

January –February 2009

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SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of 1st January 2009

Dear Sisters,

I send my heartfelt wishes for a happy and holy New Year 2009 to you, your local communities and all the Provinces and the Region of the Company. May we live this New Year in dynamic fidelity as we serve Christ in persons who are poor, with an evangelical spirit and under the protection of Mary, the Mother of God. This is something we can all wish one another!

I am very grateful for the news that you have been sending me in recent weeks, telling me about your communities and the joy you experience as Daughters of Charity. You mention your ministries rooted in prayer, sustained by the support of the elderly Sisters and based on the generous commitment of each one in collaboration with all those who work for justice and the full promotion of the dignity of those who are poor. You also describe the sufferings of those living in poverty in your various localities, where situations are made worse by violence, corruption by those in power, natural disasters and the worldwide economic crisis. In your letters, you also share with me stories of your community life, giving thanks for its vitality and often expressing your desire to live community more deeply.

In prayer before the Infant in the crib, I offered all that you shared along with this New Year that is in such need of **hope** and **peace**. I meditated on the passage from Isaiah that we read at Midnight Mass, which can bring light to the year that is beginning:

*“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
 those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined.
 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy...
 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their
 oppressor,
 you have broken as on the day of Midian...
 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us ...
 he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of
 Peace.”*
 (Is 9: 1-5)

Mary is at the heart of the events of Christmas. Through her spirit of faith and openness to these events, she was able to discover their meaning little by little. She experienced the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy. Let us follow her example as we meditate on the birth of Jesus, and recognise the humility of a God who became one of us through love, freely-given. From this we can draw on reserves of **hope** that we need for the coming year, for the poor and for ourselves as well.

Like Saint Vincent and Saint Louise in their time, let us confide ourselves to Mary, asking her to *live as prophets and bearers of hope now and everywhere*, courageously building the Kingdom of light and truth begun by her Son.

“ Sisters, let us place ourselves under her guidance, Sisters, let us promise to give ourselves to her Son and to her without reserve so that she may be the guide of the Company in general and of each Sister in particular.” (Saint Vincent, Coste X, page 500).

“Each day, let us implore her to help us to render to God the service we have promised Him and to be as submissive as she was in accomplishing His holy will.” (Saint Louise, Spiritual Writings, M. 33, page 785).

As Father Gregory told us earlier, in 2010 the Vincentian Family will be celebrating the 350th anniversary of the death of Saint Louise and Saint Vincent. Several committees have been formed on an international level for the preparation of certain celebrations in Paris and Rome on March 15th and September 27th 2010. In addition, the General Council hopes that this anniversary will be commemorated at local, provincial and national levels by a prayerful sharing of the spiritual treasures of our Vincentian heritage and through concrete projects and prophetic actions carried out for and with persons who are poor.

Returning to the solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, and to the Gospel for the liturgy of January 1st Mass, we find Mary and Joseph, with the newborn child sleeping in the manger, visited by the shepherds who have come to confirm what the angels

had proclaimed to them: “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favours!*” (Lk 2: 14).

This **peace** that is proclaimed, that is freely given to all through the birth of Jesus, may seem an inaccessible dream as 2009 dawns. In his message for January 1st, Benedict XVI invites us to reflect on this as he develops the theme “*Fighting poverty to build peace*”. He explains that “*every form of externally imposed poverty has at its root a lack of respect for the transcendent dignity of the human person. When a person is not considered within the total context of his or her vocation, and when the demands of a true “human ecology” are not respected, the cruel forces of poverty are unleashed.*” The Pope continues, noting that, more than putting into place various structures, “*What the fight against poverty really needs are men and women who live in a profoundly fraternal way and are able to accompany individuals, families and communities on journeys of authentic human development.*” He states by way of conclusion: “*while attentively following the current phenomena of globalisation and their impact on human poverty, the Church points out the new aspects of the social question, not only in their breadth but also in their depth, insofar as they concern humanity's identity and relationship with God.*”

Let us reflect on this message that interconnects the worldwide fight against poverty and the coming of peace, and that invites human beings to restore God’s place in a world that wants to manage without God. Let us also pray that our service of Christ in persons who are poor and the witness of our life might be a source of hope and peace wherever the Lord has sent us. Let us make our own the closing invitation of Benedict XVI to open wide our hearts to meet the needs of poor persons. Let us all pray that the General Assembly, inspired by the Holy Spirit, will plough new furrows in our lives...

With gratitude for your prayers, I assure you of my devotion and affection as I confide you to Mary, the humble daughter of Nazareth, Mother of God and only Mother of the Company.

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

FATHER GREGORY GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Motherhouse

Conference of 1st January 2009

My dear Sisters,

It is not easy to put together, year after year, a talk for the Daughters of Charity on January 1st. I want to present you with something that is particularly significant this coming year when the General Assembly will be taking place. So I have decided to share with you some reflections on the visits I made during 2008 to various Provinces of the Daughters of Charity during which I had the opportunity to meet the Sisters, confreres and members of the Vincentian family. I visited the Daughters of Charity in Cameroon; Sardinia, Peru, Madrid, Greece, Rome, Portugal, the United States, particularly California on the east coast, Spain (Salamanca), Slovakia, Australia, the Cook Islands, West Kalimantan, Indonesia, Madagascar; the Berceau in France; Kinshasa and Brazzaville in Congo; Istanbul; Cambodia; Laos; Thailand; Costa Rica; and had a brief stay in Panama. In these different countries I have always been delighted to have the opportunity to talk to the Daughters of Charity. I have been enriched by the Sisters' sharing of their apostolic experiences, their commitments with the poor, their community life and their experience of God. I am always most edified by what I see and what I hear. I prefer these simple, fraternal sharing sessions with the Sisters and I hope that the Sisters will gradually come to accept dialogue in place of a conference.

From these different countries, or major cities within some countries, I have always been delighted to have the opportunity to converse with the Daughters of Charity. Little by little the concept of having a dialogue is being accepted, rather than simply the Superior General giving a conference. I have been enriched by the sharings of the Daughters based on their own apostolic experiences, their commitments with the poor, their lives together in community, and their experience with our God who is the God of Life. I am most edified by what I hear and by what I see. From these different venues I share with you the following:

Recently I took part in a joyful event, our confrere Pedro Opeka, a missionary in Akamasoa, Madagascar, received an award for the work that he and his collaborators are doing in Akamasoa, Madagascar. He received it on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights. The event took place in Rome in the Paul VI auditorium in the presence of many hundreds of people who had come there to listen to and support not only Pedro, but other award winners who have devoted their lives to solidarity with the poor. At the very end we had the opportunity to see and listen to a brief message from the Pope. But it was one of the speakers at the beginning of the ceremony whom I found most impressive, a lay man responsible for an organisation dealing principally with work related to the United Nations. He challenged us all about the need to be more committed in promoting gospel values in our present day society where the poor are often overlooked. The exorbitant profits made by some people have brought this global economic world to a major crisis. As I listened to him, an image came to my mind, the image of a train, a train that takes us through life, a train that today is moving faster than ever, a train that goes around the world, a global train, a train that many people board but not everyone, some are left on the platform. Pope John Paul II often said, "The gap between the rich and the poor has widened with this new global economy." Pope Benedict XVI has the same message. Bishop Adrianus van Luyn of Rotterdam, Netherlands said on November 12th in his presidential address opening the Plenary Meeting of the Commission of Bishops

Conference of the European Community that “an economy that is based on the unlimited consumption of limited resources can only end in tears.” He added that the financial crisis has revealed a “distorted hierarchy of values” in society. This crisis should move Christians to make more reference to the Christian message to practise moderation and to share profits, two of the keys to building a just and fraternal world. Sisters, it is true that we are called to take our place on the global train. But we must not leave behind our baggage; the gospel values recalled for us by the Church’s social teaching and its commitment to promoting the dignity of poor people.

I would like to share with you another matter that came up during my conversations with the Sisters in various Provinces. It is about one of the passages from the gospel where Jesus says “For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Mt, 121: 50). And in another passage Jesus invites us to leave mother and father, brothers and sisters and all our possessions in order to follow him. There was a time in the history of religious life when these texts could have been taken out of context and interpreted in a fundamentalist way even to the point perhaps of being inhuman. Yet today, there is the need to be radical in following Jesus. It sometimes happens that our families make unrealistic demands on us. Perhaps they do not understand fully what our call is, or how radical is our commitment as consecrated persons. It is up to us to explain to them that we have commitments to the members of our community and people who are poor; these are just as much part of our family as our blood relatives are.

Another reflection that I would like to put before you has to do with the question of mutuality among those with whom we share membership of the Vincentian Family. I had a great discussion with the English-speaking Sisters in VIE (that is Vincentian Integration Experience) regarding mutuality within the Vincentian family. It followed from their study on the mutuality that existed between Saint Louise and Saint Vincent. We are called to that mutual relationship with all our brothers and sisters in the Vincentian Family. We are one with them in our solidarity for, with and from the reality of poor people. I would ask you this year to strengthen this mutuality even though in many Provinces there is already excellent collaboration between the Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission in what used to be called “the double family”.

Another challenge that I reflected on in a number of different Provinces was how much more vibrant communities are when their apostolates are community-based, (school, hospital). Sisters, the institutions we have (this has been a topic that has been discussed here before) are the fruits of our service to the poor carried out as Saint Vincent would have organised it. However, if these institutions are not regularly revised in the light of the charism, they could take on a different orientation and smother the charism. I ask you to review your commitment to institutions so as to be sure that these are a response to the needs of the poor and receive their dynamism from the charism.

Another challenge to consider, also related to the institution question, is the need to carry out your apostolate in a simple way. Money is necessary if we are to get things done but we have to be careful that securing monies in order to serve the poor does not become our number one priority. Let us be prudent in managing our

financial affairs, confiding in Providence, but at the same time using money well without becoming slaves to it, and avoiding the pitfalls of our society.

A final challenge has to do with being prophetic for the Sisters you live with in community, encouraging one another to live out together your Constitutions, showing great respect and tolerance. Our example and the simplicity of our lives are the best ways of encouraging them. Sometimes, when we notice the shortcomings of our Sisters, we can be hurtful by pointing them out. We mustn't be aggressive in community but approachable. In this way we will create opportunities to talk to one another in order to help us all to live out our vocation. The prophetic challenge before us is to conduct our conversations as dialogues that resemble a duet where the voices may differ, like soprano and bass, but when blended the outcome is a harmonious melody.

I pray that you may be prophetic and do this by living as gentle spirits in a lifestyle that calls and attracts others. We are called to give witness that God is our life, it is God for whom we commit ourselves to one another in community, and it is God for whom we commit ourselves to people who are poor.

I ask God to bless you all in this year 2009.

Father Gregory Gay, CM
Superior General

SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Letter of 2nd February 2009

Dear Sisters,

The feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple is an occasion for us to re-live the joy of the elderly Simeon and the prophetess Anna. They lived under the watchful eye of God and were able to recognise the Messiah; they saw the *light of the nations* for whom they had waited with all their heart. Their example of prayer, faith and perseverance can encourage us to recognise Christ in the various ways we meet him each day. Their example can also guide us in the weeks leading up to the feast of the Annunciation and help us to prepare for our renewal of vows with joyful and attentive hearts.

In accordance with the beautiful tradition in the Company and on behalf of all of us, I met Father Gregory to present our request to renew our vows. I now have the joy of sharing with you that our Superior General grants us this grace for March 25th this year. During our conversation, I spoke to him about this past year and commented on the letters you had sent me, the strong points of our community life, our service of Christ in poor people, and our relationship with God, not forgetting our

inconsistencies as well. Father Gregory, who has visited a large number of our Provinces, mentioned the witness of our proximity of life and heart with those who are poor and the need to preserve this attitude of servant which characterises us in the Church.

I shared with him that one of the fruits of this request to renew our vows, carried out in a spirit of faith, is the joy that comes with the awareness of the greatness and the simplicity of our vocation. Another fruit is humble gratitude to Christ who chose us and captured our hearts one, five, ten, or sixty or more years ago. This same Christ, through the strength of his Spirit, inspires us day after day, year after year, to follow him and to serve as witnesses to Charity wherever Providence sends us.

“Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty!...”¹
“You lay your hand upon me...”²

For the past five years, on the occasion of this February 2nd letter, we have considered together the Action Lines that resulted from the 2003 General Assembly: Mission, Relationships, Formation, Internationality of the Company and Vocation Ministry. Each of these subjects allowed us to prepare for our renewal of vows from a different perspective. This year, I would like to reflect with you on the furrows that the Lord is asking us to plough more deeply, to straighten, to carefully irrigate in order to respond faithfully to the initial call that he spoke to us in gratuitous love.

The General Assembly this coming May and June gives a particular dimension to our renovation. You have all taken part in the work of preparation through your local communities and Provinces. For over a year now, the Spirit has been at work in a special way in the Company. Reading the documents of your Assemblies is solid proof of this reality.

Today, as a way of preparing for our renewal of vows, I invite you to reflect on the following question:

What new furrows are we called to plough personally, at the time of this renovation, in order to live our vocation and mission as Daughters of Charity more deeply, as prophets and bearers of hope, and to welcome with open hearts the Lord’s will, which will be manifested in the decisions of our General Assembly?

I like the image of furrows because it evokes both the hard work and the mystery of germination and the future harvest. As Saint Paul wrote: *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”*³

I will develop two points:

- **Ploughing furrows, a work of going deeper and going farther**
- **Ploughing furrows, in order to live our total gift of self with renewed fidelity**

¹ Rev. 15:3-4.

² Ps. 139:5.

³ 1 Cor. 3:6.

1 TO PLOUGH FURROWS, TO WORK SERIOUSLY AND PROGRESSIVELY IN ORDER TO “BE STRENGTHENED IN OUR INNER BEING”⁴

To mark out, to plough furrows, is a task that requires patient commitment and steadfastness. We plough furrows in order to prepare the earth to be ready for the seed; we plough furrows to turn and aerate the earth to receive the grain; we plough furrows so that the water can run through, to moisten the plant and bring life to it; we plough furrows because we hope to receive a rich harvest.

To mark out, to plough furrows ... It means working seriously at our inner life, and even more than that, moving forward, with a focus on the future. To look forward requires leaving behind all that is old and outmoded, routines, ways of thinking and acting, obsolete plans. Ploughing furrows implies going deeper, growing in our inner self; but it also obliges us to see farther ahead, to focus on a goal to be attained.

Newly-ploughed furrows give off the scent of freshly-ploughed fields, and help us to sense and imagine a future harvest:

“...Lord my God, you are very great! ...

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.”⁵

What a joy it is to contemplate a stretch of land that is well ploughed, well-prepared for the harvest to come, a wide open plain or tiny plots of terraced land, clinging to the slopes of a hill, or more modest fields protected from the wind by hedges or fences...according to where we happen to live. On the contrary, what a distressing scene to see fields uncultivated and lying waste, deprived of grain, of seeds of hope!

Psalm 65 describes in poetic language the lands of abundance, fruits of the labour of those who cultivate it...of the grace of God:

“You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it... for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.”⁶

To mark out, to plough furrows... Deepening of insights and vision for the future are equally necessary in the dynamics of growth. We need to work interiorly in order to grow in intimacy with the Lord until our last breath, to grow in our ability to reflect and discern, in the face of the superficiality of our world, in the atmosphere of feverish immediacy that surrounds us, in order to avoid the danger of living superficially and allowing our faith resources to dry up.

⁴ Eph. 3:16.

⁵ Ps. 104:1, 14-15.

⁶ Ps. 65:10-14.

*“Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord...”*⁷

The goal of ongoing formation is to help us to carry out this process of deepening our insights, this vision of the future, *“as a progressive modelling of herself on Christ, with renewed fidelity to the Spirit and to the aim of the Company.”*⁸ We are nourished each day by the Word of God⁹ which *“can profoundly change human heart, so it is important that individual believers and communities enter into ever increasing intimacy with God’s Word.”*¹⁰ For this reason, it is good to check how the Word bears fruit in our heart, and what ground we are preparing so that it may take root.

*“Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns.”*¹¹

We live in a pragmatic society, full of speed and aggressiveness. Is this not an invitation for us to slow down our pace in order to intensify our spiritual life, to live with greater depth, to find once more the pathway to our heart, to come back to our heart?

To live with greater depth, to be persons of prayer... A person of prayer will be able to do anything¹², Saint Vincent said with conviction.

For her part, Saint Louise advised living in union with God, in order to belong totally to Him: *“God wants only our hearts. He placed within our power only the capacity to make a simple act of the will. He considers this alone and the deeds resulting from it.”*¹³

To live at a deeper level in our society filled with noise, setting aside for ourselves times and places of silence.¹⁴

To live at a deeper level by being attentive to gathering as a community, since the Lord is present in the assembled community.¹⁵

⁷ Hos. 10:12.

⁸ C. 49.

⁹ Cf. C. 22 a.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, Homily for the opening of the XIIth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops; October 5, 2008.

¹¹ Jer. 4:3.

¹² Cf. Coste XI, page 76.

¹³ Saint Louise, L. 40; *Spiritual Writings*, page 679.

¹⁴ Cf. C. 21 c.

¹⁵ Cf. Mt. 18:20.

To live at a deeper level in a world in which secularism is gaining ground, and is subtly diminishing the space and role given to God. Could we encourage one another to more carefully honour the Lord's day in our communities, the weekly celebration of Easter, the day of peace and rest, the "day of joy and gladness"?¹⁶

*"Sunday is a day which is at the very heart of the Christian life... Yes, let us open our time to Christ, that he may cast light upon it and give it direction. He is the One who knows the secret of time and the secret of eternity, and he gives us "his day" as an ever new gift of his love. The rediscovery of this day is a grace which we must implore, not only so that we may live the demands of faith to the full, but also so that we may respond concretely to the deepest human yearnings. Time given to Christ is never time lost, but is rather time gained, so that our relationships and indeed our whole life may become more profoundly human."*¹⁷

We could give even more examples of how we might live more deeply, but let us allow the Spirit to breathe on us, to enliven, energise, soften, clarify and strengthen. The Spirit will know how to guide each of us in this necessary task of preparing the way for the good of the entire Company.

What new furrows are we ready to mark out in order to continue to move forward on the pathway of our interior life, in order to live life at an even deeper level?

2. TO PLOUGH FURROWS IN ORDER TO LIVE OUT OUR TOTAL GIFT OF SELF WITH RENEWED FIDELITY.

May I make a quick comment on our four vows and emphasise several aspects of "ploughing" for each one. The sole purpose of my reflection is to help your own reflection, and I encourage each of you to be attentive to the Spirit.

1. SERVICE OF POOR PEOPLE

The Constitutions describe the service of the Daughters of Charity as "*a vision of faith and the concrete expression of that love, whose source and model is Christ.*"¹⁸

This well-formulated expression incorporates the teaching of Saint Vincent that invites us to contemplate Jesus Christ, to enter into the sentiments that were in him with regard to those who were weak and abandoned, and to continue his mission in close identification with him: "*... For how did He [Jesus Christ] serve persons who were poor, Sisters? He served them corporally and spiritually; He went from place to place, healing the sick, giving them what money He had, and instructing them about their salvation. What a happiness, Sisters, that God has chosen you to continue the ministry of His Son on earth!*"¹⁹

¹⁶ Cf. Ps. 118.

¹⁷ *Dies Domini*. John Paul II; May 31, 1998, On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy.

¹⁸ C. 16 b.

¹⁹ Coste IX, page 50.

Christ teaches us how to serve poor people, to live with them and for them, to serve them with *gentleness and compassion, saying a good word to them*, to use Saint Louise's expressions. Our entire life belongs to them because we have given our lives totally to God. Saint Vincent insisted "*God is the one who has entrusted the care of His poor to you, and you must act in His Spirit, sympathising with them in their distress, and empathising with them as much as possible...*"²⁰ and Pope John Paul II said it once more to the Company three centuries later: "*Have eyes and hearts only for the poor.*"²¹

This *proximity of life and heart with those who are poor* is the basis of our service; this is what uniquely characterises us as Daughters of Charity. So many of our contemporaries today await our glance, a smile, a word or gesture that will help them to once again live in hope and give them back their dignity.

Beyond this indispensable contact as servant, and beginning with it, stretch broad fields in which to labour with courage and creativity and in collaboration with others: to promote the individual in all the dimensions of his or her being, to combat misery through programmes which bring solutions to what causes the problems, to be a voice for our brothers and sisters who are in dire need...²²

In addition, our service is part of a vast current of solidarity, of the simple witness of so many persons, Christians or not, who give of their time and their energy and participate actively in organisations that promote peace and justice, the defence of human rights, protection of the environment, all of which contributes to building a civilisation of love. These are signs of life and hope that contain "the seeds of the Word present in all cultures."²³ We have to encourage, support and accompany these women and men of good will...

What new furrows are we ready to plough in order to continue advancing with creative love and audacious prophecy in our service of Christ in persons who are poor?

2 CHASTITY, A GIFT THAT FREES

*"They embrace chastity as a gift that frees their heart and gives it the dimensions of the heart of Jesus Christ for an unconditional gift and total availability in the service of those who are poor."*²⁴ *"In a spirit of gratitude and joy, they live chastity, a source of spiritual fecundity and a sign of the Covenant between God and His people."*²⁵

The joyful experience of chastity comes from a heart that is purified, a vigilant heart that takes the means necessary to maintain its lamp alight during the long night of waiting, in humble perseverance.

²⁰ Coste X, page 105.

²¹ John Paul II; General Assembly 1979-1980.

²² Cf. C. 24.

²³ Cf. C. 25 c.

²⁴ C. 29 a.

²⁵ C. 29 b.

*“Yes, in Christ it is possible to love God with all one's heart, putting him above every other love, and thus to love every creature with the freedom of God! This testimony is more necessary than ever today, precisely because it is so little understood by our world.”*²⁶

Community life is an essential support for living chastity; it is founded on non-possessive interpersonal relationships, in a balanced way that gives without seeking any return, through mutual forgiveness. Community life promotes the maturity of each Sister and allows her to attain the spiritual fulfilment to which God has called her.

A community that is well anchored in its faith life helps it eliminate the toxic effects of society's pollution – pleasure-seeking, exaggerated preoccupation with the body and with health, image worship – which can seep into our lives in the most subtle ways and obscure the beauty of the treasure that we carry in earthen vessels.²⁷

Experience teaches us that emotional balance and maturity are traits whose development is not linear and uninterrupted. On the contrary, they are generally achieved by passing through stages that include times of crisis. In every case, accompaniment, prayer, prudence and asceticism are necessary. In the storms that touch our hearts and our senses, these buoys prevent us from drowning.

Consecrated chastity opens our hearts to everyone. It accepts all forms of suffering and knows how to share with all those who are victims of rejection, violence and marginalisation. Consecrated chastity promotes a culture of life, in a society that treats all issues related to bioethics as merely relative.

*“The Gospel of life is for the whole of human society. To be actively pro-life is to contribute to the renewal of society through the promotion of the common good...A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalised.”*²⁸

We are called to love life in all its stages, to protect and defend it. *“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”*²⁹

One of the ways that we can give witness ourselves is by approaching and living advancing age in the way that Pope John Paul II did.

When the body is treated as an object, chastity acquires a new dimension: love is a gift that is given to all, without distinction of race, language or culture. It is a pure and freely given gift: to love is to say to each person, in every place, in every circumstance: *“...you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you...”*³⁰

²⁶ *Vita consecrata* n° 88.

²⁷ Cf. 2 Cor. 4:7.

²⁸ *Evangelium vitae*, n° 101.

²⁹ Jn. 10:10.

³⁰ Is. 43:4.

What new furrows are we ready to plough in order to continue to move forward in living chastity with joy and gratitude?

3 POVERTY, OPENNESS TO THE SPIRIT AND TO LOVING ALL PERSONS

*“Poverty of spirit is openness to the Spirit and to the love of all persons. It inspires the Daughters of Charity to place at the service of their brothers and sisters their person, their talents, their time, and their work, as well as material goods, which they consider the patrimony of the most deprived.”*³¹

Poverty, an essential aspect of our vocation, is one of the pillars of the Company, as Saint Louise and Saint Vincent taught us:

*“I know that, by the grace of God, you are not trying to accumulate funds. You have too great a love of holy poverty and too much confidence in God to do that. These are the two pillars of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.”*³²

*“You have a right only to your food and clothing; the surplus belongs to the service of the poor.”*³³

How can we bring this wise advice from our Founders to our current situation, to live poverty personally and communally, to choose simple means to carry out our mission?

I notice an urgent invitation from the Lord, calling us to a true and profound conversion to a form of poverty that is more authentic and radical. It is a call to live and serve with a life style that is simpler and more consistent with our condition of servants, to be inventive in our work for justice, to go through the highways of life with lighter baggage:

*“He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to take two tunics.”*³⁴ No doubt a staff is a big help for the pilgrim making a long trip, but the only baggage that is truly necessary for the mission is a heart that is filled with God!

How do we live poverty in a time of crisis, one with global dimensions, which destabilises the lives of millions of persons in our world, reducing them to a precarious state of living? The Church’s teaching clearly calls us to go further in our sharing:

“Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice... It is not merely a matter of ‘giving from one’s surplus’, but of helping entire peoples which are presently excluded or marginalised to enter into the sphere of economic and human development. For this to happen, it is not enough to draw on the surplus goods which

³¹ C. 30 a.

³² Saint Louise, L. 489. *Spiritual Writings*, page 518.

³³ Coste IX, page 74.

³⁴ Mk. 6:8-9.

*in fact our world abundantly produces; it requires above all a change of life-styles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies.”*³⁵

Poverty, as an evangelical virtue gives a message that challenges forcefully, demonstrating in an eloquent manner that God is our joy, that the space in our heart is occupied by God: the Lord is our strength and our rampart.³⁶

What new furrows are we ready to plough in order to continue to advance in our practice of poverty, in having Christ as our only treasure?

4 OBEDIENCE, THE OFFERING OF OUR FREEDOM

*“All obedience in faith is patterned on the attitude of the Son of God who, to carry out the Father's loving plan, became obedient unto death and the death of the Cross. In following Him and under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Daughters of Charity make to God the offering of their freedom...”*³⁷

Obedience, after the example of Jesus Christ, means seeking the will of God with the desire to carry it out. It is a search guided by the Spirit, requiring the participation of the one who is engaged in the service of authority as well as the one who obeys.

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, were obedient throughout their entire lives. For them, obedience was a passionate quest for God's will, manifested in Sacred Scripture, in the cries of the poor, and in day to day events. In faith, they discovered the solid and authentic basis of obedience by contemplating the obedience of Jesus.

*“... So, Jesus Christ came into the world only to do the Will of His Father, and did nothing else all His life; and will a Daughter of Charity, who should model herself on Jesus Christ, want to do anything other than God's Will?”*³⁸

*“It seems to me that the first means to help us to act as true Daughters of Charity is always to be disposed to respond to holy obedience with the view of accomplishing the will of God.”*³⁹

Today, we need to rediscover the evangelical foundations of obedience in order to overcome the difficulties that exist in our times. While liberty and personal autonomy are very highly regarded values in our cultures, they can transform themselves, too, into individualism and personal programming of one's life. They can also help us to grow in maturity of spirit and the exercise of personal responsibility...

³⁵ *Centesimus annus* n° 58.

³⁶ Cf. Ex. 15:2.

³⁷ C. 31 a.

³⁸ Coste IX, page 405.

³⁹ Saint Louise, A. 60. *Spiritual Writings*, page 788.

*“Obedience to God is the path of growth and, therefore, of freedom for the person because this obedience allows for the acceptance of a plan or a will different from one's own that not only does not deaden or lessen human dignity but is its basis. At the same time, freedom is also in itself a path of obedience, because it is in obeying the plan of the Father, in a childlike way, that the believer fulfils his or her freedom. It is clear that such obedience requires that persons recognise themselves as sons and daughters and enjoy being such, because only a son or a daughter can freely place him or herself in the hands of his or her Father, exactly like the Son, Jesus, who abandoned himself to the Father.”*⁴⁰

God's plan is for each human being to be happy and reach the fulfilment of his or her identity as a child of God. The search for God's will is something magnificent and beautiful. Discovering God's will and carrying it out fills one's heart with happiness and joy.

What new furrows are we ready to plough in order to continue to advance in living out obedience, listening to the Lord?

With this letter, I would like to tell each of you how united I am to you in this spiritual journey that will lead us to March 25th, 2009. Those Sisters who are suffering, who are facing extremely difficult circumstances are very specially in my thoughts. I assure them of our prayers and confide their intentions to the Company in heaven as well, and to our saints and Blesseds, those known and unknown.

On your behalf, I thanked Father Gregory for his joyful spirit and continual attentiveness to the Company. I also passed on to Father Javier our gratitude for his valuable accompaniment. With all of you, I also send greetings of affection and appreciation to Father McCullen, Father Maloney, Father Quintano, Mother Duzan and Mother Elizondo.

May I conclude this reflection by calling on the intercession of the Blessed Virgin for each of us and for the entire Company.

*“O merciful and compassionate Mother, ‘You who did the will of the Father, ever ready in obedience’, make our lives attentive to the Word, faithful in the following of Jesus, the Lord and Servant, in the light and with the strength of the Holy Spirit, joyful in fraternal communion, generous in mission, prompt in our service to the poor, looking forward to the day in which obedience in faith will flow into the feast of Love without end”.*⁴¹

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

⁴⁰ *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, n° 5.

⁴¹ *Ib* n° 31.

Sister Evelyne Franc
Daughter of Charity

FATHER GREGORY GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Lent 2009

To the members of the Vincentian Family

Dear brothers and sisters,

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

“Make room in my inn .Open wider my heart. My God is coming as the lonely person, as the forgotten one, the hopeless prisoner, as the unwanted child, the homeless displaced person, as the AIDS sufferer the unloved outcast. Lord, I see you coming. Welcome, Lord, come in. Your room is ready” (Sister Catherine Madigan, DC)

Since writing my Advent letter and promising to follow up in my Lenten letter some points mentioned there, I have received many reflections concerning those for whom there was no room. Many wrote lists of different examples such as the unemployed, the immigrants, those of different culture, language, skin colour. We live in a world full of prejudices. Each and every one of us, perhaps, has our own that we need to look into, to confront and to heal.

We all, one way or another, exclude others, perhaps even those with whom we live, in our communities and associations. We may look at others and consider them to be strange just because they think differently. Perhaps they are not very tidy, maybe they drink too much, perhaps they are too loud or too quiet. We have many excuses just to ignore them.

With the most recent economic crisis that has affected the world, an accentuated selfishness, which is at the bottom of the crisis itself from a moral standpoint, can provoke even among the best of people of good will, attitudes to protect what is my own, to pull back on my or our generosity to others. We do so as

individuals, as a family, as an association or as a community. The consequence is that those who suffer most, are the poorest of the poor. They only experience a greater abandonment as others pull away from them and draw more into themselves.

Sometimes we may find ourselves saying there is just not enough to go round. And we respond by saying I'm sorry, or we are sorry. I find myself saying the same thing to many legitimate requests for help for those who live in poverty.

In this Lenten season let us ask ourselves if perhaps we act too quickly to protect ourselves and our own interests. We need to reflect once again, especially in this time of repentance, about something which will help us to feel our need as well as our poverty. In other words we need to reflect on our willingness to sacrifice, or what we call in our own Vincentian tradition, the virtue of mortification. The root of the word mortification is to die to oneself, to sacrifice, to put the other first. It means taking into consideration the needs and concerns of others. The other side of mortification is selfishness, a concern for one's own well-being, looking out for one's own personal interests. These attitudes dominate the world in which we live today.

As we practise the art of mortification, it is an opportunity for us, as we say, to tighten our belts, to live more simply in order that those who are usually on the lower side of the scale will feel less the effects of the crisis than usual. We are asked to reverse the scenario, so that it be us and not them who feel the suffering. Saint Vincent practiced this continually when he referred to the poor as our lords and masters. He did not speak of a relationship of equals, but he went to the other extreme in order to help create a more balanced relationship.

Sometimes we are slow to understand what it is that Saint Vincent wants to teach us about putting the poor ahead of ourselves. Rather than drawing in on ourselves in these times of crisis, enveloped in our own selfish attitudes, let this time of Lent be a time of solidarity.

As we read in the gospels during Lent, Jesus is gradually rejected and eventually abandoned just as he and his parents were the day he was born. He experienced utter abandonment high on the cross. Only a few faithful remained; "Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala" (Jn 19:25) and John. Each of them, Mary, Mary Magdalen and John had something in common, an unconditional love of Jesus. Mary, as only a mother could have; Mary Magdalen, a repentant sinner who had sunk into the depths and it was true love that lifted her up, the unconditional love of Jesus that transformed her life; and John, the love of a true friend and faithful disciple.

Somehow or other Jesus, in his experience of abandonment "Why have you abandoned me" (Mt. 27:46) as he cried out from the cross, later experienced the intimate presence of his Father, filling him with new life in and through the resurrection. He is filled with the healing power of his Father, given new life in order that others might have life. Jesus empowered his disciples with that same capacity to give new life.

We often, look on healing as something extraordinary. We sometimes hope for miracles in order to be made new. There certainly are extraordinary ways in

which God breaks into human history making impossible situations possible with new life and new living. Yet many times when we wait for the extraordinary to happen, we let opportunities for change escape us.

God's healing power is not something that is just extraordinary. It is God's love that heals. When we look at Mark's gospel, the leper says, 'If you choose to, you can make me clean'. And Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose to. Be made clean.' Immediately the leper was healed" (Mk. 1: 40-42). Very simple human gestures and actions that come from the heart of Jesus, making a difference in the life of the leper.

It was the power of God's love in the life of Jesus that healed. Jesus' compassion for him is not something so extraordinary but very ordinary. The love of God makes us one with Jesus in healing, enabling us to be givers of new life.

The United Nations has declared this year 2009 to be the Year of Reconciliation, particularly looking at reconciliation in those countries throughout the world which are war-torn and divided because of many forms violence, strife and poverty. Reconciliation is something that is both civil and spiritual at the same time. One of the consequences of this active reconciliation, being brought together and made whole once again, is the elimination of any sense of others being abandoned or left out. All of us are part of the whole and are invited to live in harmony one with another. Harmony or wholeness is the consequence of the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as well as the consequence of dialogues between nations striving for peace in a spirit of good will.

Working for harmony and reconciliation is not an isolated act. It demands a collaborative effort on the part of all peoples. I would hope that all the members of the Vincentian Family would work to be builders of reconciliation, peace and justice in the world in which we live.

As Sister Marie Poole pointed out in *Collaboration of St. Vincent and St. Louise*, (2008)¹ we can learn a great deal from our founders, Vincent and Louise, who were destined to interrelate and work together in extraordinary harmony. Vincent and Louise would develop a spirit of equality encompassing complementarity and communion, a mutuality that went far beyond simple collaboration. The fire that was enkindled in the relationship between them and their love and service of those who live in poverty lives on today in the worldwide Vincentian Family. We, as family, are encouraged to live in their wisdom and to see and learn from their ability to build bridges between the classes of society, and to include in decision-making and responsibility those with whom and for whom we minister.

This encapsulates what we are hoping to accomplish as we deepen our own knowledge of systemic change, a contemporary way of living our Vincentian spirituality today, walking with hope among those who live in poverty.

We, as a Vincentian Family, are called as Vincent and Louise were, to recognise and accept our talents as well as our limitations and our capacity to work

¹ *Collaboration between St. Vincent and St. Louise, 2008*

independently yet jointly. Just as there was never any competition between Vincent and Louise, God forbid that there will ever be any competition between any of the branches of the Vincentian Family. Despite our differences, just as they had theirs, let us be consumed by the love of God and our love of the impoverished. They are our focus. God is the author of all that we do, and we do what we do together in solidarity with those who are poor. As Vincent and Louise were able to count on one another in all circumstances, especially in difficult moments, let that be a lesson for us, especially as we live in these trying times of social, political, economic and religious unrest.

As we walk together through this Lenten season, let us do so in the light of the example of our Founders who stand as beacons of true collaboration and partnership in ministry, a model for all of us in every walk of life.

Lent, my brothers and sisters, is a time of abandonment, a time of mortification, a time of reconciliation, a time of collaboration and solidarity. Lent is a time of harmony and peace. It is a time of new life. It is a time of movement from death to life, a time of moving out of oneself and moving towards the other, and the Other.

May the example and intercession of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalen and John enable us to remain steadfast and faithful at the foot of the cross united in our own unconditional love of Him who first loved us. Let it be the love of Christ crucified that urges us.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,



G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

FATHER J ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2009

The General Assembly will bring to an end a special period of time that is known in the Company as “Assemblies time.” It will have been an important period of common searching, praying to the Holy Spirit, dialogue and discernment about how we can make progress along the path of prophecy. But we have not yet reached

the end of our journey; we still have the final stretch of ground to cover. Thanks to the contributions made by the local communities and the Provinces we will come to our journey's end and be able to write for the Company a new "page of hope", as Cardinal Pironio described each General Assembly to be. For this very important event of a General Assembly it is good that all the Daughters of Charity, and not just those Sisters who will be participating directly, should prepare themselves for it. My intention in offering you the following reflection is to help you with this preparation.

PREVIOUS GENERAL ASSEMBLIES

Assemblies in the Company were first mentioned in the time of Father Bonet (1711-1736). Every six years the Visitatrices would come together in the Main House in Paris with the Superior General, the Superioress General and her Council, to discuss together the needs of the Company. And also, of course, to elect the Superioress General. At that time there were only 14 Provinces in the Company and these were situated in France and Poland. The term "General Assembly" appeared officially in the Constitutions of 1954 although at that time the Assemblies had no other obligation than to elect the Superioress General and her Council. This was the case, for example, when Mother Lepicard was reelected at the 1956 Assembly by the 46 Visitatrices who held office in the Company at that time.

Things began to change at the following Assembly which took place at Pentecost 1962 when there were 54 Visitatrices. Mother Guillemain was elected. At that time the Church was preparing for an intensive programme of renewal with the Second Vatican Council. In line with the Church's thinking, Mother Guillemain undertook the very serious task of renewing the Company. All the Sisters throughout the world were consulted about the significance of their vocation, about formation and customs in the Company. All this paved the way for a new understanding of General Assemblies.

Renewal in all Religious Congregations had to proceed in accordance with the Decree issued by the Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis*, the *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae sanctae* and the Instruction *Renovationis causam*. In the light of these three documents, Father Slattery and Mother Guillemain convoked the General Assembly of 1968-1969, with a view to drawing up new Constitutions. The Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes granted the General Assembly the power to legislate and to make arrangements for Domestic and Provincial Assemblies to take place. These would be able to elect delegates for the General Assembly and present postulates. Later there were the Assemblies of 1974 and 1979-80 which had as their objective, to continue the revision and drawing up of the new Constitutions and Statutes. The first of these two General Assemblies was convoked by Fr. Richardson and Mother Chiron, and the second by Fr. Richardson and Mother Roge. All this period of General Assemblies ended with the approbation of the new Constitutions by the Holy See on 2nd February 1983.

The aim of the General Assemblies of 1985 and 1991 was to reflect on the identity of the Company from the point of view of life style. The 1985 Assembly convoked by Fr Mc Cullen and Mother Roge also dealt with some juridical aspects of the Company resulting from the publication of the New Code of Canon Law. The 1985 Assembly focused its reflections on these three themes: *Spirit of the Company*,

evangelisation and life style. The Final Document, *At the Crossroads*, was a synthesis of all the Assembly's thinking. The 1991 Assembly, convoked by Fr Mc Cullen and Mother Duzan, was devoted to *The Daughter of Charity in the world and for the world today*. This Assembly, too, after reflecting in common, drew up and added three extra articles to the Constitutions and another three Statutes; these were approved by Rome on 31st August 1991. The Final Document was entitled *At Jacob's Well*.¹

For the sixth time, and in accordance with its Constitutions, the Company held another General Assembly in 1997. This was convoked and presided over by Fr Maloney and Mother Elizondo. It carried out a revision of life (*Inculturating the charism in a changing world*), specifically in relation to community living and life style. This Assembly approved a proposition asking for a revision of the Constitutions in the light of inculturation. The Final Document, *A New Fire*, was about taking the spirit of the Assembly to the whole Company. In 2003 Fr Maloney and Mother Elizondo convoked the whole Company in a document entitled *Called to revitalise*. The aim of this Assembly was to revise the Constitutions of 1983. The specific outcome of this Assembly was the compilation of new Constitutions that were drawn up in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Church, the current Code of Canon Law in 1983, the charism of the Founders and the signs of the times. It also gave rise to the *Action Lines, 2003-2009*, which were drawn up by the General Council at a later date but followed the guidelines presented by that Assembly.

From this brief review of recent history we can draw two conclusions:

1 The General Assemblies as they are held in the Company today, began with the Extraordinary Assembly of 1968-1969. We have now had seven General Assemblies in this "format". The coming Assembly will be the eighth. We can be in no doubt that the Assemblies (General, Provincial and Domestic Assemblies) have made a decisive contribution to the renewal of the Company, the Provinces and the Local Communities in these two ways: four Assemblies were devoted to drawing up and updating the Constitutions and, with them, the vocation and the life of the Daughters of Charity. Three focused on animating the Company to look towards the future following an analysis and discernment of the values and counter-values of our world.

It isn't possible to give precise details about the positive influence that the General Assemblies have had on the life of the Company and the Sisters. No doubt it has been an important influence if we bear in mind the way that the Company has developed in these last 40 years, the excellent Constitutions that have been produced and the enthusiastic reception given to successive documents inspired by the Assemblies. They have opened up new paths and moved Sisters to bring the charism up to date. We can be sure that the Company would not be what it is today if these recent Assemblies had not taken place.

2 The Company has known two different kinds of Assembly: the first ones were legislative, with a view to drawing up the Constitutions. The 2003 Assembly, which was held to revise them, also followed this pattern. It is to be expected that a

1.Cf. M. LLORET, *The Assemblies in the Company*, Echoes of the Company, March 1991

legislative Assembly whose objective is to draw up juridical texts should be of a juridical nature; discussions on concepts and wording, the importance of postulates, sticking rigidly to the working method proposed....However, the Company also has a tradition of “more pastoral” Assemblies. During the Assemblies of 1985, 1991 and 1997 the participants reflected on topical issues but they also devoted some time to drawing up additional articles of the Constitutions. The style here is a little different: discussions about concepts rather than wording, propositions rather than postulates, a method that lent itself to being more creative.....This type of Assembly summed up its reflections in a Final Document which was important in motivating the Company. Since the Constitutions and Statutes have now been completely revised it is reasonable to expect that in the near future General Assemblies will be markedly “pastoral” in tone and the working method adopted will be appropriate for the theme and the objective of each one. The 2009 Assembly is an example of this.

THE 2009 ASSEMBLY

1. All the Daughters of Charity will participate

This reflection on the General Assembly is addressed not only to the Assembly members who will be in Paris in May and in part of June, but to all the other Sisters in the Provinces. One thing is absolutely certain: the General Assembly is the work of all the Sisters, and without the cooperation of each one, the Assembly cannot function. In fact, the General Assembly is going to reflect on all the contributions, propositions and postulates from the various Provincial Assemblies. And these, in turn, take place thanks to the input from Domestic Assemblies. So we can see that the work of the General Assembly is based on the work of all Daughters of Charity.

In theory nobody can deny that the Assembly is the work of the whole Company, not just of those who will be taking a direct part in it. We can easily understand that it is not possible for every Sister to attend but we would do well to think about the links we have to establish between the local communities, the Sisters and the Assembly. One important way of keeping in touch with the Assembly will be to pray as a community and at a personal level that the Holy Spirit will come as light and strength as he did at that first Assembly at Pentecost (cf. Act 2, 1-18). Through the mystery of the Communion of Saints, the prayers offered for a particular intention are very efficacious. If rooms need to have lamps, they also need a whole network of cables to supply power though these cables are hidden from view. This comparison can help us to understand how significant and important it is to pray for the Assembly.

Another unifying link with the Assembly will be the information that will be sent out to all the Provinces and will help to maintain the interest of all the Sisters in what is happening. Modern methods of communication are already able to bring the Assembly so close to local communities that these could almost think they were listening to the proceedings. Having all this up to date information can be an excellent opportunity to reinforce our sense of belonging to the Company and, of course, to bring all these events to prayer. It would not be going too far to say that in the near future there will be tremendous possibilities in using new technology which could even open up new ways of participation that we cannot even imagine today.

It is natural for an Assembly to set out its reflections in specific terms in a document that will be developed in the next few years. This is another link between the Sisters, local communities and the General Assembly. The document will be the most concrete gift that the Company will give to each Sister at the end of this Assemblies time and it can be regarded as a summary of the spirit of the Assembly. Each document signifies a new step which urges the Company to make greater efforts in the way that the Sisters live, in inculturation and in making the charism relevant for our times. It will have the force of something that came into being in the presence of the Holy Spirit and this conviction will lead the Sisters to accept it and be attentive to its message. We cannot expect the document to capture for everyone the spirit of the Assembly in quite the way that it was experienced by those who were present, or to give details of all the organisation involved. But it can do this for the Sisters who attend. These Sisters will have to “recreate” in their respective Provinces this spirit of the Assembly which will help to make clear the thinking behind the commitments that are set down. The more information given and the more there is participation, the greater will be the level of collaboration from the Sisters and the local communities in making the document a living force.

2. Human and spiritual experience, discernment

This, in short, is what a General Assembly is about. Of course a lot of interesting and varied events will take place during them but these will all be designed to promote a fitting climate for listening, sharing and searching in common.

The human experience of personal contact with other Sisters who work in different places and in different cultural settings, who even speak a different language, who have different ways of expressing themselves, who feel differently about some issues but who nevertheless are animated by the same Vincentian spirit, all this is a very valuable asset. It is a living experience of internationality and a privileged time for extending our own tent. More than any other gathering, the Assembly represents the “*unity in diversity*” mentioned in C.61.

The Assembly will provide the necessary conditions for those who are present at it to have a genuine spiritual experience. Times of community prayer, extended periods of silence, times for sharing the Word of God, a liturgy that is well integrated into the Assembly proceedings and which is in tune with what is happening.....all this is important for providing a spiritual experience at community level and for genuine discernment to take place. The liturgy and the Eucharistic celebrations should lead the participants to find and to praise the God of life who has manifested himself and who continues his redeeming work through the Church and through the Company. The season of Easter will be a better time than any other liturgical season for promoting an encounter with the God of life.

So there will need to be appropriate slots and sufficient time for prayer, for contemplating the reality of situations and discerning God’s will. There has to be time to listen to the world’s song, its clamours and the heartrending cries of those who are poor and excluded. All this spiritual experience predisposes people to listen to the Spirit, to allow themselves to be guided by Him, and to have the best attitude towards discernment. Following the Assembly as a spiritual experience will allow Sisters to go on reading the history of the Company as the history of salvation, the service of

those who are poor as the great mission that brings the Company to share in God's own life, and it will impel them to continue their vocation journey and seek ways of being prophets in the midst of our complicated world.

The Assembly will provide many opportunities for experiencing discernment. We might think, for example, of the work in groups, the commissions and the plenary sessions. In a certain way, communication is related to discernment in so far as it provides basic criteria which can be used later on. Perhaps the word "discernment" leads us to think it is an extraordinarily complicated and technical process. No. The things of God cannot be so complicated that they make it impossible to encounter Him and know his will. The discernment carried out in the Assembly is a search for the specific things that God is asking of the Company today. There has to be this basic attitude of purity of intention on the part of all the Sisters. If they do not really want to discover God's designs then these will remain hidden. God does not force himself on us, nor does he open doors against the will of those who dwell there. He suggests, insinuates, whispers. He is not the storm or the hurricane but the "gentle breeze" as the prophet Elias experienced on mount Horeb (cf. 1 Kg 19, 11-14) This gentle breeze was powerful enough to point out the way for the prophet. However, we need the active silence of prayer in order to listen to this breeze. In discernment prayer leads us to be on God's wavelength and to put aside our own interests which often take another direction. "*The most common cause of failure in discernment, says Futrell, "is the fact that those who undertake this discernment do not pray. It is as simple as that."*² Without prayer there can be no discernment.

Another personal attitude for practising discernment is interior freedom which brings people to put aside all attachments, prejudices and passions. To turn aside from self-sufficiency and the desire to dominate. As a rule we are very much attached to the reasoning of our minds and still more to the "reasoning of our hearts." Spiritual freedom allows us to stand back a bit from the matters for discernment and it also purifies us from all affective clinging to anything which is not God or his will.

All these basic and essential attitudes guarantee good Christian and Vincentian discernment in the Assembly so that we can see how we are to live our vocation in today's world. The quality of Christian and Vincentian discernment will depend on the degree to which the Assembly members keep these two indispensable criteria in mind: our special charism and the realities of today's world. We have, of course, to safeguard and maintain the charism of our identity because this is the vocational DNA of the Daughters of Charity and the reason for their existence in the Church. However, this charismatic identity on its own is not enough to tell us what God is asking of the Company today so that it may be prophetic. There is need, too, for the Company to respond to present day forms of poverty undertaken in a way and from a life style that people today can understand.

So these are the criteria which must guide the reflections of the Assembly. To sum up, the Daughter of Charity, if she is to be faithful to her vocation, has to be aware of present day culture so as to be able to challenge and to relate to people of our times. This is what the Church puts before us in *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 2. Taken together these two criteria give us the two fundamental principles for discernment

² JC FUTRELL, *Spiritual Discernment*, CERf 1982

during the Assembly. When dealing with an important matter, for example, we should ask ourselves these two questions: is it in conformity with the Vincentian spirit? Is it necessary, appropriate, useful and prophetic for our times? Discernment will be incomplete if only one of the criteria is in operation. Both are necessary.

Discernment demands that we have great purity of intention if we are to discover God's will and assess the matters proposed so that we can make decisions. Times for personal prayer and dialogue whether in groups or in plenary sessions are provided for during the Assembly. It is impossible to practise discernment if we do not take seriously the outcome of our reflections and dialogue during it because the Holy Spirit does not work on his own but through individuals. He does not suppress anything or anybody but amplifies, multiplies and uses the minds of the Assembly members to draw out light. The ability to listen to others is tantamount to being open to the Spirit. Personal reflection will lead each one to be in favour of or against what is being proposed. In discernment this "interior judgment" is called "the movement of the Spirit". After listening to others, after reflection and in accordance with her personal convictions, a Sister feels ready to approve or reject a particular proposition. This is the "movement of the Spirit" which goes beyond the intellectual dimension and reaches the person's innermost feelings. The Assembly can be a good discernment experience.

3 Using the theme "*prophecy and hope now and everywhere*".

It is not my intention to develop here the topic chosen as the Assembly theme. The Echoes have already presented various reflections on this subject and I am sure that all Daughters of Charity have tried to study the matter deeply through readings and reflections. The Assembly is now the time for "bringing this theme down to earth" and to produce concrete proposals which will be able to revitalise the Company a bit more. The Assembly theme has the same purpose that a compass has for navigators: it helps those taking part not to lose their way because it directs the reflections of the members. It brings the Company to make relevant propositions which put our charism into action in the wide and varied scenario of today's world. In this way it avoids the risk of our being closed in and concentrating on minor internal problems. So it is necessary, beneficial and desirable that we open the windows and face squarely the anxieties and the hopes of the Church and of the world, letting ourselves tremble in the face of their real problems and thus lifting ourselves out of sterile self-absorption. More than any other Assembly theme, the present one directs us to the world and focuses truly on the concerns of the poor.

Through the specific questions and propositions studied during the Assembly the Company will seek ways of becoming more prophetic in this world, or to use the words of Scripture, ways of being the leaven in the dough (cf. Mt 5, 13-16). It will also look for ways in which its members can become bearers of hope for the poor whose numbers increase every day, and who have to face problems that are continually getting worse. In fact, prophecy and hope are the two faces of the same coin; a prophet who cannot raise people's hopes has lost his or her voice. The Company needs to be able to say something to the Sisters and to local communities to motivate them to be more faithful to the charism. The Assembly is a good time to let our Founders "speak". "Prophecy and hope" will help people to see that what the Founders say is remarkably relevant for our own times. The Assembly will also have

to reflect on ensuring that structures reflect faithfully the charism because the more this charism shines out in all its purity, the more prophetic it will be in our world.

The Final Document will motivate us and present guidelines for living in prophetic mode. If this happens then the Assembly will have achieved its goal.

Fr Javier Alvarez
Director General

FATHER J ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Guidelines for the monthly day of prayer and reflection ,

“You must be born again” (Jn 3,8)

We are now in the time of Lent. The Church tells us that it is a serious time, a time when we prepare for Easter. We need to prepare for any important event and if we are not getting ready for something but for Someone, then we have to take even more care. And if this Someone is very important or very dear to us, we have to put our best efforts into the preparation. *“If you come at four o’clock in the afternoon”* said the Fox to the Little Prince in that touching book by Saint- Exupery, *“I will start to feel happy at three o’clock.”* We need to prepare our hearts and minds for “the passing of the Lord.” We need to prepare both, because it is not enough for us to know that it is happening, we need to be able to feel it. Let us not forget that the distance between mind and heart is longer than it seems.

THE CONVERSION THAT IS PROPER TO LENT

Conversion is not a question of more or less; fasting a little more, watching television a little less, extending our times of prayer, cutting short our sleep, making an extra sacrifice, buying one thing less....Conversion is more radical than that, although some of the practices just mentioned can be means we use for a change of heart. It means changing in our manner of being, it is like dying and rising again, it is like being reborn. It is a situation like the one we find ourselves in with incorrigible people whose lives are not well integrated. They have to be fashioned anew, in a different mould, they have to *“be born again.”* This is precisely what Jesus said to Nicodemus in Jn 3, 5-8.

The conversion that the Church is calling us to is something more than a touching up, or just painting over. It calls for a different programming: *“new eyes”* like those of St Paul, so that we can see everything in a different light, or like the eyes of Saint Vincent after the year 1617; *“a new mind”* so that we can change whatever may be necessary, our ideas, assumptions, standards...; *“a new heart”*, one that is purer, larger, more steadfast, more merciful, more simple....This process will not take place simply because we wish it to and try to make it happen. It is so radical and so

much more important that it is basically the work of the Spirit and his grace. What we have to do is to abandon ourselves to the Lord more and to trust. Anyone who seeks conversion by their own efforts is doomed to failure. So conversion is not so much a question of effort as of being thankful. The famous theologian P. Tillich, often liked to say that *“a saint is a sinner to whom God has shown mercy.”* More important than being free from sin is to let our sins be overshadowed by Mercy.

In Lent it is essential that we call on God. But first of all there is His call to us. His Word, signs and sacraments, liturgical celebrations, time set aside for prayer or for examining our way of life, the example we are offered by others, the commitments we make, the entire liturgy is God continually knocking at our door because He wishes to celebrate his Passover with us (cf. Acts 3, 20). He has many different ways of knocking and making himself present. This might come in the shape of a surprise, a joyful experience, a correction, a time of suffering, any event whatsoever. Saint Vincent understood perfectly the vital importance of this divine intervention and he expressed it in the excellent phrase; *“I would not desire to go to God if God did not first come to me.”*¹ The gospel parables on mercy ratify this theological truth.

DISPOSITIONS THAT FACILITATE CONVERSION AND RESULT FROM IT

JOYFULNESS. The person who has a deep understanding of what Lent means will never find it repugnant. It is a joyful, happy and fruitful time. *“When you fast, do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do.....But you, when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face”* (Mt 6, 16-17). Austerity will be mentioned but only so that this will move us to show more solidarity with others: detachment will be counselled but with the aim of making us more free. We will be asked to fast but only so that we may savour more the Banquet. There will be talk of sharing and we will be asked to pray in order to keep alive the other aspects of our vocation. We will even be encouraged to die, but with no other aim in mind than to live...And this is true of everything. Lent never points the way to death, to diminishment, to humiliation but to life, abundance and integrity. This gives us reason to be happy and joyful, *“I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord; I repeat, what I want is your happiness”* (cf.Phil 4,4; 1 Thess 5, 16).

LISTENING. *“Look, I am standing at the door knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him”* (Rev 3,20). Having a listening disposition means being attentive to the calls made by the Lord. He speaks through people, through what they say, what they need and what they hint at. In community there can be Sisters who need help and their need is the voice of God. The same can be said about the poor people we serve. Lent comes to us through our ears.

During Lent the Word of God has a more powerful impact on us. It is a hidden treasure (cf. Mt 13, 44-46). But in order to take possession of this treasure we need to devote more time to meditation and contemplation. We are aware that one of the problems of modern societies is confusion, excessive noise (external as well as internal), and exhaustion. In these circumstances everything can fall out of place. No

¹ From St. Francis de Sales, phrase taken from Coste XI, p.221

matter how many messages the Lord may send us, we will not be able to decipher a single one. However much He knocks at the door, we will not hear anything. We need to disconnect plugs and take out batteries. This is what we call the desert. The desert is a good place and we need it in order to detox.

SELF-DENIAL. The desert and the season of Lent call us to do without anything that is superfluous and at the same time, to pay more attention to what is essential, to give priority not to what catches the eye but to what is of real value. *“Life is not made secure by what you own”* Jesus reminds us in his Gospel (Lk 12, 15). But there is another and more important reason for practising self-denial; doing without things in order to share with people in want. Every person has the right to share in what appears on the world’s table. If this is not the case we are breaking faith with Christ’s message, *“When you give alms, do not let your left hand...”* is what Jesus takes for granted (Mt 6, 3-4). If you desire a change of heart, says the prophet Isaiah, you must *“learn to do good, search for justice, , help the oppressed, be just to the orphan and defend the widow”* (Is 1 , 17).

WELCOMING Living Lent in the right way means rekindling our desire to meet Jesus in a transforming embrace. He, too, *“longs to eat the Passover”* with us (Lk 22, 15). However, if we are not able to step outside our usual routines we will soon forget that He is at the door. The ability to welcome him means leaving aside everything that could lead us away from God and it means we have to give Christ the first place in our lives. It shows itself in a deep love that welcomes him into the depths of our heart. This capacity for welcome will also bring us to open our doors to all the messengers that God sends us. He has his friends and his representatives, and we have to be attentive to these. We must not reject any of them because that would mean snubbing Jesus himself. The poor are numbered among his messengers and friends. If you are attentive to the poor members of your house and those you work for, you will be offering the Lord the best possible welcome. Saint Vincent’s teaching on this point could not be more appropriate.

FOR PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY PRAYER

- Meditate on the transforming encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus (cf. Jn 3, 1-21)
- In your own specific and personal circumstances, which dispositions must you have if this Lent is to be a transforming experience for you?
- How is your local community going to spend this time of Lent?

Father Javier Alvarez
Director General

PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

Province of Australia, Fiji and Cook Islands

**The art workshop at Hutt Street Centre
in Adelaide (Australia)**

A programme set up to promote
the artistic talents of people in difficulty
particularly the Aborigines of Australia
“Painting for pleasure”



The vast majority of people in Australia would find it hard to believe that there is extreme poverty and homelessness in this country. It is often hidden and insidious.

A bit of history

In 1954, the Archbishop of Adelaide, South Australia, invited the Daughters of Charity to begin a Pastoral Visiting Programme in the Cathedral Parish. When the Sisters arrived they found a small number of homeless men sleeping in the nearby parklands and lodging houses. With no money, and depending entirely on Divine Providence, the Sisters set about trying to respond to the basic needs of these men.

Today, some 50 years on, Hutt St Centre is a front-line agency working towards meeting various needs of some of the most vulnerable people in Adelaide. Situated in the south-east corner of the city, the Centre is accessed by men and women who sleep in adjacent parklands, squat in nearby buildings, and reside in cheap hotels, boarding houses, community and public housing. On average the Centre would support about two hundred people a day with many services, including social work, the provision of meals, medical support and use of shower facilities and locker-room storage for personal items.

Over recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of Aboriginal people coming to the city from remote towns in the north of the state, from the Northern Territory and Western Australia. They are leaving their home lands seeking health care or looking for employment/training or housing. Once people come down from the desert interior of Australia, very limited options are available for them as regards community, employment or housing. Added to these major problems faced by many in the Aboriginal community is their very limited English, as most primarily speak their traditional languages. The desert culture from which the people come is regarded as an ancient nomadic culture which results in displacement and marginalisation as well as difficulties integrating into Western society in a capital city.

Establishment of the Hutt Street Art Centre

Two years ago I began to serve at the Hutt Street Art Centre as a pastoral care worker. I thought one way of engaging with the people, and especially with the aboriginal people, would be through art. In response to this, Hutt St Centre set up “Painting for Pleasure”.

Initially we set out to provide space once a week where everyone was welcome to come and paint, to draw or just to chat. Over the past year we have seen the demand for the group increase.

The “Painting for Pleasure” room is now open 5 days a week and most of the time the “artists” arrive before the Centre opens because they are impatient to continue their work.

Now the *Painting for Pleasure* workshop is recognised by the participants and staff of Hutt St Centre as an art space, fulfilling the initial plan of providing a place where everyone is welcome to come and paint, to draw or just to chat amongst themselves and with staff members. Their vibrant artworks reflect their indigenous culture and their responses to the “here and now” of their daily challenges. The most established members give their support to newcomers and share with them their experience. The art work has been valued and is considered to be of high quality. Some of the paintings have been sold.

In addition to the success of the art programme and the growth in self-esteem for the artists, there have been even further good news stories. We have experienced an influx of people attending the art group but also an increasing number of people who collaborate with the Centre and support its work. People who have been allocated housing often continue their painting at home while remaining committed to their attendance at Hutt St for friendship and support with their art work. Other services have also been accessed through “*Painting for Pleasure*”.

Within the next few weeks Therese Rein, the wife of the Australian Prime Minister, will be opening an exhibition called: “*Home is where the art is*” for artists with a history of homelessness. The exhibition is a result of close collaboration between two different agencies in the homeless sector. For the participants in the Hutt St Centre “Painting for Pleasure” art group this exhibition will reflect the personal journeys of the Aboriginal artists and their culture, and it will be an opportunity to sell some of their art work.

Sister Gwen TAMLYN

Daughter of Charity

VISIT FROM SUPERIORS

Sr. Evelyne Franc, Superioress General and
Sister Margaret Barrett, Assistant General

Visit to Kenya

7th- 11th November 2008

Friday 7th November 2008, marked the joyful arrival of Sr. Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, and Sister Margaret Barrett, Assistant General, in Kenya. The Sisters gathered to sing a Magnificat of thanksgiving in the chapel of the Seminary house in Nairobi, conscious of the importance, privilege and the blessing of Sr. Evelyne’s visit.

During her time in Kenya, Sr. Evelyne was able to see each local community and meet many people who work with the Sisters.

On Saturday, 8th November, Sr. Evelyne set off with Sister Margaret Barrett and Sister Catherine Prendergast, Provincial of the Irish Province, on the journey to the mountain mission in **Chepynal**, West Pokot, Kenya, where the Sisters have been since 2002. To arrive there meant driving up a mountainous, poorly kept road, crossing several river areas, hazardous during the rains, winding along precipitous cliffs and viewing magnificent scenes of the countryside from soaring heights.

The Sisters of Chepynal were overjoyed to welcome the visitors and Sr. Catherine Mulligan, coordinator of the Kenya mission,. Greeted by dancing women in traditional Pokot costume, the Sisters began their visit to the various mission endeavours in Chepynal, making stops at St. Mary's Nursery, Chepynal Girls' Primary School, St. Catherine's Polytechnic and Linyough's Women's Centre. (The Pokot word "linyough" suggests hope and togetherness.)

After an enthusiastic welcome and greetings from the Pokot children and young people, it was the adults' turn to speak and they thanked Sister Evelyne for all that the Community has done to assist in meeting the needs of the children and the families, including education for the youngest children, promotion of girl students in primary schools, training of outstation nursery teachers, support for girls and mothers who have no primary school certificate, through technical education, and development programmes for women. They also heard explanations of the anti-FGM (female genital excision) programme and the water programme. Sr. Evelyne acknowledged their gratitude and expressed hers as well; she admired all that the people have accomplished in collaboration with the sisters.

After a heartfelt liturgy of praise and thanksgiving, the Sisters began the journey down the mountain to Kitale for a brief visit to the future mission in the new parish of St. Kizito in Matissi. Here they were welcomed by the young people and various parish choirs and by the Sisters who are currently assessing the needs of the people in the parish where alcoholism, prostitution and smuggling are the only means of earning a living.

Back in **Nairobi**, Sr. Evelyne had an opportunity to see the DREAM centre for persons with HIV/AIDS. Sister joined the personnel for their morning prayer, met the staff individually, and had an informative tour of the centre with explanations from the staff about the programme in the Centre where 4 Daughters of Charity are working.

The next stop on the journey was **Thigio**. Here the Sisters opened a Care Centre and a dispensary in January 2002, a nursery in October 2002, a Technical Training Centre for women and a physiotherapy unit for handicapped youngsters in November 2002. They started an agricultural training programme in December 2002. The Kenya sky was a beautiful blue and the day was sunny. Welcoming the visitors were the Sisters and the postulants. Young women from the Training Centre accompanied the visitors as they followed a group of women dancing down the hill to St. Louise Centre. They were surrounded by the elderly men and women, the disabled young people from Kisima, the nursery children, as well as the women in the Development Programme.

After a prayer by an elderly woman and the presentation of gifts from all the groups, the visitors went to each room. Sister Evelyne and Sister Margaret greeted each child, young person, each adult and elderly person. All were pleased by their words and kindness.

Sr. Evelyne and Sr. Margaret, bringing the customary gift of maize, tea and sugar, walked to the village to visit the home of two of the Kisima boys who have special needs. On their return trip, they stopped off at the clinic and dispensary. The postulants and the pre-postulants were delighted to have a special session with the visitors. In the physiotherapy area, Sister Evelyne admired the wonderful work done for children by the physiotherapists and then the visitors walked through the Cardinal Otunga Centre (the new hall and library opened in January 2008) to view the new sports court and building (both nearing completion). Before leaving Thigio, the Sisters all gathered to share their experiences of the joys and challenges of the mission.

That evening Sr. Evelyne and Sister Margaret joined in evening prayer with the priests and students of DePaul Centre, the house of studies and novitiate of the Vincentians. Fr. Barry Moriarity C.M. warmly welcomed the Sisters and in her turn Sr. Evelyne spoke to the priests and students telling them about her recent experience as auditrice at the Synod in Rome.

The following day the visitors continued their journey to the places where the Daughters in Nairobi carry out their ministries. Accompanied by two Sisters, they entered the Langa'ta Women's Prison, the only Kenya maximum security prison (about 600 women). Approximately 40 children also live with their mothers in the prison. The Sisters first went to the cells where women who have recently given birth are housed with their newly born babies; the youngest child was just a few days old. When these children reach the age of 2 or 3 they go back to the nursery.

In the work area, they admired the achievements of the prisoners who do handicrafts such as embroidery, knitting, tailoring and weaving. Young women who have not completed secondary school are able to attend classes in prison in preparation for the National Examination. Some women take advanced college courses. Two Sisters visit the prison regularly and provide spiritual accompaniment and support for the prisoners and staff members. The Daughters of Charity also provide material support: medication, travel for released prisoners, and supplementary nutrition for children and adults who are ill.

The Sisters moved on to *Bangladesh*, a very poor slum community with approximately 2000 residents; Bangladesh has no running water or services. Few houses have electricity. Most people in the village are day labourers when they are able to find work. Problems such as poverty, addiction, and illnesses, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, are constantly found among the residents there. In this locality is the small one-room Peace School, which houses a small nursery four days a week, a mobile clinic another day and a tutoring programme on Saturdays. From the Peace School, the Sisters stopped to see Kuwinda, a larger but equally poor community.

On the way home, Sr. Evelyne and Sister Margaret stopped at the parish church to greet the students in the tailoring class and to see where the Mobile Medical Clinic is held. The ten students in the tailoring class and their teacher were pleased to meet our visitors and to thank them and the community. After talking to the students, it was time to return to Chanzo for a cup of tea and some mandazi (Kenyan doughnuts).

On 11th November, all the Sisters from the Kenyan mission: 17 missionary Sisters, six Sister students from other African provinces studying in Kenya, and four Seminary Sisters, all gathered in Nairobi with Sister Catherine Prendergast and Sister Aster Zewdie, Visitatrice of Ethiopia, to hear Sr. Evelyne speak about our charism, the Constitutions, our prayer life, community living and the service of people who are poor. Everyone appreciated Sr. Evelyne's simplicity, attentiveness and presence to each Sister; they were inspired and affirmed by her words of encouragement and her understanding of their various situations and services.

Sr. Evelyne, Sr. Margaret, and Sr. Catherine Prendergast joined Sr. Margaret Mary Ekanem, Seminary Directress and the Seminary community for lunch and had a simple and informal exchange of ideas.

All the Sisters of Kenya offer their warmest thanks to Sister Evelyne and Sister Margaret for their support in facing the challenges they have to meet. This visit brought us closer to each other and the worldwide community, where the needs of the poor call us to ever greater love and solidarity.

The Sisters of Kenya

VISIT FROM SUPERIORS

Sister Evelyne Franc

And Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor

Visit to the Province of China

25th November-3rd December 2008

Sr. Evelyne and Sr. Julma, General Councillor, were met in Beijing on November 25th by Sr. Maria Wu, Visitatrice of the Chinese Province for their visit to the Province which was to take place in two stages; first of all in China and later in Taiwan, another part of the Chinese Province.

November 25th-28th: China

Many of the Chinese Sisters had known Sister Evelyne when she was Vice-Visitatrice of Taiwan so they were doubly happy to see her again. Some Sisters spoke French well and were able to converse with Sister Evelyne in French, while the others spoke in Chinese.

A highlight of this visit was the reception into the Company of two postulants and two Seminary Sisters by Sister Evelyne. The date had been set for this time so that they would have the privilege of being received into these stages of formation by the Superioress General herself.

A trip to Tianjin gave Sr. Evelyne the opportunity to see the Tianjin Diocesan Sisters of Charity, part of the Vincentian Family, who follow closely the teachings of St. Vincent and St. Louise.

The final stop was Shanghai, where there are also quite a few Daughters, who were delighted to have a visit from the Superioress General and Sister Julma.

During this first part of their visit, Sister Evelyne, Sister Julma and Sister Maria Wu had travelled thousands of miles, by car and by plane of course.

29th November -3rd December 2008: Taiwan

Sunday morning Mass in the parish church gave Sr. Evelyne the opportunity to renew her friendship with many of the parishioners, who remembered her very well. On the Sisters' premises Sr. Evelyne visited the Chinese Province Archives. This room had been her office when she was Vice-Provincial and Sister was particularly interested in the testimonies there about the martyrdom of the Sisters of Tianjin.

Sr. Evelyne attended a Council Meeting on November 30th and then met privately with each of the Councillors.

The next day there was a general meeting for all the Sisters of Taiwan, and all 30 were present. Sr. Evelyne spoke about community relationships, modelled on those of the Blessed Trinity. Sister brought out how love and self-forgetfulness are the means of helping one other to go to God. Sr. Evelyne also encouraged devotion to the four Sisters newly named blessed of the Company- Sr. Lindalva de Oliveira, Sr. Guiseppina Nicoli, Sr. Marta Wiecka, and Sr. Rosalie Rendu.

Sr. Evelyne spoke specifically about our charism— saying that spiritual service must accompany our corporal service. She stressed our need for mobility, for being open to the future, a missionary spirit, a simple, poor lifestyle, and all of this having the Word of God as its foundation.

The second session of the morning took up the theme of the apostolic life. It is the spiritual life which generates enthusiasm for the apostolate. For this, prayer is vitally important. Sr. Evelyne therefore encouraged the Sisters to safeguard times of prayer and spiritual exercises. Having been privileged to take part in the recent Synod of Bishops in Rome on the Word of God, Sr. Evelyne encouraged the Sisters to keep on reading the Scriptures with great love and appreciation. Sister also recommended

the Sisters to read the works of Benedict XVI. In conclusion Sister advised us to enter into Advent in union with Mary, in her '*Fiat*', her '*Magnificat*', her '*Conservabat*' (she kept all these things in her heart) and her '*Stabat*' (her presence at the foot of the cross. Her nearness to the suffering Jesus, is our model for keeping close to the suffering peoples of the world today.

In the afternoon Sr. Evelyne made herself available to any Sisters who wished to talk to her. Many of the Sisters also used the opportunity during these days to have a private talk with Sr. Julma.

The evening meal was a belated Thanksgiving dinner, postponed for four days so it could be celebrated with Sr. Evelyne. Many Vincentians, representing 7 nationalities attended.

On December 1st Sr. Evelyne and Sr. Julma, together with Sr. Maria Wu, Visitatrice, took Taiwan's "Bullet Train and set off for Tainan, 200 miles to the south, where Sr. Evelyne had served as administrator in the Miraculous Medal Hospice from 1994 to 1996. The old building which had 15 beds for elderly and incurable patients has now been replaced by a new unit. During her visit Sister Evelyne was able to admire this new facility which accommodates a hundred or so elderly persons. While in Tainan, Sr. Evelyne visited the Vincentian cemetery to pray for the five Daughters buried there, four of whom she had lived with: Sister Mary Fu, Sister Mary Ayo, Sister Marie-Joseph Hsu and Sister "Moumou" Lyang.

Late that afternoon the travellers returned to Taipei in time for dinner. Recreation around the dinner table recalled many scenes from Sr. Evelyne's time in Taiwan. When the Sisters went to Rome for the canonisation of the Chinese martyrs, Sister Evelyne was their guide in Paris and in Rome.

Early in the morning of December 3rd Sr. Evelyne and Sr. Julma left for the airport on their way to Vietnam. Sister Evelyne would have liked to stay longer to visit the many and important works undertaken by the Sisters of Taiwan in several localities; serving migrant workers, visiting people in their homes, caring for the elderly, accompanying young delinquents and doing pastoral work with aborigines in the mountains.

This meeting with Sister Evelyne has given us a greater insight into the worldwide unity of the Company. Sr. Evelyne shared news of the various Provinces, with their difficulties and their successes, the increase in vocations in some of the Provinces, the Sisters' commitment in the face of natural disasters the opening of houses in new mission territories, the Sisters availability...and this put into our hearts a greater desire to support them by our prayers and sacrifices.

Sister Kathleen Grimley,
Echoes correspondent

VISIT BY SUPERIORS

Sister Evelyne Franc

and Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor

Celebration of the Daughters of Charity's 80 years of presence in Vietnam

December 11th 1928 – December 11th 2008

1 – A BIT OF HISTORY

Vietnam is one of 10 countries that make up ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)

- Population: 84 million inhabitants (in 2006).
- Political situation: from 1954 to 1975, the nation's territory was divided into two regions, the North under control of the Communist Party, and the South controlled by the Republic of Vietnam. On April 30th 1975, after troops from North Vietnam and Viet Cong entered Saigon, the government of South Vietnam surrendered. The victory of the communist government from Hanoi ended the war between North and South Vietnam, and the country was reunified under communist control. The capital of South Vietnam was renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the former Vietnamese communist leader.

Religion: Buddhism is the religion of most of the people, while Christians make up only 7% of the population.

2 – HISTORY OF THE COMPANY IN VIETNAM

The Province of Daughters of Charity in Vietnam began with three French Daughters of Charity.

In 1927, the bishop of the diocese of Saigon wrote to the Superioress General of the Company, Mother Mathilde Inchelin (1922-1928), to request Daughters of Charity for the hospital in Saigon.

On December 11th, 1928, Mother Inchelin sent three French Daughters of Charity to Vietnam: Marie Mathilde Sempé, Jeanne Legout and Marthe Côte.

In 1932, the Province of Vietnam was founded with its first Visitatrice, Sister Francine Lepicard (1932-1935).

In 1934, the first three Vietnamese Daughters of Charity were sent on mission.

In 1975, after the victory of the communist government of Hanoi (North Vietnam), all the European missionary Sisters had to be repatriated. Relations between the Province and the Motherhouse were suspended until 1985.

In 1988, Mother Anne Duzan visited Vietnam with Sister Blandine Pierron; after that time, the Visitatrices and delegates were able to participate in the General Assemblies of 1991, 1997 and 2003.

3 – CELEBRATIONS FOR THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PRESENCE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY IN VIETNAM

a) *The various celebrations in commemoration of our 80th anniversary were planned as a way of expressing our gratitude to God as well as a means of launching us into the future with new momentum.*

b) *Three celebrations were organised:*

- With Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General and Sister Julma Neo, General Councillor, on December 4th 2008.

- With Church authorities, religious communities and the families of the Sisters, on December 13th, 2008.

- With civil authorities, collaborators and members of the four branches of the Vincentian Family, on December 14th, 2008.

c) *Arrival of the Superioress General at the Provincial House*

On the morning of December 3rd 2008, Sister Evelyne Franc and Sister Julma Neo arrived at the Provincial House in Ho Chi Minh City and were welcomed by guard of honour made up of aspirants, Sisters, many Sister Servants and elderly Sisters. Afterwards, as they gathered in the Chapel, the Sisters told God of their joy at being able to celebrate this family anniversary with Sister Evelyne and Sister Julma and to welcome them as representatives of the Company.

The afternoon included a meeting with the Provincial Council, Eucharist with the Dominicans, Vespers with the Community, and then the inauguration of a new multi-purpose room built in the basement of the Mai Vinh house. That evening, there was a meditative presentation entitled "*Path of Grace*" filled with impressive and meaningful images describing the efforts of the people and Vietnamese Catholics to overcome many forms of oppression.

The following day, they visited the exposition hall where there was a display representing all the events that have taken place since the beginning of the Province. Afterwards, Sister Evelyne met the aspirants and postulants. In her meeting with the Sisters of the Province who had come from local communities both near and far, Sister Evelyne called to mind the first Sisters who had come to begin the Province. She also mentioned the signs that the Lord gives us today with the recent beatifications of Sister Lindalva [1953-1993] in Recife in Brazil; Sister Giuseppina Nicoli [1863-1924] in Sardinia, and Sister Marta Wiecka [1874-1904] from Poland in Ukraine.

"Sister Lindalva is a model of fidelity to the service of poor persons. Her assassin was a man whom she refused to have expelled from the Dom Pedro Home in Salvador because, as she said, he was a poor person who had the right to be served by her. Sister Giuseppina offers us an extraordinary example of obedience and availability, always willing to move from one service to another and creative in reaching the most abandoned among those who were poor. Sister Marta is impressive in her fidelity to the charism of Saint Vincent. She cared for those who were ill with great sensitivity and much experience, always remembering to say some good word, never separating corporal and spiritual service, even to the point of giving her life for another person. We don't need large numbers of Sisters to give witness, Sister Evelyne said, our witness lies in the quality of being servants. The Company is in need of prophets for our times..."

Concluding her talk, Sister Evelyne reminded us: *“Living the Vincentian vocation authentically today requires apostolic reflection in common and periodic assessments on all levels in order to discern what God is asking of us.”* (cf. Statute 11). Sister Evelyne then commented on C. 24: detachment of heart, the sense of giving without seeking anything in return, defence of justice, commitment to social transformation, and the importance of pleading the cause of the underprivileged who do not have the possibility of being heard. Finally, she added: *“Mary is always present and active in the life of the Company. Let us live with her and like her, listening to the Word of God in order to serve Christ in persons who are poor and to be open to being evangelised by them.”* Sister Evelyne ended by saying: *“The Company has been present for 375 years and in the Province of Vietnam for 80 of those years. The Province is so young, and the journey ahead of you is still quite long! May God work wonders in the Province, as He has done in the Company in general. Strive to continue to live deeply the spirit of the Company.”*

All that we have experienced from Sister Evelyne’s visit continues to bear fruit in our lives as Daughters of Charity, servants of people who are poor. Thank you, Sister Evelyne and Sister Julma.

Sister Gonzague TRAN THI KIM TÚ
Echoes correspondent

SISTERS’ TESTIMONIES

Province of Switzerland-Turkey

Sister Josephine’s witness to obedience

On June 29th 2008, at the request of her Visitatrice, Sister Josephine returned to Turin, her Province of origin, after 37 years of service to persons living in poverty in Turkey. Her witness of generous availability had a great impact on our Community, and without realising it, Sr. Josephine influenced the reflections of our Provincial Assembly.

In the two weeks leading up to her departure date, invitations multiplied: doctors and nurses, every department in the hospital and several religious communities, everyone wanted to thank Sister Josephine and express their sadness about her departure. She said to them all very simply: *“There are tears in my eyes and my heart, but deep inside, I am at peace. I have the serenity that comes with doing God’s will.”*

Another day she confided to us: *“I didn’t imagine that detachment would be so difficult,”* and pointing to Christ on the cross, she continued, *“He is the one who gives me strength, and He will be with me in Italy.”*

To the residents who didn't understand why she was leaving and who wanted to write to the Mother Superior, she said: *"Don't even think about doing anything like that. I promised to obey, so please don't keep me from that. God knows very well where I should be. I will always keep you close in my heart."*

Sister Josephine strove to pass on our charism to others up to her last day here: *"It is not enough to give food, we should add a kind word, encourage others with a smile, a handshake, be patient with them: people need that as much as they need food."*

All the personnel who worked with her insisted on having a celebration to thank her for all that she did for the patients. During the celebration, Sister Josephine asked forgiveness for the times when she had been too brusque with them. Everyone was touched by this gesture. She said the following words to one of the nurses who said how sad she was to see her go:

-Perhaps one day, you'll take my place!

-That's impossible, Sister, I'm a Muslim.

-We never know, responded Sister Josephine, Allah is great!

Thank you, Sister Josephine, for your shining witness of faith and adherence to God's will. You help us to truly live our vocation as Daughters of Charity.

The Sisters in the Hospital of Peace
(Istanbul)

THE POOR SPEAK TO US

Province of Cuba

After cyclone Ike hit Cuba we were evangelised by the poor

On 8th September 2008, hurricane Ike hit Cuba, causing floods and doing enormous damage in many places, including Baracoa, the oldest town in the most easterly part of the island. The first victims saw their homes ravaged by waves 10 metres high. Others took advantage of the help offered by their families and neighbours. There were countless examples of this.

The Daughters of Charity went to visit the inhabitants of Baracoa to help them face this new catastrophe. As they went through the streets carrying food and medicines they met many people who told them about their sufferings but also, at times, these people shared experiences that had affected them in a positive way. How many times did we hear them say, « Thanks to God and to those who helped us, we

are still alive. » In the course of these conversations we recognised God present and working in the hearts and lives of these sorely tested people.

Mercedes' story is rather different : she did not have faith but one particular incident allowed God to come into her life.

Mercedes lived with her two sons aged 13 and 14. When she heard that this third devastating hurricane was approaching, she decided to remain in her house to protect her possessions, not only from the storm but also from looters. However, she decided to send her two children to a place of safety. In despair at having to leave his mother there, the older boy wrote on one of the walls, « O God, I place my trust in you » He drew a cross by these words and then left the house with his brother. Later on the emergency services arrived and decided to evacuate the mother to a safe place.

When the hurricane was over, Mercedes and her two sons returned to their house. They were overjoyed to find it still standing although it was damaged. Mercedes immediately set to work to put the house in order and she discovered the writing on the wall. « *Someone has been in here* », she thought. Seeing his mother so angry, her son confessed that he had written these words because he was afraid that his mother might die. Mercedes was absolutely taken aback by these words because she had never spoken of God to her children.

As she told her story, Mercedes broke down in tears and she said, « *That really startled me. I don't know where my son learnt that but I do know that he was the first to speak to me about God. Up to now I did not have faith but now I believe that God has done something special for us and that we owe everything to him. Thanks to my child I want to learn about this God of Life so that I can pray to Him and thank Him.* »

Sister Maria Lazara FERNANDEZ
Echoes correspondent

IN ST VINCENT'S TIME AND IN OUR OWN DAY

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

The Community of Twelve

The first Conference given by Monsieur Vincent to the Daughters of Charity, marking the beginning of Volume IX of Coste, is dated July 31st 1634. It took place, then, eight months after the foundation of the Company. At least two other conferences preceded this one: "On the last day of July 1634, in a third and final conference, M. Vincent gave the Rules to the little Congregation of the Daughters of Charity, and an instruction on how to practise them. (Coste IX, 1). What follows is based on these conferences

This conference of July 31st is very significant: first of all because it is the first one that we have, and most of all, because this is when M. Vincent presents the first regulations of the Company and gives a commentary on them. These regulations are the closest to the original intention of the Company. On this day, M. Vincent and Louise de Marillac had one concern: to regulate the Sisters' life in such a way as to best adapt it to what they had in mind at the time of the foundation.

In the years that followed, there would be other regulations, and then Constitutions which would strive to remain faithful to the intentions of the Company at its origin. However, as was the case for the Congregation of the Mission moving from the College des Bons Enfants to Saint-Lazare (cf. Coste XII, 418, 1963 ed.), it was necessary to take into account the numbers and distribution of the Company, juridical and canonical principles, the bishops' wishes, objections from the pastors, etc. In short, countless factors were involved, some of them unexpected ones.

This date of July 31st 1634, is only eight months after November 1633, still very close to the beginning of the foundation in all its freshness. It is striking to see how M. Vincent and Louise de Marillac envisaged this instrument for a better service of poor persons... acting in complete freedom, without being overly concerned about juridical prescriptions or any other constraints. There can be no doubt that the regulations would never otherwise have been so closely linked to life. They could never have been so uniquely developed in function of the purpose of the Company: the service of the poor.

This is why this first rule is very valuable and interesting. Note, however, that M. Vincent and Louise de Marillac are not novices in the field. They had already envisaged and developed very effective regulations for the Confraternities of Charity. For M. Vincent, this dated back to August 23rd 1617 (Coste XIV, 124-125, French ed.), and for Louise de Marillac, at least to the foundation of the Confraternity of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet (Coste I, 114). Moreover, a comparative study allows us to quickly see the numerous convergences between the regulations for the Confraternities of Charity and the first regulations for the Daughters of Charity. In order to have a good understanding of the overall structure that you had at the beginning, let us recall the particular circumstances of that time, as M. Vincent reminds us:

“Since most of them [The Ladies at Saint-Sauveur] were of the upper class, were married, and had families, they were often inconvenienced by carrying this soup pot, became disheartened, and talked of finding some servants who would do it for them.” (Coste IX, 358) It was Marguerite Naseau the volunteer who intervened here. Her way of living and especially her service of poor persons made such an impact that “other parishes wanted others who would do the same” (Coste IX, 358).

With requests from the Confraternities in Paris, as well as from Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, Marguerite Naseau “attracted to this, other girls whom she had helped to detach themselves from all superficial things and to embrace a devout life.” (Coste IX, 66) Without realising it, Marguerite played the role of mistress of novices!

At this point in your history, Marguerite Naseau and her handful of recruits were dispersed among the Paris Confraternities, and as Vincent de Paul said, “they began to meet and come together almost imperceptibly.” (Coste IX, 166) Three points are worth emphasising here before we move on to analyse the conference of July 31st 1634.

1/ Up to that day, everything took place within the context of the Confraternities of Charity, especially those in Paris. The Confraternities were the originating framework, the foundational structure, and they would provide your real and juridical setting for fourteen years, until May 30th 1647. “Up to the present, you haven’t been a body independent of the Ladies of the Confraternity of Charity; but now, Sisters, God wills that you form a special body which, however, without being separated from that of the Ladies, will still have its particular functions and spiritual exercises.” (Coste IX, 255)

When we read the conference of July 31st 1634, we should keep these circumstances in mind: the Daughters of Charity were servants of poor persons but within the framework of the Confraternities, and under the direction of those who were in charge of the Confraternities.

2/ So they were “servants of the poor” within the structure of the Confraternities. However, thanks most certainly to the personality of Marguerite Naseau and the insight of Louise de Marillac, they were already something else. For some time, as Vincent said, they had begun “to meet and come together almost imperceptibly.” (Coste IX, 166) This is an essential point in the unfolding of your origins: the initiative (whose?) preceded the structure. We know that Vincent de Paul really appreciated this kind of providential process, which makes life, in a way, more important than law, in the form of events that speak, provoke and impose themselves. Today we would call them “the signs of the times” (cf. Coste III, 272; VII, 148-149; XII, 416-418, 1963 ed.; XIII b, 324).

This is how the first Daughters of Charity in Paris, together with Louise de Marillac, had the custom of gathering together to share their life, their experiences, their difficulties and their plans.

3/ We have a clear sense that something was happening, and what follows will prove it. In all this spontaneous experience of community, after the decisive action of Marguerite who recruited her first companions, Louise de Marillac was the one who took the lead and became the animator of this informal group.

If we quickly go back to the history of your origins, we see Vincent de Paul continually influenced by his experiences of 1595-1630: the service of poor persons undertaken by the most advantaged social classes. We should not forget the hesitation he showed until May 1633, six months prior to the foundation of the Company (Coste I, 200). Louise de Marillac, on the other hand, following the lead of Marguerite Naseau, had for several months been animating a community of poor young women dispersed among the Confraternities in the big city of Paris.

Keep this in mind: it was **Louise de Marillac**, an illegitimate child from one of the most influential families in the kingdom of France, who was the first to join these

poor country women. It was not the “poor swineherd and son of a labourer” who was the first to animate them, but a daughter from an influential family! What a curious idea Providence had, but one that Vincent would come to understand later. (Coste IX, 74-75)

So you see, the origins of the Company were truly unexpected and unhoped-for, and Vincent was certainly correct in repeatedly saying that “no one had thought of it,” and therefore it was the work of God.

The work of God, certainly, but by the pathway of providential interventions: Marguerite Naseau, then Louise de Marillac who took the lead, and finally Vincent de Paul in the course of his retreat in September 1633. The latter happened thanks to the exchanges that took place over four or five days between Vincent’s Guardian Angel and that of Louise! (Coste I, 216)

Here we are on November 29th 1633. We have very few details about this memorable day and the way in which this group of young women, who had been accustomed to meeting together, decided to become a Community. It is not until eight months later that we find the first traces of the event: July 31st 1634. It is relatively easy, however, to reconstruct from this conference, the early days of this Community.

At the conference of July 31st 1634, the secretary is Louise de Marillac... what an achievement! (cf. Coste XII, 810-816, 1963 ed.) From the first lines, we can appreciate her competence, something that is of inestimable value for the historian: “On the last day of July 1634, in a third and final conference, M. Vincent gave the Rules to the little Congregation of the Daughters of Charity, and an instruction on how to practise them.” (Coste IX, 1)

“ ... third and final conference... ”. We know that the second had taken place the day before on July 30th and that at that time M. Vincent mentioned the time frame, from November 29th 1633 to July 30th 1634: “ ... when I was speaking to you the other day, I was saying that you’ve been residing together for some time now with the same purpose in view, but so far you haven’t had any Regulations for your way of life.” (Coste IX, 1). It seems clear that this end of the month of July 1634 had been the first significant moment in the life of the Company. As at Chatillon (August to November 1617) and as on all the other occasions, Vincent de Paul wanted experience to precede the development of the regulations, which would only be written much later (Coste IX, 92, 111, 169). Vincent justifies himself in the manner of a good Christian...and a Gascon! “ ... In this, Divine Providence has guided you, as God guided His people, who were without a code of laws for more than a thousand years after creation. Our Lord acted in the same way with the early Church; for, as long as He was on earth, there was no new written law; His Apostles were the ones who assembled His teachings and Commandments after He had gone.” (Coste IX, 1)

On June 14th, 1643, in the introduction to the summary of the Conference dealing with the explanation of the regulations, the secretary (the original of this conference is in Louise de Marillac’s handwriting) wrote: “...our Most Honoured Father M. Vincent did us the charity of discussing with us the Regulations and way of life of the Daughters of Charity, as a result of the request of a parish Sister to let her have in writing the practices observed in the house. Most Honoured Father had not yet

made up his mind whether to have a written text; from this we have reason to believe that Divine Providence has reserved to itself the guidance of this work, which it advances and holds back, according to its pleasure.” (Coste IX, 92)

A bit later on, Louise de Marillac, after reflecting on the subject of the conference of January 22nd 1645, wrote: “The Company has long desired and requested that its way of life be set down in the form of Regulations so that, by reading them, we may be encouraged to practice them. God, who has today given us this grace, asks of us greater fidelity and exactitude than ever.” (Coste IX, 169)

Finally, in 1645, the first rule is written with the intention of presenting it to the archbishop of Paris, Jean-François de Gondi, to obtain the approbation of the Company (Coste XIII b, 123-127). This is the same archbishop of Paris who was presented with a petition in August or September 1645, in which Vincent described in detail the activity of this newly formed Company, and asked Jean-François de Gondi “to erect as a Confraternity this company of girls and widows and to give them as regulations the following articles, according to which they have lived until now and are resolved to live by in future, under the name of Girls and Widows, Servants of the Poor of the Charity.” (Coste II, 602-603)

I recall in passing that the Rules of the Congregation of the Mission took no less time to mature: they were not given to the Missioners until 1658, and the introduction of this little volume distributed to each one began with the Latin words: “En tandem...” which means “Here finally...”!

Perhaps you have noticed the expression used by Louise de Marillac: “the little congregation of the Daughters of Charity.” Truly, Louise was very much ahead of M. Vincent, and it is amazing to find this prophetic title in a text from July 1634. In fact, for M. Vincent, the first Daughters were only a group of “servants of the Paris Confraternities”, and Vincent would continue to think of them in this way until 1647. For Louise de Marillac, they were already a little congregation of Daughters of Charity! I believe I have already alerted you to the fact that Louise de Marillac would not always be the kind of collaborator who followed along respectfully. Rather, quite often she was ahead of her Director; here we have an example of this, and there will be many others!

Let us now go back to our Conference of July 31st 1634 and listen to M. Vincent: “Providence seems to have brought the twelve of you together here... ” (Coste IX, 2) – Here then is the little Community, and in the course of this conference, we can identify several of the first twelve members of the Company:

- Marie Joly is from Saint-Sauveur, as well as another Sister, perhaps Nicole;
- Michelle and Barbe are at Saint-Nicolas;
- Marguerite and her Sisters are at Saint-Paul;
- one Sister (Jeanne Lepentre) is on her own at Saint-Benoît;
- the others (doubtless three, including Jacqueline and Madeleine) are at Hôtel-Dieu, under the guidance of Mademoiselle Le Gras. Various cross-references allow us to have a few details about these first twelve gathered on July 31st, 1634, or at least, on eight of them. Let us begin with the most well-known among them.

MARIE JOLY

In a conference on the virtues of Barbe Angiboust, Marie Joly declares: “I have been here from the beginning, when the Company was founded.” (Coste X, 519) She was an excellent servant of poor persons and had a strong personality. In 1641 she was sent to Sedan to take care of those wounded in the war taking place in the region. She remained there until 1655, separated, out of necessity, from the Community and its practices. At the time of her return to the Motherhouse, she ran away and then returned, and her case was studied at Council. ““Let us consider the reasons that seem to oblige us to act like the father of the prodigal in the Gospel, since God is giving us the means to do this”, said Most Honoured Father. “She is someone who has strayed from the right path, and it is a charity to lift up those who have fallen; she is contrite, and it seems that she ought to be forgiven, since she is sorry for her fault; she has been a member of the Company for a long time and has worked very hard for those who are poor. During the siege of Sedan, she suffered a great deal. Lastly, it is to be feared that many of our Sisters may be greatly saddened if we do not take her back.”” (Coste XIII, 349-352) There is no need to go into the reasons “against” this which were honestly presented at Council; the reasons “for” had already won out!

BARBE ANGIBOUST

She entered the Company on July 1st 1634 at the age of 29. She was superior at Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1638, then in Richelieu, then at Saint-Denis in 1645; she lived in Fontainebleau (1646), Brienne (1652) in Aube, Bernay (1655) in Eure, and Eure-et-Loir in Châteaudun (1657) where she died on December 27th 1658 at the age of 53. She was a remarkable Daughter (Coste X, 511-523 and 541-544), a true Daughter of Charity.

She was the one who gave this extraordinary reply to the Duchess d’Aiguillon “Madame, I left my father’s house to serve persons who are poor, and you are a great, rich, powerful lady. If you were poor, Madame, I would gladly serve you.” (Coste X, 516; I, 322) This remark succeeded in challenging and clarifying the situation for Vincent de Paul, where it seems he had accepted or tolerated a certain deviation from the norm. He shared his thoughts with Louise de Marillac: “What do you think of that, Mademoiselle? Are you not delighted to see the power of the spirit of God in those two poor young women and the contempt that He has given them for the world and its greatness? You could not believe the enthusiasm that this has given me for the Charity, nor the desire I have for you to return soon and in good health so as to work at it in good earnest... ” (Coste I, 323)

JEANNE LEPEINTRE

She had been a servant of Madame Goussault. She was a teacher in Saint-Germain-en-Laye (1642), superior in Nantes (1647) then in Châteaudun (1655) and at the hospital of Salpêtrière (1657). “A strong, good Sister,” was M. Vincent’s description of her. Nevertheless, she was a difficult character and often took rash initiatives. Her correspondence with Saint Vincent is interesting. (Coste II, 230; III, 602; IV, 171, 281; V, 8; VI, 44) Unfortunately, towards the end of her life, she suffered from dementia.

JACQUELINE

She had a strong personality. Did she perhaps deserve the slap in the face that she received one day in 1638 from Jeanne, the Daughter of Charity at the parish of Saint-Laurent? In her case as well, the Council of the Company had to deliberate on the possibility of sending her away: “Now, Sisters, something has come up that requires your advice: it concerns poor Jacqueline, who is here in the house. She is not a well-balanced person and is causing many minor disturbances; consequently, she shouldn’t remain in the Company any longer. She complains constantly, and this can upset weak persons who don’t yet know her. And since she doesn’t appreciate anything that’s done, wherever she is she makes up ridiculous stories that can be very harmful. If her wishes are opposed, she’s unbearable and incapable of accepting a correction, and, what is worse, I think that, since apparently she’s here only grudgingly, she can’t work out her salvation in this place and will do better if left to her own devices. In short, Sisters, she has no common sense.” (Coste XIII, 242) What an accusation, apparently not very Vincentian! It could only be resolved by words in her defence, an appeal more Vincentian in nature: “On the other hand, you have to consider that she’s a Sister who has worked hard for the poor and is one of the oldest members of the Company [this is in 1646]--even one of the very first, I think. For that reason, it might seem better to keep her.” (Coste XIII, 242) In fact, we never cast out the elderly servants, even if age has not improved them! A long debate led to a more moderate decision being taken and Jacqueline was not sent away.

NICOLE

We know very little about her; it seems that she was not easy to deal with. M. Vincent wrote to Louise de Marillac in 1636: “I really wish, Mademoiselle, that you could persuade that poor Nicole to go and stay at Saint-Benoît or somewhere else. If she agrees, you will have to write to Mademoiselle Viole to accept her. Yesterday I met the young woman from that parish; she is asking for someone else. Oh! what a good deed you would be doing if you could manage that! But I think it inadvisable for us to proceed in too peremptory a manner; that would have unfortunate consequences. To speak to her, I cannot.” (Coste I, 357) At the end of 1638, feedback was more positive: “Since you think Nicole may have mended her ways, fine; try her again... ” (Coste I, 537)

MARGUERITE

In October 1638, Monsieur Vincent wrote to Louise de Marillac: “I am very glad that you kept Sister Marguerite and are having her make a retreat.” (Coste I, 502) This is the only information we have on Marguerite.

MADELEINE

“I have seen that good young woman, Madeleine. I think you will have to work with her a little as her passions are rather strong. So what! When these young women have the strength to overcome themselves, they work wonders afterwards. Accept her, therefore, please... As for that good young woman from Argenteuil who is melancholy, I think you are right in raising objections to taking her, for it is a strange disposition, that of melancholy. I think that you have enough young women for some time and that you should train them well to read and sew so that they can work in the

country.” (Coste I, 239) It was about 1634 when Monsieur Vincent wrote this letter to Louise de Marillac.

MICHELLE

We have no information about her, except the fact that on that day she was made Superior of Barbe at Saint-Nicolas. We can now imagine these twelve young women, gathered around M. Vincent and Louise de Marillac on July 31st 1634 in Louise’s house in Paris on rue de Versailles, across from Epée-Royale. (Located near what is currently 21 rue Monge.)

It is necessary to read and comment on this conference one paragraph at a time, remembering that we are only at the earliest days of the Company and recalling the delays and the changes that took place even in the lifetime of M. Vincent. On various points, it is fascinating to catch Vincent in the midst of his plans (at times unspoken), with his hopes and ambitions for the Company.

I pointed out previously that on this July 31st 1634, as often happened on later occasions, Louise de Marillac was ahead of M. Vincent in the organisation of the Community. In the course of this conference, however, in two or three prophetic passages, it seems as if he also became aware of the fact that he was living at the beginning of a great history, your history, that of the Daughters of Charity.

So as not to go on for too long, I will try to sum up these thirteen pages, essential ones for you, under three headings:

- A. The order of the day,
- B. The organisation of the community,
- C. The mystique or charism of the group (the prophetic aspect).

A: THE ORDER OF THE DAY

“So, dear Sisters, let us see how you should spend the twenty-four hours that make up the day, as the days make up the months, and the months the years that will lead you to eternity.” (Coste IX, 2) What a beautiful philosophical-astronomical speech that must have had quite a ring to it coming from the mouth of M. Vincent!

The order of the day began with rising at 5 o’clock in the morning, ended at 10 o’clock in the evening, and included the following details:

- offering of the day on rising...
- mental prayer and Mass...
- service of poor people; examination of conscience before meals...
- great silence between 10 o’clock in the evening and meditation the next day.

To conclude the day and promote sleep...a spiritual sleeping pill! “...fall asleep with a good thought. This will be an easy way for you to remember God when you awake...” (Coste IX, 7)

Several remarks and observations can be made on this very simple order of the day

I – PRACTICAL NATURE OF THE ORDER OF THE DAY

Everything was organised for service and in function of service. In order to recognise this, we need to compare this order of the day with that of religious at that time. In all communities and congregations, the daily rhythm revolved around praying the Divine Office. The other activities were necessarily and consciously divided up. In the order of the day for the Daughters of Charity, between Eucharist in the morning and prayer in the evening, only the examination of conscience at noon (and the bell!) were scheduled. The Daughters were servants of the poor and it was in function of this, first and foremost, that their rule was developed. This observation is an essential aspect which continues to be a criterion for the Daughter of Charity in every era; for your Constitutions now and in the future.

2 PRIORITY IN THE ORDER OF THE DAY

From July 31st 1634 onward, M. Vincent considered the possibility of competition or conflict between what was needed for spiritual subsistence and the demands of service: he clearly ruled in favour of the service of poor persons: “Remember that when you leave meditation and Holy Mass to serve poor persons, you lose nothing, Sisters, because to serve those who are poor is to go to God, and you should see God in them.” (Coste IX, 5) We will come back to this paragraph later, one of the most valuable and most significant for your vocation and identity.

3 – THE ORDER OF THE DAY IS RELATIVE

Monsieur Vincent added an important detail concerning the time of rising: “So, you will rise at five o’clock, whenever the work of the Charity allows you to go to bed at ten, for you must take care of yourselves for the service of those who are poor, and give your bodies their just due.” (Coste IX, 3) This is much more than advice for good health and hygiene. It has to do with the concept of regulations, and M. Vincent clearly revealed his thinking on this point.

The rule was not an absolute, not an end in itself. Rather, it was a MEANS of ensuring the service of poor persons. And if this service required working past 10 o’clock at night, M. Vincent considered it normal to rise later than 5 o’clock in the morning... because our bodies have needs. It is true that we can easily find texts in which Saint Vincent insisted on regularity, punctuality and uniformity. At Saint Lazare, he had to go drag a lazy confrere out of his bed one morning (Coste XI, 238). It would be absolutely wrong, however, to make M. Vincent into some sort of fanatic about Regulations.

First of all, we have seen that he was reluctant to write and codify the rules. (Coste III, 272; VII, 163-165; XII, 416-418, 1963 ed.; XIII b, 324) On the other hand, he continually and clearly defined their limits, at times almost making their application quite relative: whenever the schedule permits, in as much as possible, etc. It is to be understood, of course, that the only valid excuse was the service of the poor, not a person’s whims or laziness.

The same prudence and moderation is shown in the following statement: “A good maxim for those whom God uses to establish holy and new works is to defer as

long as possible making the regulations. Experience teaches that what is feasible at the beginning is sometimes harmful as things go on..." (Coste III, 272).

4 – PLACE OF PRAYER IN THE ORDER OF THE DAY

For Monsieur Vincent, prayer was unquestionably a very important part of the day of a Daughter of Charity: "a centre of devotion". Moreover, Vincent added some particularly significant reflections: "Take care to give an account of your prayer as soon as possible... You cannot imagine how useful this will be. Tell one another quite simply the thoughts God has given you and, above all, be careful to remember the resolutions you took at meditation." (Coste IX, 4)

It is important to know that in the 17th century, mental prayer was personal, intimate prayer of the highest quality, a sort of spiritual and mystical aesthetic. Vincent de Paul, for his part, presents it as sharing that takes place spontaneously. We know by what follows and on various other occasions that Vincent claimed to have been the originator of this way of carrying out this practice of piety in the Church. Some among you, myself included, surely remember when this practice was more formal than spontaneous. It was an exercise called Repetition of Prayer that was used until about twenty or thirty years ago. As with other matters, it is good to capture the real life thinking of M. Vincent on this point. According to what Vincent said in the following quotation it clearly involved spontaneous sharing of prayer, absolutely independent of the schedule, to be made "*as soon as possible*" (Coste IX, 4) and steering clear of any kind of formality.

Naturally, as communities became larger in size, he himself organised the practice, and arranged it more specifically within the order of the day and the week. He maintained however, the flavour of and a certain nostalgia for spontaneous sharing of prayer. (Coste IX, 175, 331; X, 60, 226; XIII b, 301) Contrary to the opinions of his day, Vincent believed that the masters of prayer were those who were simple and humble, those regarded as least among the others (Coste IX, 422), just as our Lord confirmed: "At our house we have another custom that really helps to support us: repetition of meditation in the morning. I can vouch for the fact that it has good results. It is unbelievable that God would let me be dry at prayer. My hope is that I'll learn from one of the good Brothers some of the inspirations he had, and from which I will benefit. I expect that from God's goodness, and He hardly ever fails me." (Coste XIII b, 301) And again: "...we have Repetition of Prayer, not every day but sometimes every two days, sometimes every three, as Providence allows. Now, by the grace of God the priests make it well and so do the seminarians--some better, some worse, according to what God communicates to them--but as for our poor Brothers, God's promise of revealing himself to the humble and to little ones is verified in them" (Coste IX, 331).

These four observations on the order of the day point out the way that M. Vincent approached the idea of regulations or rules in general, and the first regulations of the Daughters of Charity. These rules were closest to the origins of the Company and to Vincent's concept of the Daughters of Charity.

The rule is important and M. Vincent insisted on its value and significance (Coste IX, 9-10), but it is to be put into practice only as a means of serving the poor better.

This method takes into account real life. Let us recall the time of rising at 5 o'clock that Vincent introduced into the order of the day "whenever the work of the Charity allows you". Keep in mind the poor person who arrives at the time of Mass or prayer.

It is a means of supporting the life of the group, through the sharing of prayer. The relationship between rule and life, in which regulations are developed and lived out in relation to life, was certainly a major concept in the establishment of the Company, according to the famous conference of July 31st 1634.

B: THE ORGANISATION OF THE COMMUNITY

We now come to what the latest Constitutions call: GOVERNMENT.

Keeping in mind the influence and requirements of history (you don't govern 30-40,000 Daughters of Charity all over the world in the same way that you direct a dozen poor village girls in the rural surroundings of Paris!), I am impressed by the spontaneity, freshness and the (calculated?) naiveté of Vincent de Paul, in the way that he envisaged and established the governance of the Company.

A paragraph in Coste IX, page 7, outlined the persons who would be the major superiors of the Community: "Honour the Ladies of the Confraternity of Charity and always treat them with great respect..." This is completely logical since the first twelve Daughters of Charity on July 31st 1634 were by profession "servants of the Confraternities". But quite spontaneously, Vincent de Paul added something that is very significant: "... honour [the same term he used for the Ladies] the sick as well and always look on them as your masters."

Read and reread this text, compare the words (that Louise de Marillac carefully weighed), and I am sure you will easily recognise that from the time of your first rules, poor people were for M. Vincent your major superiors, the highest in the hierarchy of superiors. And that remains true today. It was very logical for Vincent to conclude that it was appropriate to welcome poor persons whenever they arrived or to go to them whenever they called, to stop everything for them, including leaving Mass or prayer.

The poor, then, are the real major superiors in the Company of the Daughters of Charity. All the same, there is also the need to have persons in authority over the Company as a whole, as well as authority figures at local level.

For the other superiors, nothing was solemnly set down, no doubt due to the fact that the person who was secretary was none other than Louise de Marillac. It is obvious, though, that Mademoiselle Le Gras, was the one around whom all would gather once a month. She would be "the person who has the general charge of all of you" (Coste IX, 11).

With regard to authority at local level, the distribution of responsibilities was really delightful and significant. It was done according to the following principle: “there must always be one among you who acts as the Superior. Sometimes it will be one Sister, sometimes another.” (Coste IX, 7) I especially relish these two lines, which define authority in the Company of the Daughters of Charity for the very first time.

Let us consider each of these words: “there must always be one among you...” It is necessary... it is as though this is an inevitability that Vincent de Paul is anxious to put into perspective: “there must always be one among you who acts as the Superior” “...who acts as...” Here again a lovely formula!

For Vincent de Paul, the superiors are neither captains, nor commanders, and even less are they warrant officers. They are the persons who “act as”, literally “take the place of” (“tenant lieu”). So they are lieu-tenants, and as such they are an inevitable necessity.

Monsieur Vincent will have other occasions to speak about superiors, their length of office and authority. For example, in a conference in 1644 on Responsibilities and Positions of Authority, he tells the Missioners of the Congregation of the Mission, at an appropriate moment: “Today I was saying to a Superior who was talking to me about some men to whom he was planning to entrust some responsibilities, ‘Alas, you’re going to lose them! They are souls closely united to God, and failing to work at their perfection is to lose everything.’ Mais quoi! It’s a necessary evil. What is much worse, however, is what I heard from one of the holiest men I’ve ever known (it was Cardinal de Bérulle), and what I experienced a long time ago, and it happens this way in almost every case, namely, that this state of leadership and being in charge is so evil that of itself and its nature it leaves a malignancy, a vile, cursed stain; yes, brothers, a malignancy that infects a man’s soul and all his faculties, with the result that, once out of office, he has all the trouble in the world submitting his judgment and finds fault with everything. What a pity!” (Coste XI, 125)

Coming back to the rule and the selection of the local superior: “Sometimes it will be one Sister, sometimes another.” To measure the impact, the originality and the courage of Vincent de Paul’s thinking concerning authority in the Community, let us place ourselves in the historical context, that is, a time and a country in which personal, inherited, absolute power had attained greater and greater importance, a value that predominated and imposed itself in every sense of these terms. We are just a few years away from the birth of Louis XIV, the Sun King, who would rise in 1638.

It was at this moment that Vincent de Paul thought about persons who would “act as” superiors for this young community, sometimes one, sometimes another. And he specified that they would take turns monthly: first one, then another, from one month to the next. We must admit that in the context of the kingdom of France and the Church at that time, this approach to authority seems original, doubtless well-tested and certainly provocative! It was about authority seen in terms of service, as Vatican II would define it 330 years later, and no longer authority related to precedence, dignity, domination or superiority.

And now we come to the fascinating distribution of patents, the first series of nominations of superiors in the Company of the Daughters of Charity: “So now, Sister Marie of Saint-Sauveur, you’ll be the Superior of your Sister for the whole month; Michelle, the Superior of Barbe at Saint-Nicolas; [the house where Louise de Marillac had lived] Marguerite, of her Sisters at Saint-Paul; and you, Sister, at Saint-Benoît, your Guardian Angel will be your guide.” (Coste IX, 8) The faith and humour is magnificent here, but Vincent does not specify if alternating roles will be respected for the case of the guardian angel who has the responsibility for a month, and Jeanne Lepeintre, the Sister at Saint-Benoît who could accept the responsibility the following month. “For the Hôtel-Dieu, it will be Mlle Le Gras.” And now the Company is in the state of being governed!

This page 8 of Coste Volume IX is a cause for wonder, with this passage from the Conference of July 31st 1634 setting into place the government of the community of twelve. Here we touch on the very first roots of the community organisation of the Company. What spontaneity, what freshness, what Gascon humour that knows how to take things seriously without dramatising the situation! For me, this page is the sharpest and clearest outline for reviewing life. It is a breath of fresh air for Vincentian superiors: for today and... until the end of times:

- there must always be one among you who acts as the Superior;
- Sometimes it will be one, sometimes another;
- By being obedient you will learn holy humility, and by governing through obedience you will instruct others usefully;
- So now, Sister Marie of Saint-Sauveur, you will be the Superior of your Sister Nicole for the whole month...
- and you, Sister, at Saint-Benoît, your Guardian Angel will be your guide...

How could it be that after meditating on these points and being challenged them, a superior could still feel superior to the others, when she or he is simply someone who “takes the place of,” a lieutenant?

C: THE MYSTIQUE OR CHARISM OF THE GROUP

This will be my last point. You may be thinking that I am going to make a lengthy analysis of it. In fact, each paragraph contains a mention of God, a reference to faith and a spiritual motive. The Blessed Virgin is also invoked several times. It is very important to note this Marian dimension here in the very first definition of your vocation. Unfortunately, we cannot develop all these aspects at this time. I will limit myself to an extraordinary passage which to me seems to demonstrate perfectly the greatness and special nature of your vocation and spirituality.

“Remember that when you leave meditation and Holy Mass to serve poor persons, you lose nothing, Sisters, because to serve those who are poor is to go to God, and you should see God in them. So then, be very careful to attend to all their needs, and be particularly alert to the assistance you can give them for their salvation; don’t let them die without the sacraments. You are not there simply to care for their bodies, but to help them to be saved. Above all, motivate them to make general confessions; put up with their little fits of temper, and encourage them to suffer patiently for the love of God. Never get angry with them, and don’t speak to them harshly; they have enough to put up with because of their illness. Imagine that you’re

their visible Guardian Angel, their father and mother, and do not go against their wishes except in those things that are bad for them, for in that case it would be cruelty to give them what they want. Weep with them; God has made you to be their consolers.” (Coste IX, 5)

It is striking to find such a passage in the first of Vincent de Paul’s conferences to the Daughters of Charity that has been passed down to us. At the risk of surprising you, I must say that I think there are no better words from Vincent on this subject, not even the following text: “...in serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ. How true, Sisters!” (Coste IX, 199) Obviously, this is my personal opinion, but what a treasure in those lines! Here is the best proof that Vincent de Paul had a very clear idea of the mystique or charism of the Community just eight months after the birth of the Company. Perhaps he was a bit late with regard to the plan of its foundation, but in the first regulations, and especially in the paragraph cited above, he showed once and for all that he had defined the vocation, spirituality and identity of a Daughter of Charity.

“Remember that when you leave meditation and Holy Mass to serve poor persons... ” It is all the more striking that this masterly phrase seems to appear in parenthesis at the heart of the conference. M. Vincent had just spoken about prayer and Mass in the order of the day, presenting both of them as the centre of devotion. Suddenly, he sensed the need to specify the hierarchy of values for a Daughter of Charity.

Seeing these twelve simple and available servants of the poor, he was tempted to shift the focus of their devotion, or more precisely, to deepen the meaning of it by situating it in “Jesus Christ in persons who are poor”. The expressions he used (which must have made an impression on the secretary) have particular force, most likely because of their spontaneity: “when you leave meditation and Holy Mass to serve poor persons, you lose nothing.” What audacity, it was almost heretical, especially at this time when the Eucharist has been rightly proclaimed the centre of faith and devotion in response to the question of Protestantism: “you lose nothing”. This in no way calls into question the place of the Eucharist in the faith and life of Vincent de Paul. Quite the contrary, and he explains this as well.

“You lose nothing, Sisters, because to serve those who are poor is to go to God.” There is essentially no choice to be made between these two realities or values; there is a logical connection between them both. To go from Mass to the person who is poor is a way of accompanying God in the Eucharist to the home of the poor person. A meditation can be written on this sentence: “You lose nothing, Sisters, because... ”

Another gem from this passage: “you should see God in them”. The word “see”...this expression is strong in Coste IX, page 199, where Vincent said: “you will find God there”. Here he said: “you should see”. Seeing! It is not even a question of seeking and finding something; it is about something that is obvious. To do justice to Coste IX, 199, I recall that it includes the famous exclamation: “and that is as true as that we are here.”

To see God in the person of the poor! When we reflect deeply on this thought, we understand, without the need for many questions, this somewhat disconcerting shift from the Eucharist to the poor person. A theologian could have doubts, raise

questions and introduce nuances. Vincent de Paul, however, approaches the matter easily and simply, because he knows how to see God in the person of the poor.

We could think in terms of total mysticism: that's fine! But it is just as true that real mystics do not simply hover above realities. Vincent also connected immediately with the most concrete attitudes relating to service: "So then, be very careful to attend to all their needs." See God, most certainly, but without ever taking our eyes off the poor person under the pretext of devotion or contemplation. It certainly involves a faith perspective, but one transmitted by the eyes of a servant, professionally trained in service, conscientious and meticulous: "As you see God in those who are poor, you must be very careful to attend to all their needs." (cf. Coste IX, 5)

What follows is a clarification that is so fundamental for the identity of a Daughter of Charity: "You are not there simply to care for their bodies, but to help them to be saved." We can be sure that in these few lines nothing essential has been omitted; even though this was only eight months since the foundation of the Company. Here Vincent de Paul emphasised for every Daughter of Charity the intimately connected responsibility that is hers with regard to service and evangelisation, in other words, corporal service and spiritual service.

Monsieur Vincent insisted on what he called: assistance for their salvation...He used the adverb 'particularly' "...be particularly alert to the assistance you can give them for their salvation; do not let them die without the sacraments. You are not there simply to care for their bodies, but to help them to be saved. Above all, motivate them to make general confessions." This spiritual aid, immediately focused on the sacraments and confession, might appear to be a bit hasty and also lacking in discretion by today's standards. We need to recall that this took place in Christian times and that the vast majority of people, regardless of their religious practice, considered themselves Christians. Be that as it may, Vincent de Paul insisted on the evangelising role that is proper to each Daughter of Charity. Vincent then moved spontaneously, in the same sentence without any form of transition, to the relationship between people: "put up with their little fits of temper, and encourage them to suffer patiently for the love of God. Never get angry with them, and don't speak to them harshly; they have enough to put up with because of their illness."

Perhaps a reference to the recent past can help me relate better to what Vincent de Paul means by these lines. Here again, I think we can find an essential element of the spirituality and identity of the Daughter of Charity. Notwithstanding the progress made in medicine and improved social structures, the Daughter of Charity who participates fully in these forms of progress, will always be one who bears with others' moods, encourages and never becomes angry! In short: she is someone for whom relationship is continually a priority concern; she knows that those who are poor "have enough to put up with".

These lines are truly among the richest and most complex of anything that Vincent de Paul could have said or written about the Daughters of Charity. This was July 31st 1634, eight months after the foundation of the Company, in the presence of the first twelve Daughter of Charity and Mademoiselle who gathered them together. Monsieur Vincent concluded: "Imagine that you are their visible Guardian Angel, their father and mother, and don't go against their wishes except in those things that

are bad for them, for in that case it would be cruelty to give them what they want. Weep with them; God has made you to be their consolers.”

Here we have the mystique or charism of the first twelve Daughters of Charity, which would remain the fundamental reference text for all Daughters of Charity in every time and place. Vincent was certainly aware of this, and was thinking of you, the Daughters of Charity of today, as he closed his conference: ““But, Sisters, all our resolutions are nothing without grace. That’s why we really have to ask God to give us strength and set to work courageously. Give yourself to God and to the Blessed Virgin for that intention, and ask the intercession of Saint Louis and the other saints who were so happy to serve God in the way you do.

‘Well now, Sisters, think about God’s mercy in choosing you to be the first persons for this foundation. When Solomon wanted to build God’s temple, he placed precious stones in the foundation to show the excellence of what He was trying to do. May God in His goodness grant you, the foundation stones of this Company, the grace of being eminent in virtue! For, by failing to be virtuous, you would do harm to all those who come after you, if God is pleased to bless this beginning. Just as trees bear fruit only according to their seed, those who come after you will probably not aspire to greater virtues than the ones you have practised.’

All the Sisters then declared that they wanted to follow the recommendations they had heard and to live according to the Regulations given them.

Everyone knelt down, and M. Vincent added, ‘May God in His goodness imprint upon your hearts what I, a wretched sinner, have just told you on His behalf, so that you may be able to remember it well in order to put it into practice, and that you may be true Daughters of Charity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.’ (Coste IX, 12-13)

Father Jean Morin, CM

PREPARATION

FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR

OF THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY

OF THE DEATH

OF OUR FOUNDERS

15TH MARCH 2100

27TH SEPTEMBER 2010

PREPARATION FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR OF THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY

2010!

Two anniversaries

The year **2010** will be a special year for us as Vincentians. It will mark the 350 years that have passed since our Founders departed for the Heavenly Jerusalem, Saint Louise in the spring of that year and Saint Vincent in the autumn. It will, of course, be an event that deserves to be celebrated, not just because both saints continue to live on in the institutions they founded and in the teachings that they have handed down to us, but also because both of them have made a notable contribution to the development of charity in the Church and in the world. We may recall that in 1960 Pope John XXIII declared Saint Louise to be the patroness of all social works in the Church, and that on the day of Saint Vincent's funeral, Bishop Henri Maupas du Tour said of the saint that "*he had almost completely transformed the face of the Church.*" The Bishop was obviously referring to the Samaritan face that the Church was able to reflect more clearly after Saint Vincent. All this movement of charity resulted, three centuries later, in the expression coined by the Vatican Council, "*The Church of the*

Poor.” This was later followed by the term “*preferential option for the poor*” which of course was also applied to the Church.

No doubt there will be many and varied initiatives undertaken throughout the year of the Founders; celebrations, charitable projects, conferences, articles, writings.....all aimed at helping people to know, to study more deeply and to revitalise a charism which seems more necessary than ever, given the state of our world today. I am sure that each Province will play its part and will think of specific ways of celebrating the year of the Founders. It will surely be a good occasion for renewing ourselves in the spirit of our vocation and strengthening our sense of belonging to the Company. The Founders will always be a wellspring of inspiration because their lives, their initiatives and their teachings all bear the seal of the Holy Spirit.

The “Echoes of the Company” will also contribute to our preparations for this important event for the Vincentian Family. Throughout this year, 2009, we will be publishing a series of articles on Saint Louise, Saint Vincent, and on the relationship between both of these and their collaboration. It will be a good opportunity for us to study our roots anew and more deeply. We might think of using the coming articles for a community sharing and even for celebrating the word of God. Creativity which is at the heart of the Vincentian ethos, will find appropriate ways of using the means we have at our disposal to take advantage of this opportunity that is being offered us.

This Vincentian Jubilee Year is a year of grace, of blessing, of conversion. In our days there are so many celebrations, so many invitations to take part in this or that event, that we might be given the impression that this is just one more. No. We have to distinguish between “other things” that may be interesting, good and relevant in themselves, and our own special anniversary.

The year of the Founders must be “*a special year for us as Vincentians*” and learning more about their lives will lead us to renew and confirm our choice of this vocation, a choice we made 10, 20, or 50 years ago and which we have to keep alive with all the freshness it was first made, because vocation is an act of grace which is not limited by time or age.

The Year of the Founders is also “*the year of those who are poor*” and of all the people who take their part. Saint Vincent said that the poor were “his burden and his sorrow”. These words help us to understand the fundamental orientation of his life. For the Founders who meditated often and deeply on chapter 25 of St Matthew’s gospel, Jesus Christ and those who are poor are united in the closest way. Everything is explained and oriented by this concept.

The Year of the Founders is a good opportunity to revitalise our option for the poor and also, why not, to think up new forms of service and evangelisation for these people. In our own day, we are invited to use our creativity and our imagination as Saint Vincent and Saint Louise did in their day. Prepare well for the anniversary of the Founders!

Father Javier Alvarez
Director General

PREPARATION FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR OF THE 35TH ANNIVERSARY

Saint Louise de Marillac

1591 – 1660

“It is not possible to contemplate and study the person of Saint Louise de Marillac, and not love her, because she is so great in her goodness, her suffering and in her actions”

Bishop Jean Calvet¹

Advance notice

Introduction

Is it possible in our times to know everything there is to know about Louise de Marillac? Yes and no would hardly be a satisfying answer. We would put the accent on the “Yes”, despite certain parts of her life that we really don’t know much about and which make us share Saint Louise’s pain when we read what she said in those times of difficulty.

Pope Pius XI, in the panegyric for her canonisation in 1934, urged the Company to instil in local communities an ardour like that radiated on the faces of those we love.

*“Daughters of Charity, Louise de Marillac is one of you. She is your Mother. Her glory is your glory; receive as an inheritance her charity and her motherly concern. **Hasten** to faraway mission lands and to all the places throughout the world where the sun from the East to the West illuminates your path and your footsteps along the ways trodden by heralds of Christ.*

***Come**... raise your eyes to the gaze of your Mother, **read** in her expression and hear from her lips her satisfaction and her encouragement to follow her spiritually and prove yourselves worthy of her...”*

After referring to Louise de Marillac as God’s “beloved servant”, Pope Pius XI prayed: “O Jesus, give us a spark of that fire that you set ablaze in her. Yes, my God, may this spark burn within us, so that as we abide in you, this flame of charity

¹ Rector Emeritus of the Institut Catholique, Lille

*mat shine forth, spreading abroad charity that is patient and gentle, holy and humble, comforting and strong, long-suffering and victorious.”*²

During this year of preparation for the Jubilee year of the 350th anniversary of the death of our holy Founders, our spirits, hearts and minds delve into the reality of her life that was holy in every way.

FIRST PART: A BIT OF HISTORY

Some witnesses will share their secrets. We know who they are:

- Saint Vincent and Mathurine Guerin;
- historians such as Gobillon and Abelly
- Sister Marie de Geoffre de Chabrignac who over a 17 year period laboured for the holiness of Louise de Marillac to be recognised
- Bishop Bonard who, helped Sister Marie de Geoffre’s writings, produced an extensive volume on the life of Louise de Marillac, the third edition of this work appearing in 1921, one year after the beatification of Louise de Marillac.

SECOND PART: PEOPLE WHO WROTE ABOUT SAINT LOUISE

This second part will be entitled, **“History, memory, meditation.”** During the XXth century, numerous books and theses have been written by Daughters of Charity and talks have been given at Vincentian and other courses. Themes and circumstances vary, but the purpose of these writers remains the same: to emphasise certain aspects of Saint Louise’s life so that we can better understand her virtues and put them into practice, *“the virtues that touch them especially and which they intend to imitate, with the help of God.”*³

- Sister Regnault at the Motherhouse produced the “grey book” of letters of Saint Louise and a work entitled “Louise de Marillac and her passion for poor persons”.
- Sister Margaret Flinton from the Province of Emmitsburg (USA) courageously presented in 1953 her doctoral thesis entitled “Louise de Marillac, the social aspect of her work” (edited in 1956).
- Sister Alfonsa Richartz, from the Province of Germany, “evangelised” by means of Saint Louise de Marillac a group of religious institutes taking their inspiration from Saint Vincent. All this precious inheritance will later be available to the Daughters of Charity.
- Sister Elisabeth Charpy, from the Province of France-North, has provided the Company with what can be called the “official documents”; two foundational works: Spiritual Writings and the book entitled “Documents”. We should also add other works that came from the same sap that nourished the tree.

At the Motherhouse, we cannot forget Sister Blandine Delort, who brought out of hiding the signed writings of Saint Louise and Saint Vincent, painstakingly

² Excerpt from the panegyric of Pius XI, at the time Cardinal Pacelli, in 1934, for the canonisation of Louise de Marillac (in the formulary of 1953).

³ Conference of Saint Vincent, July 3RD, 1660. Original: Archives at rue du Bac

compiled by Sister Marie de Geoffre. The Visitatrices were the first to benefit from this work.

Each of the Vincentian Sessions, organised by Sister Marie-Genevieve Roux, has allowed hundreds of Sisters at a time to benefit from a better understanding of the life and activities of Saint Louise, thanks to the various presentations given by Sister Elisabeth Charpy.

After this list, it is appropriate to mention our collaborators in the Congregation of the Mission whose writings are less well-known and not translated.

In 1921, a booklet about fifty pages long was found in the Vincentian library. It was written by Father Portal, whose sources were Gobillon, Bonard and the letters of Saint Louise de Marillac. Similarly, another book entitled “Meditations on Blessed Louise de Marillac” was written for her feast, the octave of the feast and the first Saturday of each month. The book is dated 1920, the year of her beatification, but the author is unknown.

Because of the great interest shown by the Sisters who visit the cultural patrimony of the Company, this wide range of works from can be thought of as “memory lanes”. The wealth, depth and witness of faith expressed in diverse ways in these works are to be explored and pondered once again by us today and by those who will come after us.

THIRD PART, LOUISE DE MARILLAC, FORMATOR, SPIRITUAL GUIDE AND ORGANISER

“Daughters of Charity... raise your eyes to your Mother, study her expression and hear from her lips ...” The third part will be dedicated to Louise as formator, spiritual guide and organiser, as shown in her life and in her actions, with emphasis on her life in God and with God; her attentiveness to everyday life will be stressed in a special way.

FOURTH PART; WHAT DOES LOUISE DE MARILLAC HAVE TO SAY TO US TODAY?

This final part will highlight the fact *“Our Lord formed a Company more for himself than for you and you are members of this. That is why you are called Daughters of Charity, that is to say, Daughters of God.”*⁴

St. Vincent wanted the Company to be as Mademoiselle envisaged it and in accordance with God’s designs for it from the very beginning. What message does Saint Louise have for us today?

CONCLUSION

⁴ Father Jamet – Preface to Louise de Marillac or A Passion for the Poor, yesterday and today (Ed SOS)

To conclude this advance notice, what fruits are we to gather from this life that was totally given to God and to the poor? “If you wish to reach perfection,” she said, “you must strive to die to self. My dear Sisters, what wonderful things I am saying to you in these words. Oh that I might write them in blood or bequeath them to you in letters of gold!”

Louise de Marillac has left us her spiritual testament; it remains for us to ask her for the grace of true holiness, **the holiness that she had.**

Sister Claire HERRMANN
Archives Service

*“We cannot see
our neighbour suffer
and not suffer with him;
we cannot see him weep
and not shed tears too.”*

Conference on Charity, May 30th 1659 - XII, 270