of the laity in the service of evangelisation. Then, among the laity, he gives women a role once again. He thought the laity should be co-responsible with the bishops and priests for the evangelisation of poor people. Long before Saint Vincent, there were lay organisations to provide for the needs of the poor, but most often, their possibilities and privileges were limited to the material domain. Anything relating to worship, catechesis, preaching or evangelisation was reserved to the clergy. Anybody of my age knows that this was still the case 50 years ago or even less. In November 1617, though, M. Vincent had the audacity to set down in writing the regulations for the first team of lay people that he founded, and he stated that this team would have the responsibility to assist SPIRITUALLY and CORPORALLY the poor persons in the parish. All through these regulations, he insisted at great length on what we would today call the mission of evangelisation.

This was a great turning point, and as a result Vincent de Paul had his share of trouble with the pastors. Whenever he preached a mission, he or his confreres would promote and organise teams of lay people into what was called the Confraternities of Charity. Although the pastors were generally in agreement about providing material assistance, on the other hand, they found these lay Vincentians troublesome or worse,

and acting beyond their level of competence in matters of evangelisation...Come winds or high waters, M. Vincent held fast!

And in terms of the role of women in the Church, the thinking of Saint Vincent seems even more courageous, to the point of being audacious. Having a lay man become involved in evangelisation was out of place, but tolerable. ON THE OTHER HAND, a woman... On this point, M. Vincent realised he was being something of an agitator. Reading his texts, we sense that the Gascon in him was not worried by this.. Listen to just two short passages...and believe me, there are many other examples! He was speaking to the women involved in these lay teams that he founded wherever he went: “You practise what widows in the early Church did, namely, you meet the material needs of the poor as they did, and even the spiritual needs of persons of your own sex, as they did. In this you will be exempt, as it were, from the prohibition placed upon you by Saint Paul in 1Cor. 14: *‘Women should keep silent in the churches; nor are they permitted to speak’...*” (Coste XIII b, 764). Vincent de Paul was in flagrant contradiction of the apostle Paul. I spoke about his being an agitator; there was a bit of that, no doubt...and imagine the effect of such words in the Church in the XVIIth century!

Another text stated: “For eight hundred years or so, women have had no public role in the Church; in the past there were some called Deaconesses, who were responsible for seating the women in the churches and teaching them the rubrics then in use. About the time of Charlemagne, however, by a discreet working of Divine Providence, this practice came to an end; persons of your sex were deprived of any role and haven’t had any since then. And now that same Providence is turning today to some of you to supply what was lacking to the sick poor of the Hotel-Dieu.” (Coste XIIIb, 432). Vincent reminded the ladies of their mission as evangelisers of poor persons, as well as their role and responsibility in the CHURCH.

Our great Saint from the Landes region most certainly played a decisive role in all that contributes even today to the richness of our Church, according to Vatican II.

HOLY SPIRIT, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

M. Vincent has answered this question: the Holy Spirit consecrates and sends the Church to proclaim the good news to those who are poor, to the very ends of the earth. It’s very simple. This is found in the prophet Isaiah. And out of the 1277 pages of the Jerusalem Bible, it is THE passage that Jesus Christ chose to define the purpose of his mission, in Luke 4:18.

What does the Holy Spirit do? He breathes in this way into the heart of the Pope, the bishops and lay men and women. As long as this breath of the Spirit is felt by the laity, priests, bishops and the Pope, the Church will continue to move in the RIGHT DIRECTION, for it will be the Church of the Spirit.

Cover**61st Annual DPI/NGO conference to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

This was the most important event of the year for the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) in conjunction with the United Nations. It was organised by the DPI (Department of Public Information of the UN) in partnership with the NGOs to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Taking as its theme: *“Reaffirming Human Rights for All, the Universal Declaration at 60 years”* the Conference heightened awareness of the issues of human rights and encouraged a greater commitment on the part of NGOs in this domain.

Approximately 2,000 participants coming from 90 countries (including 10 Daughters of Charity currently on mission in the Motherhouse) participated in this 61st Annual Conference of NGOs associated with the DPI of the UN. The gathering took place in Paris from September 3rd-5th, 2008 in the Paris office of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation). This was the first time that this Conference was held outside the United Nations headquarters in New York.

The Conference provided a platform for debate about ways of raising public awareness of the importance of Human Rights. It helped draw attention to the “efforts and unique achievements accomplished by civil society throughout the entire world, in partnership with the United Nations, the member states and other agents, to make this dream a reality.”

Another positive outcome of this Conference was the encouragement given to NGOs to join forces to promote Human Rights. All the NGOs, and not only those specifically focused on this subject, felt involved in the issue. In the closing of this 61st Conference, the participants heard presentations by Stephane Hessel, Ambassador of France, Ingrid Betancourt, former Colombian Senator who addressed the Conference via video link, and Shamina de Gonzaga, President of the 31st annual Conference.

“Unquestionably, human dignity must be defended, and in this regard, indifference is our enemy number one,” declared Kiyoko Akasaka, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information.