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SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO, SUPERIORESS GENERAL

**Letter of 14<sup>th</sup> March 2009**

To all Daughters of Charity

Dear Sisters,

As the feast of Saint Louise approaches, several days after the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her canonisation (March 11<sup>th</sup> 1934), I send you joyful greetings, assuring you of my union with you in heart and prayer on this occasion and offer you a quotation from our Foundress, a gem of radicality and good sense with a touch of humour:

*“If humility, simplicity and charity, which produce support, are well established among you, your little Company will be made up of as many saints as there are persons. We must not wait, however, for someone else to begin...let each of us be the very first to start.”* (Spiritual Writings, page 532, letter to Sister Cecile Agnes, January 8<sup>th</sup> 1657)

Please allow me to add a bit of Community news to this feast day message. Firstly, I would like to call to mind the visit that Sister Blanca Libia Tamayo and I made to the Provinces of Bogota (Colombia) and Ecuador in February. These are only very brief echoes of the rich and full days we spent in the company of the Sisters in these two Provinces.

The Province of Bogota celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, giving thanks for the past, seeking clear understanding of the current challenges and planning for the years to come, especially in the domain of Vincentian formation. I could see the difficulties they encounter because of the political situation and admired the courage of the Sisters who are present in areas where guerrilla activity continues. I was also able to witness the extent of the damage caused by the eruption of a volcano in Huila last November that destroyed homes and agricultural products, as well as a school belonging to our Sisters which was completely covered by lava sediment. Nothing was spared except a large statue of the Blessed Virgin.

In the Province of Ecuador, I was impressed also by the vitality and hope of our Sisters, their proximity to those living in poverty and their attention to formation of their collaborators. There as well, but in a different manner, they face a complex political situation, especially in the field of education. Several days before our arrival, their school in Riobamba, listed as a national historical landmark, was completely burned down during the night. Thanks to their creativity, and the generosity of the local population, the Sisters have managed to continue classes for their 643 primary and secondary school students in other locations.

I ask you to pray for the Provinces of Madagascar and Eritrea. The Visitatrice of Madagascar wrote to me recently, explaining that although the country has reaped the benefits of restoration made since 2002, recent political difficulties have already put an end to this progress. She added that the people in the south are struggling to obtain water and food while political battles are raging in the streets of the capital.

In Eritrea, the consequences of both the worldwide financial crisis and the current political regime are weakening the country and creating complications for our Sisters serving those who are poor. Containers of basic necessities, rice, milk and sugar will be sent to them.

May these glimpses into the lives of the Sisters in some of our Provinces strengthen our “interprovincial unity” and solidarity and inspire our prayer! Happy feasts of Saint Louise and Saint Joseph, with special wishes for the Sisters in all our Seminaries!

Devotedly and affectionately,

Sister Evelyne Franc  
*Daughter of Charity*

**Conference to the Daughters of Charity  
March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

Let me begin, Sisters, by saying that it is a day to give thanks to God, to give thanks to each and every one of you who renewed your vows. Without knowing it, the world thanks you, the Church thanks you, other religious men and women who commit themselves to following Jesus Christ thank you, the Vincentian Family thanks you, and above all the poor thank you.

There will be four focal points as I share my reflections with you today: one, the world situation; two, an ecclesial dimension; three, consecrated life; and four, the General Assembly of the Daughters of Charity 2009.

**1. The world situation**

By renewing your vows today, you affirm the goodness of God and manifest at the same time your willingness to do His will in a world wrapped up in itself, a world that is self-centred, greedy, deaf to alternative ways of acting. In other words, a world that gives to no one, listens to no one and loves no one but itself. The economic crisis in which the world finds itself is the worst in the history of humankind, say the experts. In one sense, the world itself cries out to those of good will to act, and to act in a way that can help transform the world in which we live. And by what you do today, that is, the renewal of your vows, you commit yourself to that transformation. From a faith perspective, any situation of crisis such as the world economic crisis that we are experiencing, is also a time of grace, an opportunity to

look at things anew, the opportunity to live alternative lifestyles. Certainly the vows which each of us is called to make before the Lord, help us to live that alternative lifestyle, a lifestyle often misunderstood by the world, yet precisely the lifestyle that the world itself needs.

## 2. The ecclesial dimension

A second focal point is the context of the Church and what the Church may say to you regarding this day of renewal and what you, in response, can say to the community of believers. This year we celebrate within the Church the Pauline year.

There are two dimensions of St. Paul's life that I would like to single out here. First and foremost is his own personal conversion. The scene itself as explained by Paul or those who passed on the experience of the conversion of Paul, is striking. We have Paul, proud and zealous in the name of the Lord, who persecutes followers of the New Way. But then comes the moment when he falls from his horse, he who was strong and powerful, in a position of dominance among others for his intellectual capability and "supposed" wisdom is brought to utter humility in and through that fall. He needs to be led by others. He comes to a fuller experience of the true God, but only after having emptied himself of self and allowing himself to be led by others. It is then that his eyes are opened and he can see the truth of the message of Jesus and the clear way of adhering to the Will of God, the heavenly Father.

In a similar way we can understand the vows that you pronounce before the Lord on a yearly basis, as a way of helping stay off your high horses, as a way of allowing you to be led by others, and therefore a way of helping you to have your eyes opened to see clearly the Will of the Lord. Poverty is that gift that enables you to empty yourselves of self as did Paul's fall from the horse. Obedience is that gift that allows you to be led by others as was Paul in his blindness. And chastity is that gift that fills you with the healing power of God enabling you to see clearly God's will in your lives.

The second aspect of St. Paul is in relation to his mission. His mission was to be spiritual animator of the Christian communities, helping them to maintain their unity in Christ, practise love one for another and serve particularly those most in need. One of the places that Paul most eloquently speaks, animating the Christian community towards its fuller union with Christ and their brothers and sisters, is in his letter to the Colossians. 3: 12-17.

*"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."*

This text of St. Paul presents the characteristics of the “new person” and Christ himself encourages us in and through the words of St. Paul to set our minds on things above and not on things of the earth. The vows that you pronounce are the particular means that help you to fulfil this command of the Lord. The vows help you to die to yourselves hiding your life with Christ in God. (Col. 3:3) Each of the vows helps us to put off the old and put on the new.

### 3. Consecrated life

The next focal point is consecrated life and what it says to you this day as you renew your vows, and how you can fulfil your vocation as members of a Society of Apostolic Life among other religious men and women who commit themselves to following Jesus. The Congregation of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, headed by our own Cardinal Frank Rodé, has gifted us with the document, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, an Instruction which has been eloquently reflected on by Father Javier in the *Echoes of the Company*, September-October 2008. It is a well-written document which speaks in depth about the relationship between authority and obedience. True authority understood from a gospel context has to be seen in terms of service: service to others as Jesus humbly shows us on the night in which He gathered with His disciples to share with them in community His last meal. Jesus gives the humble example of the washing of feet and immediately after this he shows the extent of His obedience to the Father: ... obedience unto death.

The document speaks of obedience as being a way of listening, listening with the utmost intensity in order to hear the voice of God as God speaks to you in His Word that is written or in His Word that is proclaimed through the daily events of human life. That listening or obedience takes place in the context of community; I quote, “*Listening means accepting the other unconditionally, giving her space in one’s own heart. This conveys affection and understanding, declares that the other is appreciated, and that her presence and opinion are taken into consideration.*” (Instruction, 20.)

In addition to listening to the Father in and through the community, the Instruction develops how obedience is important in relation to the mission. It says, and I quote, “*One is in mission when, far from seeking one’s own affirmation, one is, in the first place, led by the desire to accomplish the will of God.*” (p. 39) Obedience to the mission helps to avoid any striving for just one’s own fulfilment. The Constitutions support the idea that the Daughters of Charity are called to seek community and live it “in and for the mission.”

In order to listen wholeheartedly to God in the different contexts where He is present, one needs to free one’s life from all that clutters, occupies or distracts from listening attentively. The vow of poverty achieves this objective and works hand in hand with obedience. Once freed from all that clutters, leaving ourselves empty, our hearts are ready to love more deeply with a love that comes from God. The pureness of love given freely to others is made possible in and through chastity. Chaste love takes us out of ourselves and into relationship with others; and for the Daughters of Charity the relationship *par excellence* is with the poor, in the service that you unconditionally give to them.

Service freely given to the poor in this manner helps one to come to know and love more deeply Christ present in those who suffer. In knowing Christ we more easily imitate Him and exercise in our own lives the authority He Himself exercised.

#### 4. The 2009 General Assembly

Your 2009 General Assembly has as its theme, “Prophets of Hope, Now and Everywhere.” In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is recognised as a great prophet. He was one who astonished the crowds by His teachings for He taught them as one having authority. As we examine the gospels, it is clear that Jesus’ authority and his credibility among the people, becomes evident because of the close relationship between what He says and what He does, unlike the scribes of his day. Your General Assembly calls you to be prophets, prophets of hope in our world today, and to have credibility in your prophetic stance as a community, particularly by the witness you give to being with the poor and giving yourselves to them in loving service.

As I have stated in other places, I believe that the prophetic dimension that you are called to follow through on, especially in and through the General Assembly, is a collective prophecy, in other words, together giving witness to alternative ways of life. Constitution 27 says that *“in order to serve Christ in the persons who are poor, the Daughters of Charity commit themselves to live their baptismal consecration through the practice of evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience which receive from this service their specific character.”* As you have heard in many other places, your vows are different from the vows of other religious men and women in that they are oriented, guided and lived out in the context of service of the poor.

It is in the quality of your service that you can be prophetic. At the beginning of this conference I referred to the fact that the world thanks you even though it is not aware of it, even if it doesn’t understand the alternative lives that you live as Daughters of Charity, And this is where the vows help you to be prophetic.

According to the world’s standards the value of a person’s life is determined by what they have. Your vow of poverty says no to that and yes to giving yourself out of love for God

The world says that you will find fulfilment in doing what you yourself wish to do. Your vow of obedience says that you will find fulfilment in doing the works of God, doing his will and not your own.

The Daughters of Charity give prophetic witness by their vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and service of the poor. At the same time these vows help you to be faithful in your commitment to the poor, to be in solidarity with them, in your love of them and in your faithfulness in serving them.

Let this renovation day be one of new life in loving and generous service of the poor, as true sisters in community. May God give you the grace to put into practice what you have renewed today, throughout each and every day of this new year.

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

FATHER J ALVAREZ, DIRECTOR GENERAL

Motherhouse , 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2009

Renovation retreat

**The Vincentian mystique**

In this pre-Renovation retreat of 2009, I would like you to think about one of the most characteristic features of Vincentian spirituality. We are part of a spiritual tradition that was started by Saint Vincent and which has come down to us under the name of “Vincentian spirituality.” There can be no doubt that one of his most original contributions to the Church was the way he integrated these two seemingly opposite concepts, “action” and “contemplation”, or to put it another way, “contemplation” and “mission.”. We will also be speaking of a “Vincentian mystique”. These are all different ways of referring to the same thing.

*“Ten times a day a sister will go to visit the sick and ten times a day she will find God in them.”* (Coste IX p.252; cf. X p.332; X p.679-680; Ix p.5-6;XI p.33) It seems to me that this highly descriptive and significant sentence expresses very well what we now call “the Vincentian mystique.” For Saint Vincent, then, it is not only possible but it is necessary for the Daughters of Charity to discover and meet God, not only during times of prayer or when they go to Mass, but also in service, in life, in activity, in those who are poor and the people they serve. This integral spirituality is of course, the fruit of personal experience since Vincent was no office theologian but a practical man who had both feet firmly on the ground and was in the habit of reflecting on his personal experiences.

I think that Jean Arnouilh’s film *“Monsieur Vincent”* brings us close to Saint Vincent’s experience of poor people, an experience which led him to repeat so strongly and with such conviction the sentence we quoted earlier. At one point in the film, the camera focuses for quite a while on Saint Vincent’s eyes and this shot fills the whole screen. His glance is fixed, unmoving, not centred on anything specific. His hands are folded. All this leads us to think that he is absorbed in his thoughts or some spiritual experience. Suddenly his lips start to move softly and we strain to hear him say: *“Forgive me, Lord, I didn’t know, I didn’t know.”* These words are not a mystery for us. We know only too well that Saint Vincent had just made a marvellous discovery which would transform his whole life, He now understood very clearly and in great depth those words from Chapter 5 of St Matthew, *“Whenever you did it to the least of my little ones, you did it to me.”* Saint Vincent, of course, was familiar with this text and had often meditated on it but now it was a moment of special enlightenment and he understood its meaning in a totally different sense and in greater

depth. We, too, must have had a similar experience; a passage from the gospel or one of the psalms that we have read many times, is suddenly filled with meaning, and without our knowing why, we begin to understand it at a much deeper level. Something like this must have happened to Saint Vincent with regard to chapter 25 of St. Matthew. It was like a ray of light suddenly descending on him so that he began to see life in a very different way. If Christ identified himself with the poor it followed that in serving these people and working with them, one could find God. This was the conclusion Saint Vincent came to and this simple discovery led him to introduce into the Church a form of spirituality that brought together action and prayer. This idea is perfectly summed up in the words we quoted at the beginning: *“Ten times a day a sister will go to visit the sick and ten times a day she will find God in them.”*

Why is this “Vincentian mystique” so important for serving the poor and consequently becoming prophets in the world we have to live in? The reason is that it is difficult to understand the concept of service of the needy and live it out except from the angle of faith and seeing the poor person as a sacramental sign. This conviction is essential in a horizontal society where the thing that really counts is efficiency. If a Daughter of Charity does not live and act from the conviction that Christ is to be found in the person of those who are poor, she runs the certain risk of becoming simply a voluntary worker; her gospel and Vincentian way of living will lose their meaning and will no longer be a prophetic force. That is why Saint Vincent insisted so strongly on a formula that all Daughters of Charity know by heart and which is one of the keys to understanding their identity: we must *“give ourselves to God in order to love Our Lord and serve him in the person of the poor.”* (Coste IX p.592) All the conferences of the Founder are full of similar recommendations, statements and repeated advice. The Constitutions have captured very well this Vincentian spirituality using terms that are more modern but an authentic response to Saint Vincent’s masterly intuition. For example, article 21b tells the Daughters of Charity that *“when the urgent needs of their neighbour require it, they should know how to leave God contemplated in prayer in order to find God in persons who are poor.”*

It is right that we insist on this mystique of service, this contemplation in action, because experience tells us that if these convictions and motivations about the poor and about service are not diligently fostered, Daughters of Charity can end up losing the sense of their vocation. When there is only service and no mystique some Sisters can come to the conclusion that they could do the work they are doing without belonging to the Company. On the other hand, there are Sisters who can become immersed in unbridled activism or a professionalism which can gradually erode other aspects of their vocation.

## **VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY: A UNIFYING SPIRITUALITY**

Vincentian spirituality is a unifying force: it goes beyond the dichotomy of “sacred spaces”- “profane spaces” to bring us to the conclusion that God is to be found in both. It is true that the chapel is a place where we find and adore God through the sacraments, his Word, the Community that gathers together in his name and in prayer, but God is also found and consequently manifests himself in the world, among the people we serve, the people we live with, in the different local and global situations and events that make up our lives. This integrated spirituality is logical if



we remember that God created everything that exists in the world and that his Providence is the window through which he follows everything that takes place here below.

There can be no great separation between the chapel and the world. These are, of course, very different places but both are necessary for a Daughter of Charity in the sense that one has to lead to the other. That is the unity that Saint Vincent is inviting us to live out: our encounter with God in the chapel through personal or communal prayer or through the sacraments, must be transformed into energy for serving the poor. That is why Saint Vincent constantly recommended the Missionaries and the Daughters of Charity to end their meditation by making specific resolutions. Prayer must lead us to life, otherwise this encounter with God will just be on a superficial level. On the other hand, everything we have experienced in our ministry and in community; the difficulties, joys, concerns, different situations, people...all these are part of our prayer. Our joys and successes lead us to thank God, our problems and difficulties bring us to ask for his guidance and his strength, the things that cause us concern are enlightened by his Word and this helps us to discern God's will. We should not leave at the chapel door what we have experienced in our work so as not to interfere with our conversation with God. So those who are poor, our ministry and our community life have their place in the chapel. But be careful, this has to be a dialogue not a monologue and it must not be a quiet time for planning our day without reference to God.

An integrated spirituality makes us understand that there are not two separate experiences of God but just one that takes place in two situations. For example, Moses discovered God in the burning bush (cf. Ex 3, 1-14), and he also found him when he was leading the People to the Promised Land. He would never forget the burning bush but the people with their needs and their demands, and even their sins, would continually bring him back to God. For Moses, the bush and the people would both be an occasion for encountering God. For Saint Vincent the same could be said about the chapel and the poor, something he expressed in that well-known phrase, "leaving God for God." So there are two forms of contemplation; contemplation in prayer and contemplation in action. Let us think about this second way of encountering God.

## **DIFFICULTIES WHICH PREVENT US FINDING GOD IN OUR LIVES**

There are many reasons why we may find it difficult to encounter God in our service of the poor. I think, however, that most of these difficulties come from

### **THE CONTEXT IN WHICH WE LIVE AND WORK**

The post-modern era has caused us to have a great mistrust of anything that cannot be quantified, measured or judged to be tangible. Faith is one of these realities that have been called into question. The most obvious consequence of this has been a weakening of faith which takes different forms: unbelief, indifference, agnosticism. In our day "the social eclipse of God" casts its shadow over personal convictions, and the superficiality that is prevalent today easily turns people's attention to things that are not transcendent. For example, it is relatively easy today to let oneself be influenced by gossip about celebrities or to get hooked on television serials which

present a chapter in the story each day so that television audiences become addicted to them. All this leads to superficiality and even to manipulation.

Moreover, technology which is so much part of our developed societies, leads to the emergence of a new and utilitarian mentality which only values things for their usefulness. This new mentality ends up reducing to a considerable extent, the human person's capacity for contemplation. By capacity for contemplation we mean the human being's ability to go beyond what is merely useful and to question the meaning of some situations. Looking at a computer, or a modern car, for example, nobody today would even think of thanking God for the intelligence He has given to people which has allowed them to make such wonderful progress. Similarly, nobody would think of admiring human intelligence when this is used for the good of others. Today, people are more concerned about knowing how things function, how they can be used, how much they cost. This functional mentality is all-pervasive. It is true that things are made for a purpose but they also have a value in themselves; present day culture does not consider this and is only concerned with their usefulness. Every change in outlook, influences us and yet we are meant to be contemplatives in action. This new way of thinking can even influence us by leading us into activism which prevents us stopping to think why and for whom we are doing what we do.

### **OUR INNER LIFE**

Consecrated persons who have chosen to follow Christ in a radical and total way can still discover in themselves some atheistic areas which prevent them from taking seriously the ineffable presence of God in their lives and in the events that punctuate their existence. Some years ago a book entitled "*The Atheism of Religious*" was published and it caused scandal in Church circles. Obviously, this book was not saying that religious are atheists but it did say that there could be areas in the lives of religious where the Gospel hasn't yet penetrated. The more a person has parts of their life that could be termed atheistic, the more difficult will it be for him or her to see God in their personal life as well as in life in general. We can have a theoretical faith based on good formation and yet be unable to shed light on, or reply to, important everyday issues. It is in daily life that a person's faith can be measured, and particularly in the face of difficult circumstances. We can find these situations distressing but people who have faith will never lose their peace of heart, they will never let themselves be overcome by fear because they are very much aware of what their faith is based on: "*Some trust in chariots or horses, but we in the name of the Lord our God.*" Ps. 19. "*In the Lord I have taken refuge. How can you say, 'Fly like a bird to the mountain'*" (Ps 10).

Of course, if we do not realise that God manifests himself through his providence in the world he created, then we will find it hard to detect God's presence in specific people and situations.

### **THREE VERBS THAT LEAD US TO THE VINCENTIAN MYSTIQUE**

The contemplation we have been talking about has nothing to do with states of ecstasy or other more or less extraordinary manifestations that some privileged souls may experience during prayer. The contemplative in action, in service and in mission, is not someone who does extraordinary things or who is endowed with superhuman

qualities, no... Such persons carry out their mission (whatever this may be) in a very simple way, in the clear knowledge that they are doing God's will. They are able to see in the people they serve or with whom they work, a reflection of God's image even if sometimes the way these people act make it difficult to see God in them. In unexpected circumstances they say to God, "*Lord, what should I do? Tell me how I should do it*". When a Daughter of Charity lives out her service at a deep level she becomes an active contemplative. I think this is what Saint Vincent had in mind when he often told the first Sisters that they should find God in the poor people they served. I will now suggest three verbs which can make the service of the poor a genuine encounter with God.

### 1. SEEING

"Looking at" is not the same as "seeing." For example, we look at a shop window, a landscape or the time on our watch, but we see a person, we see a situation that causes us concern, a book or a film that holds our interest. Seeing is at a deeper level than just looking at. "Seeing" often means understanding a situation. In the Vincentian mystique, seeing means going beyond appearances and what our senses tell us. It means, for example, being able to see in the dirty and neglected face of some person, something more than the disagreeable physical appearance before our eyes; it can also mean recognising God's joy in a group of people who live together in friendship. If we cannot make this leap of faith we will not be able to grasp in depth the true meaning of things or situations even if we are offered very specific scientific, psychological or social explanations for them. Created realities are "theophanies", "theological places" in which God dwells. If a person does not reach this state then there is no contemplation.

To be able to grasp this theological interpretation of things and situations the heart needs to be involved. In the letter to the Ephesians (1, 18) St. Paul prays, "*May the God of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, ...open your hearts to receive His light*", so that you may see beyond what your senses tell you. In Saint-Exupery's book the fox reminds the little prince that "*it is only with the heart that we are able to see things properly; the essential nature of things is hidden from the eye.*" In the Gospel we see that Jesus was able to go beyond appearances so that when he speaks of the lilies of the field or the birds of the air his thoughts turn to the one who clothes the flowers and provides food for the birds (cf. Lk 12, 25-28; Mt 6, 26-27). In the case of the man with the paralysed arm, Jesus thinks of his Father who wants this man and all sufferers to be delivered from pain (cf. Mt 12, 9-14; Mk 3, 1-6). His contact with the poor and the marginalised leads him to discover a loving God who comes to the defence of his beloved children ( cf. Mk 2, 13-17; Mt 5, 17-26; 7, 2-17). Hanging on the cross, he feels that God is silent and yet he finds God in the depths of that silence. (cf. Mk 15, 1-47). And to remove all possible doubt, he does not hesitate to reproach the Pharisees for their obstinacy and their blindness in not being willing to discover God's will (cf. Mt 16, 1.ff.) "*Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the face of the earth and the sky. How is it you do not know how to interpret these times?*" ( Lk 12, 56)

So we can see that for Jesus, the world was no obstacle to his contemplation of God, rather was it the place where he listened to his Father's saving will. His personal spiritual journey did not consist in avoiding the noisy world in order to better

contemplate God. On the contrary, he immersed himself in this world to contemplate and love his Father from within it. That is exactly what Saint Vincent did. (cf. J.A.GARCIA, *En el mundo desde Dios*, Ed. Sal Terrae, Santander 1989, 107-120).

### **ADORING**

When a Daughter of Charity asks herself why she is serving those who are poor and who are the real beneficiaries of this service, the answer, in one way or another, has to be God. The first sentiment that should arise in the heart of a Daughter of Charity who lives out this encounter has to be that of adoration. *“Take off your sandals because the ground you are standing on is holy!”* (Ex 3, 5), God said to Moses tending his sheep on Mount Horeb. The Constitutions say the same thing when they speak of serving those who are poor with “devotion” (cf. C10 b). It is the sentiment which arises spontaneously when we find ourselves with the Lord. These words of the Constitution have a deep significance because, if this attitude is lacking, every encounter with God risks becoming something routine and service simply a social task. It is more difficult to explain how this encounter should be lived out in the service of the poor; should one have a visibly humble attitude in this service or should one be filled with the confident assurance of someone who has been sent by God? Perhaps the four words in the Constitutions which complete the expression “with devotion” can in some way describe this devoted service: it is to be carried out with compassion, gentleness, cordiality and respect (cf. C 10 b). We should all meditate carefully and attentively on each of these words because, together with an awareness of the Lord’s presence, these four dispositions unfailingly lead us to this attitude of adoration or devotion.

This encounter with God gives rise to joy, trust, unconditional dedication and happiness. This is a way of saying that a Daughter of Charity who lives out her service (whatever form this may take), in the knowledge that she is doing God’s will, will probably have these feelings. There is good reason to say this because it would seem impossible to be in contact with the One whose image we are made in through his love, without this arousing in us sentiments of gratitude, joy, trust and the desire to consecrate our lives to him. Something like this must surely have happened to Paul when in the midst of persecutions, floggings and mortal dangers he dared to ask, *“With God on our side who can be against us?.....For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel.....nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God.”* (Rm 8, 31-39). He made this strong recommendation to the Philippians, *“I want you to be happy in the Lord; I repeat, what I want is your happiness.”* (Ph 4, 4).

That is why if in our service (whatever form this may take), we are not living with great joy trust and happiness, then we should think about the way we are offering this service and finding God in it, because it may be that the foundations of our vocation have become weakened.

### **SERVING**

God always acts something like a trampoline: the person who finds Him, feels by this very fact, invited to work for his Kingdom. This “Kingdom of God” can be the source of such joy that it leads the person to sell every thing in order to possess it,

as we read in the Gospel (Mt 13). What do we mean by this? That service when it is done well and not in just a professional but a Vincentian way, calls for more and more commitment and this means the service is gradually improved. The reason for this is not hard to see: in service we discover the God who has a passionate love for those who are poor and excluded; this discovery strongly encourages the Daughter of Charity to continue to do what God is asking of her, because it is this that gives meaning to her life. The more she gives herself in service, the more she discovers God; the more she discovers God, the more strength she is given to serve the poor. This is the essential difference between a professional woman and a Daughter of Charity. This professional woman can do the same work and be just as efficient, or even more so, than a Daughter of Charity but her motivation is different. The professional person may be motivated by financial considerations and/or just the feeling of being useful. The Daughter of Charity is motivated by a desire to do God's will and this makes her life much more worthwhile. We read in chapter II of the Constitutions these words, "*Given to God ...For the service of Christ in persons who are poor.*" Needless to say, this motivation does not preclude the human satisfaction that every Daughter of Charity can experience in her work but the essential motivation of her life can be nothing other than Jesus Christ.

### **SOME MEANS OF ARRIVING AT VINCENTIAN CONTEMPLATION**

\*The first way of doing this is set out in Statute 4 which asks the Daughters of Charity to look back on their life, (at a time set out in the Community Plan) in order to discover the action of the Holy Spirit working in them so as to thank God and also to check whether they are being faithful. This Statute is new. It was reworded to be in line with what Constitution 83 had to say about the general and particular examen which focused more on checking one's conduct. The present Constitutions take a different perspective; it is now a matter of seeing oneself as a gift from God, as someone created in God's image and who is continually being called to live under the influence of his Spirit of love. This is a much more profound perspective than one that concentrates on the works, on attitudes and behaviour. This exercise of contemplation that Statute 4 is calling us to, most certainly creates trust, joy, hope and the certainty that leads us to say as Saint Paul did, "*I know in whom I have put my trust.*" Seeing ourselves through God's eyes allows us to view life, service and the poor through God's eyes. It is not always easy to live in this way because not all events are happy ones and we can also find ourselves being led into excessive consumerism and competitiveness.

It is also important to pray against the background of our personal history which is part of life; we can do this by reflecting on fidelity. Of course, fidelity does not refer simply to our personal fidelity (we are often lacking in fidelity): God's fidelity to us is more important than our fidelity to him. Our faithfulness to God is based on his faithfulness to us. When we look back over our past we can see that God was there at every moment of our lives, inviting us to be joyful, to be happy and rejoice in difficult and hard times, encouraging us to trust him. We can also make our future the subject of contemplation and adoration in the Lord's presence. Sometimes the future may make us fearful, sometimes it can inspire hope, often it challenges us. To pray about the future means offering it to God and remembering always that we are called to live this future (whatever it may hold), not on our own but in company with Him. The

*Canticle of Creation* by Saint Francis of Assisi is a good example of someone who could see his life, and life in general, through the eyes of God.

The Statute we are referring to here asks the Daughters of Charity to “review their life and verify their fidelity”. This is another prayer exercise that can help us to contemplate God in the midst of our life and the world. It is possible to pray with our own personal history which is part of life, and we can do this by reflecting on fidelity. Obviously, we are not referring here to our personal fidelity (very often we are not faithful) but to another and more profound fidelity, that of God which is much more important than our own. We can even see that our fidelity to God is based on God’s fidelity to us. When we look back on our past we can see that God was always there at every moment of our lives, inviting us to be joyful, to be happy and to rejoice in difficult and hard times, to encourage us to trust in him. It is in thinking of God’s fidelity that we can reflect on our faithfulness to God.

We can also pray about our future. Sometimes the future may make us fearful, sometimes it can inspire hope, nearly always it gives rise to uncertainty. To pray about the future means presenting it to God and to remember always that we are called to live this future (whatever it may hold) not on our own but with Him. The *Canticle of Creation* by St. Francis of Assisi is a good example of someone who could contemplate his life, and life in general, from the aspect of God.

\* The second way of coming to this Vincentian form of contemplation is something that I notice in the life of St. Vincent after his conversion. We know how deeply distressed and concerned Saint Vincent was about the poverty and suffering of marginalised people of his day and at the same time he felt strongly impelled to struggle to improve the lot of those who suffered. We see this in the following texts: “*The poor people who don’t know where to go or what to do are suffering, and their numbers increase daily, they are my burden and my sorrow.*” And we have another text written at the time of the Fronde religious wars of 1655, “*The famine is so severe that we see people scrabbling in the soil to find something to eat, eating grass, stripping the bark off trees, tearing up their rags to devour the fragments. But what we would not dare to say unless we had seen it with our own eyes and were filled with horror, is that people were eating their arms and hands and dying in despair.*” (Coste XI p.300) Here is yet another text, written in a different tone, but which reflects God’s solicitude, “*God loves the poor, consequently He loves those who love the poor, for, when we truly love someone, we have an affection for his friends and for his servants.*”” (Coste XI p. 392). Saint Vincent not only feels God’s pain in these desperate situations that bring suffering and degradation to people but he also hears God calling him to fight against poverty and he has understood God’s pleasure and approval when someone cares for His beloved poor’

It is possible to contemplate God in the midst of the world and specifically in the service of those who are poor. God suffers in all the painful situations of abuse, ill treatment, disdain, violence of every sort that we learn about through the news bulletins on television, radio, or the press and He condemns them but He loves and rejoices at the sight of all actions carried out in love and a spirit of service that is life-giving. So in every situation, when faced with some event or dealing with all sorts of people, the Daughter of Charity should be in the habit of asking herself what God is

wanting to say to her and what should be her response. This was the way that Saint Vincent practised discernment and we can do the same.

\* The third way of coming to Vincentian contemplation is through encountering God by offering good service. When a Daughter of Charity works and serves others in a Vincentian way (we are not speaking here of a merely professional service) she will find God in her work whatever this work may be. This encounter with God will always be of benefit to her even if she finds difficulties in the work. This is how we should interpret Constitution 16b. It suggests that service given in a Vincentian spirit is more nourishing than fatiguing for the person. The reason for this is obvious; service nurtures the person because it brings about an encounter with God. I am convinced that the Sister who habitually and spontaneously makes God the first objective of her service is much less stressed and for that reason her service is a source of joy and confidence.

This is the path of Vincentian mysticism; contemplation in action. It is not something that just happens of itself, it has to be prepared for by deep and intense prayer. If this prayer is not truly interior, it will not lead to prophecy; it is not a question of the length of time we devote to prayer but how intense that prayer is. Even long periods of prayer, if this is on a superficial level, will not bring us to experience God, transform our hearts or lead us to find God in our lives. True prayer that comes from the heart always transforms us; in other words, God always ends up taking us over completely; our mind, our heart, our hands. Our mind takes on the values and criteria of the gospel which are opposed to the maxims of the world. Our heart expands to love to a greater degree God, the poor and our Sisters. All our deepest emotions are oriented more and more towards Jesus Christ. Our hands reveal in a specific way the love that we show through our works of service and evangelisation.

This is expressed very well in article 21 of the Constitutions.....Daily prayer is a crucial time in the day of the Daughters of Charity ; they cannot persevere if they do not pray.....there have to be times of silence..... In her daily prayer the Daughter of Charity etches the image of Jesus Christ on her heart, on her mind and on the retina of her eyes so that she will recognise him later and contemplate him in the work entrusted to her. Prayer and service are two different but interrelated activities that allow us to contemplate the face of Christ.

Father Javier ALVAREZ  
*Director General*

### TODAY'S CHALLENGES

Province of Austria

**We need to build bridges,  
not walls**

*“Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows; for very often many acts of love of God, of devotion, and of other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect if they don't translate into the practice of effective love.... We have to be very careful about that; for there are many who, recollected exteriorly, and filled with lofty sentiments of God interiorly, stop at that, and when it comes to the point of doing something, and they have the opportunity to act, they come up short. .... No, no, let's not fool ourselves: Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit. (All our work consists in action.)” (SV XI, 32-33)*

In 1948, the Daughters of Charity in our Province opened a kindergarten in Graz under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin. Here the Sisters look after about a hundred children.

In May 1966, the kindergarten was renovated to meet new governmental regulations and the children were regrouped into four classes.

Seventeen years later, the Sisters opened another classroom which was specially designed to cater for 15 children with disabilities.

In recent years, changes in society have led the Sisters to admit more and more children coming from various countries. As a result, the Sisters face new pedagogical and social challenges.

At present we have 125 children of 34 different nationalities who are divided into five classes. 80% of the children have a language other than German as their first language.

This situation poses various problems:

- On the one hand, there are large numbers of migrants of different types. (For example, parents who have left their countries in desperate circumstances due to war or persecution; families who have fled poverty in order to offer their children a brighter future and who are waiting for work permits.) This waiting period and an uncertain future cause many of them to suffer depression and this in turn makes communication difficult. During this time of waiting and uncertainty many asylum seekers do not see the need to learn the German language.

- On the other hand, the families who are German-speaking become worried and wonder if their children are receiving quality education or if the “foreigners” are receiving preferential treatment. We are continually faced with these kinds of questions and we must give a satisfactory response.

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Is it really that easy to speak about one world? When languages and education systems are all so different.

We find ourselves caught up in this conflict situation.  
How then can we address this challenge in our everyday life?



We think that it is only possible to integrate in a meaningful way  
**When the foreigner is not seen as a threat but as an asset.**

The children's integration into the daily life of kindergarten is made easier by the commitment shown by personnel who have foreign and intercultural backgrounds. Awareness of the children's maternal language helps provide a certain sense of familiarity for them in this new environment. We take into account the different cultures of the children in a variety of areas such as culture, food, customs, human relationships and recreational activities. Our goal is to awaken an interest in differences. It is essential to work with our collaborators from other countries in order to achieve this. They incorporate songs, games and dances from different countries into the daily activities planned for all the children. The children who speak German learn songs in Russian or Turkish, and this sparks their interest in other languages. Frequently, when they are playing games, the children ask: "How do you say 'car'? How do you count to ten in your language?" The children's spontaneity shows us how we can build bridges.

**When we show respect for people who have ideas that are different from ours**

Tolerance must be a pre-existing condition in order for people of different mentalities, religions or nationalities to be able to come together in positive ways. When ethical, religious or cultural issues are involved, people can become particularly sensitive in their reactions because this touches on the roots of their identity. First of all, it is important to overcome a fear of the unknown, to nurture trust, to go from *me* to *you*, to no longer *take sides* but be *together*. Maybe families find this challenge too much for them. In addition to our work of education, our mission in the kindergarten is also to give support to our children's families.

An area that is particularly sensitive is that of religion and religious feasts. The co-existence of different religions presents the following challenge: is it possible to do something together? Cardinal Konig said: "*When I was young, my only knowledge of other religions was through books. Now our various partners in interreligious dialogue are our neighbours and colleagues. We need to ask ourselves what it means to be Catholic among so many other forms of religion. This will be one of the major questions for the third millennium.*"

Involved as we are in a Catholic establishment, we consider respect and good inter-religious relationships to be of the utmost importance. We offer the children access to the world of Christian faith by familiarising them with Jesus through stories of his life and God's love for all people. We celebrate Christian feasts and traditions while at the same time recognising what is of value in the feasts and celebrations of other religions. We visit different places of worship. It is important that each one be firmly rooted in his or her own religion, for this is the only way to live one's faith and be open to the beliefs of others.

Language learning plays an important role in fostering mutual understanding and esteem. It is important that the children who are not of German origin master their native language, an essential foundation for learning other languages, in our case, German. For this reason, we encourage the parents to use their native language with their children. Nevertheless, we offer the parents courses in German that are

taught in an entertaining way, to help them communicate with other parents. On the other hand, when communicating information or having meetings with the parents, we seek the help of interpreters. Some of the parents whose children have attended our kindergarten volunteer to be interpreters for us. For many of them, this is a way of showing their appreciation for what we have done for their children.

Our ministry helps us to promote a culture of peace and to witness to the children and their parents: “even if we are different, we are all valued and loved by God.”

By way of conclusion, here is a poem by Derya Tunc:

*You say: “this isn’t my country” and I wonder: “where is my homeland?”  
 You think I don’t speak German well but what language do you speak well?  
 You always grumble about us but do you know us very well?  
 You think that we want your homes and your jobs but all we want is to live in  
 peace.  
 You think...You all think...  
 Why can’t we think the same way?  
 Why can’t we just live together in peace?*

Sister Roswitha BAUER  
*Daughter of Charity*

### TODAY’S CHALLENGES

Province of Sardinia (Italy)

## **Serving people caught up in one form of twenty-first century slavery**

### **Human trafficking**

As we begin this third millennium, our society must be made aware of the terrible social scourge that still exists in our world: the “trafficking” of human persons, a new form of slavery that disregards all human rights. It is a situation of violence, intimidation, domination and abuse of individuals. Beyond the limits of time and space, this atrocity savagely reduces human beings to the status of objects, something to be used. Women are transformed into nothing more than an object to be made use of for other people’s pleasure. They provide a source of income for criminal associations and a means of satisfying the demands of selfish clients. Deprived of

their dignity, they are the victims of trade. The trafficking of human persons is an “industry” that destroys its victims physically and emotionally

Having hoped for a better future for themselves and their families, these women, victims of prostitution, instead find themselves deprived of all their fundamental rights: stripped of their dignity, as well as their identity and their femininity, deprived of their right to life, safety and happiness. Forced to endure degrading, exhausting and dangerous work conditions, they have no legal protection and are reduced, by threats and abuse, to a state of total dependence on unscrupulous criminals.

### **The Daughters of Charity in Sardinia in the service of these victimised women**

These young women who arrive in the shelter programs run by the Sisters show many signs of physical and psychological destabilisation. Their self-defence mechanism takes the form of arrogance or extreme anger and this shows how vulnerable they are. This is all accompanied by feelings of guilt, shame and humiliation at what they have experienced. Their loneliness and sense of abandonment remains with them a long time and as a result they continue to feel enslaved and marginalised. At first, due to their lack of self-esteem, they seem very apathetic and unmotivated, showing no interest in anything. Some are even at the point of self-loathing and have suicidal tendencies. This year, one of the young women with us attempted suicide on three occasions

Feeling guilty and judged by the world around them, they have a great need to sense their own value, but cannot manage to regain their self-confidence or to trust others. With their identity destroyed, they have lost the sense of their own dignity as well as their ability to respect even the most basic rules of living with others. The reconstruction of their identity is a very slow process. It takes a great deal of time for them to be able to re-integrate on social, professional, cultural and spiritual levels. Our mission is to accompany them in order to help them rebuild their lives and form constructive relationships with others, especially with their family, and we try to help them re-integrate into the world of work. Once they rediscover their place in society, they can establish their legal status and obtain the documents necessary to find housing or perhaps return to their country of origin.

### **Projects established by the Province: A Three-Stage Shelter Programme for women who have been trafficked**

#### **1. In Nulvi: the Passage House (“de fuga”)**

This is the first in the series of shelters for young women who are fleeing their “workplace”. Here they receive immediate support to find stability, receive the care they need and do the necessary paperwork for the police.

How do they get to us? With the help of **teams working on the streets**. In Cagliari, Sassari and Olbia, these teams working on the streets provide an initial contact with the young women in prostitution.

Lay collaborators, under police protection, meet these women at night, in the places where they gather, half-dressed and numb with cold, waiting for their customers. These teams offer them personal human contact, present various solutions to their problems and give them the address of the Passage House where the Sisters are there to welcome them.

These young women who have experienced so much humiliation and frustration are in need of inner healing that comes through understanding and pity. The teams on the streets do not judge or condemn them, but rather accept them as they are and strive to ease their suffering and restore their trust and hope. In this painful world of “trafficking,” these women call out to these teams in the streets, seeking in them a visible sign of God’s presence, trying to catch a glimpse of another way of life. They ask the teams to be for them the real face of humanity in order to help bring out their inner worth that comes from God and is hidden beneath the ruins of their outward appearance.

## **2. In Flumini de Quartu: A Residential Reception Centre** (formerly a summer camp)

In Flumini de Quartu, a town on the outskirts of Cagliari, the “Saint Louise Centre” functions as the second level in the shelter programme. Here, young women coming from the Passage House follow an education programme whose goal is to prepare them professionally or culturally to re-enter the world of work.

## **3. In Cagliari: another Residential Shelter**

This year, the shelter programme in Cagliari cares for five young mothers. We are receiving more and more requests from pregnant young women, several coming from African countries. They show amazing strength and perseverance: they vehemently refuse to have an abortion. In order to protect their baby, they find the courage to flee from their persecutors, all the while aware of the risks and difficulties this involves. (At present, in our shelter programme in Nulvi, too, one young woman is pregnant.)

For the past two years, the Sisters have also been involved in other services for women who have been reduced to slavery after coming from other countries in search of work or to help their families. In Sardinia, the situation is now escalating: women, betrayed by others in their own country, find themselves alone in work places where they are abused physically, psychologically and sexually. Even their families who are still living in their country of origin receive threats. Forced to work up to 16 or 17 hours a day without remuneration, they are housed in shabby rooms without windows or light. The only human contact they have is with their bosses who mistreat them and give them only one meal a day.

Pope John Paul II made frequent appeals to increase awareness of the new challenges and areas of society that call for the Church’s evangelical action. On various occasions, he denounced the trafficking of women and children for the sex trade, considering it an extremely appalling social problem that violates human rights and dignity. He encouraged zealous action and involvement in this sector:

*“In our own time,” the Pope said, “there are so many needs which demand a compassionate response from Christians. .... In this context Christians must learn to make their act of faith in Christ by discerning his voice in the cry for help that rises from this world of poverty... Now is the time for a new "creativity" in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by "getting close" to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters.” (Novo Millennio Ineunte n° 50)*

*“Who can deny,” Pope John Paul II says again, “that the victims of this crime [of human trafficking] are often the poorest and most defenceless members of the human family, the ‘least’ of our brothers and sisters?” (Letter of May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2002)*

Sister Ignazia MISCALI  
Echoes Correspondant

### VISIT BY SUPERIORS

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

### **Visit to the Province of Ecuador**

16<sup>th</sup> -21<sup>st</sup> February 2009

***“God is unsounded depths of tenderness and this is shown in specific ways. He knows the day and the hour.”***

The Lord had held in store this moment for Sister Evelyne to make her first visit to the Province, a visit that came just at the time when the Province had the great sorrow of seeing the “Saint Vincent de Paul College” in Riobamba destroyed by fire a few days earlier; a time when the country was rocked by the global financial crisis and when the government had an aggressively hostile policy towards the Church. It was in these circumstances that the Province felt the Lord’s presence and his embrace with the visit of Sister Evelyne and Sister Blanca Libia.

When the date was finally decided on, the whole Province began to prepare joyfully and prayerfully for the visit. After a long, 22 hour journey, Sister Evelyne and Sister Blanca Libia arrived on Ecuadorian soil at midnight on 16<sup>th</sup> February. The Visitatrice, Sister Piedad Rojas, and the members of her Provincial Council were at the airport to meet them and bid them welcome.

Next day the Sisters of the Provincial House could hardly wait to meet Sister Evelyne. During the Mass of Welcome, Fr Edmundo Burbano, Provincial Director, said, “ *Sister Evelyne’s visit to Ecuador gives us great joy and her presence here brings a message of encouragement in times of sadness and confusion. Her words*

*give us the strength we need to continue our struggles and inspire us to continue unremittingly our works for the liberation of those who are poor”.*

Then the Provincial House Sisters welcomed Sister Evelyne and Sister Blanca Libia. Right from the outset we appreciated their simplicity and approachability.

This first day of the visit was devoted to

- sharing ideas with the Provincial Council and personal interviews with members of the Curia.
- a visit to the Seminary. At present there are 8 Seminary Sisters and in welcoming Sister Evelyne one of the young Sisters said *“In your person we feel that it is Saint Louise who is visiting us, just as she visited our first Sisters.”* Sister Evelyne invited the Sisters to share their experiences and then emphasised some points that need to be kept in mind at this stage of formation.

On the morning of Wednesday, February 18<sup>th</sup> Bishop Nestor Herrera (former President of the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference and currently Bishop of the Machala diocese) presided at the Eucharist and he said, *“Mother General, your visit helps us to grow in the love of God and of our brothers and sisters. May your visit to Ecuador encourage the Sisters of the Province in their mission and their sisterly witness.”*

Immediately after this there was a meeting with the Sister Servants. The Visitatrice opened the proceedings *“The first words that come from the bottom of my heart are of thanks to God, for your presence here, dear Sister Evelyne, your first visit to the country of Ecuador. The Daughters of Charity have been in Ecuador since 1870, when Sisters from the country of our Founders came here after overcoming many difficulties. At present we are 391 Sisters in this Province where there are 55 local communities dedicated to the service of the poor in our ministries of education, health care, social and pastoral work. We welcome you with great joy, enthusiasm and hope.*

After these few words of introduction, Sister Evelyne stressed several key points with regard to the Sister Servant as animator of the local community. Her message was to the point, gospel-based and Vincentian. It was followed by sharing of ideas before lunch time.

Sister then went to visit the elderly Sisters in “Oasis Marillac” where she paid tribute to their fidelity, simplicity and creativity. She spoke movingly to each individual Sister. Finally, Sister Evelyne met the young Sisters at Gethsemane. She spoke to them about faith, joy, compassion.... An atmosphere of trust made dialogue very easy.

On Thursday morning, the Eucharist was presided over by Archbishop Raul Vela of Quito and Primate of Ecuador. In his homily he said, *“Thank you, Mother Evelyne, for your visit and for your words of comfort! Today we are rejoicing because we are welcoming the “most important servant of the Community.” We are rejoicing because we are celebrating the Word of God and the Eucharist. We appreciate your affection for Ecuador and I can tell you, in all simplicity, that your presence here is a grace for us. We are happy that you are able to see your Sisters*

*here and encourage them. May God grant you all the gifts you need to fulfil your mission. And we, the people of Riobamba, have not forgotten the terrible disaster of St. Vincent de Paul College being destroyed by fire. We do not forget, either, how the soil of Ecuador was enriched by the blood and the lives of eleven Daughters of Charity who gave themselves completely to God and who died as a result of the plague in 1939.”*

Sister Evelyne then met the Sisters of the Province. Since it was nearly the season of Lent and the time for the Renovation of the Vows, Sister spoke about the place of conversion in our lives as Daughters of Charity. Her talk was followed by sharing. During the morning Sister Evelyne visited the sick Sisters in the “Sister Emilia Zamarraga rest home.” After sharing with the Sisters she encouraged them to continue their vocation journey. In the afternoon it was the turn of the elderly sick Sisters to have the joy of a visit from her at “Bethany House.” Sister Evelyne gave them news of the Company, thanked them for their prayers and sacrifices, and took the time to greet each Sister individually. Each Sister expressed in her own way the affection and respect she had for Sister Evelyne. The day ended with a visit to the “Vincentian Quarter”. Here, she was joyfully welcomed by children, young people, adults, collaborators, postulants and Sisters. Sister listened untiringly and attentively to what the poor and the Sisters were saying. She spent a little time with the postulants and with the elderly Sisters who live here.

The following day began with a period of prayer during which we asked God to be with us. Sister Evelyne had a meeting with the Sisters. One of them told her, *“Today we are happy to get to know you as a person, not just someone we have seen in a photograph. I would like to tell you that the example of our elderly Sisters and the encouragement of our Superiors help us to discover our mission which is to love and defend poor people insofar as each of us is able to do this. We all need your advice and your words of encouragement in order to be the Daughters of Charity that Saint Louise and Saint Vincent wished us to be.”*

After another sharing session with the Sisters, Sister Evelyne set aside some time to meet any Sister who wished to speak to her. The closing session took place that afternoon with a meeting with the Provincial Council and Mass celebrated by Father Jose Luis Garcia, Visitor of the Priests of the Mission.

On 21<sup>st</sup> February the visit ended with a Eucharistic celebration presided over by Father Walter Eras, Provincial of the Franciscan Fathers. In his homily he said, *“On this day when you are leaving us, in spite of the sadness of separation we keep in our hearts the happiness your visit brought and our desire to continue to serve together the poor people of this world.”*

We thank God for all that we received through the reflections, sharings and news of the Company and our Sisters in other countries, as well as for the living hope this Province has received during this visit. We also remember in a special way all that we received from Mother Chiron. Thanks to all this we feel ourselves more united than ever with our Sisters.

Sister Maria Ines AREVALO ESTRADA  
*Daughter of Charity*

## SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

Province of France-North

### Enlarge the site of your tent

*“Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left...” (Is 54:2-3).*

*“God is the one who willed this Company of Sisters from different regions and wanted all of them to be of one heart.” (St Vincent 13 February 1646).*

*“In order to possess this availability, agility and mobility, we must be clothed with the Spirit of Jesus, with sandals on our feet, as the Gospels say.” (Sister Evelyne).*

*“Learn one of these three languages: English, Spanish, or French to progressively simplify official communication in the Company and the organization of international meetings.” (Action Lines 2003-2009).*

We would like to share with you an experience that we have each had in two different countries: Poland and Kosovo. At the request of Sister Evelyne, we have tried to give our Sisters from these countries a basic knowledge of the French language.

However, neither of us is young anymore, and we do not know either Polish or Albanian, so you can imagine we were somewhat apprehensive. It would have been impossible to set out on this mission without serious preparation! Our objective was to give the Sisters a “taste” of the French language and to motivate them to acquire a basic knowledge of it.

One of us was familiar with Kosovo after having spent a month there with a humanitarian organisation, but she did not know the language. Moreover, her training was for nursing, not teaching. So we had to prepare for the task by:

- acquiring some understanding of the geography, history and socio-cultural context of these regions and the Company in both these countries, as well as ridding ourselves of any preconceived ideas that we might have had.
- learning the basics of their language.
- interacting with families we know who are living in France and who have come from these countries.
- gathering information about methods of teaching French to foreigners, selecting and using a method.

It is easy to talk about “inculturation”, but now the time had come to experience it: for us it meant feeling “foreign” because of differences in language, customs, food, etc., and for the Sisters there it meant welcoming a Sister from Paris. The warm



sisterly welcome we received facilitated this inculturation. Very quickly, we started working with various groups: aspirants, postulants, Seminary Sisters, juniorate Sisters and other Sisters who want to learn French. All showed great motivation in overcoming the complexities of the French language. Most of them reached the point of being able to express themselves in French and were very happy to be able to write in French to share their mission and express their gratitude.

We were able to share our experiences and ministries with the Sisters who already spoke French and these were able to translate for the others what we said. The mission of the Daughters of Charity in Poland, Ukraine and Kosovo is truly a service of the poorest persons in society: young people, adults with severe disabilities and sick people in difficult circumstances and needing expensive hospital care. The selflessness and dedication of the Sisters greatly impressed us. We are grateful to them for making it possible for us to accompany them in their various local communities and services. We also noted how important it is for them to invest time in developing “projects” in order to find ways of giving better service to persons who are poor.

Some weeks after our return to France we can say most definitely that the time spent in these countries has broadened our horizons. We have been enriched by other countries... the welcome we received and the simplicity of the people and the Sisters touched us deeply. On the other hand, we discovered a level of poverty which is much greater than that in our own country and the people do not have the means to change the situation. Our outlook has changed and our horizons now extend beyond the borders of mainland France.

Sisters Marie-Renée COMBOURIEU and Marie-Renée LELIÈVRE  
Daughters of Charity

### SISTERS' TESTIMONIES

#### Sisters' Testimonies

Province of Hungary

#### **Sister Romana, Daughter of Charity and advocate for music education**

I met Sister Romana in 1971 when I was studying in Hungary that year. At the time, she was living in a small apartment in Budapest and seemed to be about eighty years old. I was struck by the enthusiasm and energy with which she spoke. At the end of our visit, she showed me two small photographs of herself with Zoltan Kodaly and his wife Emma. Sister Romana died in 1974 at the age of 88.

Zoltan Kodaly had a large number of excellent students dating back to the 1920s and 1930s and extending to the 1950s, the years during which Kodaly taught at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest.<sup>1</sup> Because of my longstanding association with Kodaly's methods of music education, little by little I became aware of the importance of a woman who from a very young age was closely linked to his great enterprise. I learned that Sister Romana, as a member of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, played a significant role in the spread of Kodaly's work in Hungary. Unfortunately, as the years passed, her influence was completely forgotten.

During a recent visit to Budapest in March 2006 on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the International Kodaly Society, I was able to visit the Provincial House of the Daughters of Charity and meet their archivist, Sister Klara Visy. She had some documents on Sister Romana as well as information on the Ranolder Institute. This article is based primarily on these documents together with the information I received firsthand from Sister Romana during our first and only meeting in 1971.

Founded in 1883 and directed by the Daughters of Charity, the Ranolder Institute was one of the greatest educational institutions in Budapest.

In 1910, Sister Romana began teaching mathematics, physics and geography at the Ranolder Institute. Her musical gifts led to serious studies in music at the Liszt Academy of Music, where she was awarded a diploma in music education. As a talented musician and accomplished organist, Sister Romana very quickly recognised the significance of the compositions of Kodaly and Bartok. She was also among the first to use the "tonic sol fa" method in music classes. Sister Romana organised the first folk music competition that took place on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1939 at the Ranolder Institute. In 1940, Sister Romana became the Directress of the Ranolder Institute. Kodaly paid frequent visits to the Institute and met Sister Romana. During an interview in 1974, Sister Romana recalled: "*Kodaly would often come to our choir practices. We would welcome him very graciously, and as he entered the room, the choir would sing a melody in five parts from the text 'In the Lord's Name' followed by 'Laudate Jesum Christum.'*" It was due to the artistic quality of Sister Romana's choir that Kodaly discovered that children were capable of interpreting difficult choral compositions.

In 1943 the Ranolder Institute celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary<sup>2</sup>. This event was commemorated in a book which presented the history of the school and descriptions of all the programmes and musical activities. Sister Romana was mentioned as Director of the school, (a position she would hold until the school was closed by the government eight years later when the Ranolder Institute was confiscated and the Daughters of Charity in Hungary were disbanded). Some time after these celebrations, Sister Romana began preparing the school for the International Festival of Choral Singing which was to take place in Berne, Switzerland, from April-23<sup>rd</sup> - 27<sup>th</sup> 1948. The programme presented by Sister Romana took the form of a very attractive 13 page document which included the history of the Ranolder Choir and the following information:

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HEIN, Sr. Mary Alice, "Le Testament de Zoltan Kodaly, International Kodaly Society, 1993, pp 26-27  
<sup>2</sup> Ranolder Jubileumi Emlékonyv, Budapest, 1943

*“In the course of the fifty year history of the Ranolder Institute, numerous schools have been set up; a primary school, a middle school, a technical school, a secondary school for girls and also a teachers’ training college. A total of 1600 pupils and students attend these institutions. Three different choirs have been working very well together for many years. The combined choirs, with a total membership of 300, have had a great deal of success under the name of the Great Choir of Ranolder.*

The magnificent programme prepared by Sister Romana demonstrated to the International World of Music the high quality of musical education in Hungary. Unfortunately, the narrow-outlook of the communist regime destroyed this dream of exercising an international influence. Not long before the Festival in Berne, the government refused permission for the Ranolder Choir to take part in the Festival.

So much more could be written about this remarkable woman, Sister Romana Csorda. Her work with Kodaly to promote and spread musical education in Hungary deserves to be recognised and published.

Sister Mary Alice HEIN  
*Professor emeritus at Holy Name University*

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

### **The poor person, according to the mind of Saint Vincent**

In Saint Vincent we can discover three ways of thinking about the poor person; these different approaches often overlap or perhaps we should say that they become unified:

1. An approach that is more or less linked to the social order,
  2. a more pastoral type of approach,
  3. an approach that is more of a mystical nature
1. First of all a human relationship with **ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Saint Vincent was no stranger to the situation of poor people; he was aware of it even in his childhood, in his own family and in his social background. At this definitive stage in his life poor people were for him his parents, his neighbours, the wine growers and peasants whose life and heavy labour he described with such realism. They also included the good village girls that he often referred to in his Conferences to the Daughters of Charity.

When we examine the echoes of this early experience we realise that the young Vincent originally looked on poverty as an evil and he regarded poor people as victims. Later on, when he spoke to his communities about evangelical poverty, he never failed to bring to their minds this unjust social poverty so as to make gospel poverty more meaningful.

Before it became pastoral or mystical in nature, Saint Vincent's relationship with poor people was primarily at the level of solidarity and it was of a human, economic and social order. This was the sort of poverty he tried to escape from in 1595 with the help and the calculated actions of his parents. And when in 1617 he saw poverty with different eyes and in other circumstances, he recognised poverty for what it was.

In Saint Vincent's eyes the poor person is someone who is suffering: a man, woman or child living in unjust and inhuman social and economic conditions. This concept of the poor person was deeply rooted in Saint Vincent's experience, in his early experience, because he had not yet come to see the poor person as a privileged citizen of the Kingdom of God (according to Luke IV, 18), or as the mysterious presence of Jesus Christ (according to Matthew XXV, 31).

Of course, we do not find in Saint Vincent any rigorous analysis and description of the social struggles of his day but basing our findings on all the interventions of Saint Vincent on behalf of the poor, we can discover over this long period, a concern about social conditions and a study of the specific circumstances of the poor people with whom he came into contact. We can give numerous references and quotations for this, whether in relation to the Confraternities, the Mission, the material aid distributed in Lorraine, Champagne and Picardie, or to the Daughters of Charity as he put strong emphasis on the "corporal" aspect of the relief they gave.

The Regulations of the first Conference of Charity at Chatillon (Coste XIII, 423-435) is revealing. The very important introduction puts forward the gospel reasons for serving the sick and the spiritual value of this work. The pages that follow show Saint Vincent's very detailed and realistic study of the condition and circumstances of these poor people, so much so that he goes into detail about the food that the carers should bring to the sick and the particular way that they should relate to them (Coste XIII, 426-429). Saint Vincent would never lose this realism and it was to be a distinguishing mark of his relationship with poor people and of all his works.

It was symptomatic, too, that Saint Vincent should have often recalled that he belonged to the same social class as the poor and was part of their world and that he should have been so concerned that the life of the priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity should be close to that of poor people.

We know, for example, how long Saint Vincent hesitated before accepting the Priory of Saint-Lazare; this acceptance would most certainly have seemed to accelerate and accentuate what we might call our ..... "religification" (becoming religious), and we know that Saint Vincent did not want to hear of that. There is certainly a whiff of nostalgia for the early days of the Mission at the College des Bons-Enfants: "they continued the same exercises in the other parishes of my lady's estates for several years. This lady wanted to support the priests in order to continue the missions and so we were given the College des Bons-Enfants and we moved there. Monsieur Portail and I took with us a good priest to whom we gave fifty ecus a year. And so the three of us would go from village to village preaching and giving missions. When we left a place we would give the key to one of our neighbours or else we would ask them to go and spend the night in the house. However, I only had

one subject for my sermons and I used it in a thousand different ways; this theme was the fear of God” (Coste XII, 8).

So the Mission was well integrated into its social, poor and simple background. Saint Vincent was equally concerned that the Daughters of Charity should always remain on the same social level as servants at that time. Volumes IX and X of Coste and particularly Saint Vincent’s letters, let us see that he succeeded in doing this until he died. Apart from the “House” (Saint Vincent’s name for the Motherhouse), which was quite religious in character and reflected the nature of religious houses nearly everywhere, the Sisters’ living conditions seem to have been genuinely those of servants at that time. It would be interesting to read, for example, the Conference of 28<sup>th</sup> November 1649 on work (Coste IX, 483-498). It was during this Conference that Saint Vincent told the Sisters, “You can earn a sufficient livelihood by serving your neighbour; you are not a burden on anyone; you provide for yourselves. And would to God that I could do the same, I, a man unworthy of the bread I eat, so that earning my living lawfully, I might serve my neighbour without possessing anything or being a charge on anyone! Would to God that our Gentlemen were forced to do so, and that we were obliged to abandon all that we possess! God knows how cheerfully we would do so. But we cannot, and must therefore humble ourselves.” (Coste IX, 494.). And he continued his reflections on the economic and social circumstances of the Daughters of Charity: “If God is pleased, my dear Sisters, to grant you the grace of being able some day to earn your living and in addition to be in such a position as to be able to serve villages which are unable to support you, I do not know of anything more beautiful. What! Sisters will be labouring for others in places where they serve the poor and educate girls without any contributions whatsoever and will be able to do so thanks to the work they themselves have done during their free time!.....If bees, as we have seen, by gathering honey from flowers and bearing it back to the hive, support the community, why should not you, who ought to be heavenly bees, do likewise? O Sisters, if God is pleased, by your means, to grant this grace to your Company, that the poor will be served, children instructed, this house enabled to subsist, .....will not that, I say, be a great happiness for you? (Coste IX, 494-495).

This text opens up little-known horizons about the social situation of the first Daughters of Charity as it was generally experienced. Saint Vincent wished, as he said, that the same could be said for the “Gentlemen.”!

We might conclude from this that this first type of relationship that Saint Vincent had with poor people was a profoundly humane one and took particular account of the economic and social circumstances of the poor. It seems very clear that Saint Vincent strongly desired that his principal foundations should, in some way, share the conditions of the poor and of labourers, in order to ensure that relationships with these should be deeply human and show great solidarity.

## 2. The second type of Saint Vincent’s approach to the poor and his relationship with them was more **OF A PASTORAL NATURE.**

Before Gannes-Folleville, apart from the time spent in Clichy, Vincent de Paul had no close contact with poor people during the seventeen years he had been a priest. It was as a priest in Folleville that he found himself challenged, opposed and goaded into making a response. It was this priest who six months later would decide to

devote himself to working in a parish, in other words, to take on pastoral responsibilities.

It was then that Saint Vincent was shocked by the religious ignorance of the poor country people and the way the Church had abandoned them. This was the situation he wanted to rectify. It was a heroic decision to make because Saint Vincent had to courageously abandon his plan for honourable retirement and the highly desirable position he held with the de Gondi family. But at this stage there were still limits to his decision because he was only thinking then of being a good country priest against a background and pastoral thinking that were quite traditional.

So for him, the poor person was someone to be evangelised and saved. When Saint Vincent interpreted the event at Gannes-Folleville in the light of the gospel (Lk IV, 18), he began to see the poor as the privileged ones of the gospel, the first to be invited into the Kingdom, as Bossuet said, “The poor person is the first born, the authentic child of the Church which is the city of the poor, and is someone who, unlike the rich, has no need to become a naturalised citizen.”

There are two aspects of this sort of relationship with poor people that we should note and emphasise. On the one hand there is the positive aspect: the promotion of the poor with regard to salvation and the priority to be given them in pastoral work. On the other hand there was a negative side to all this; the poor person was still regarded as one to be preached to and taught, one to whom the sacraments would be administered, who would be given aid and one to whom salvation would be brought.

There is no denying that a certain progress had been made in the evolution of Saint Vincent’s spiritual and pastoral thinking. Until this time, in fact, his ministry was largely dictated by a noble family and the poor only benefited from the occasional visits of this family to their estates. From now on, priority would be given to those who are poor and he would also devote most of his time to them.

This attitude to poor people was evident when he returned to the de Gondi family after the interlude in Chatillon: from now on most of his time and most of his plans would be devoted to evangelising the poor country people and to giving missions (as laid down in the foundational contract) in order to “devote himself entirely to the salvation of poor people, going from village to village....to preach, instruct, exhort and catechise these poor folk.” (Coste XIII, 198).

So from now on the poor would be clearly seen as his priority and Saint Vincent would never go back on that. It would be the same for all the other institutions which would give priority to the poor and would make this almost their exclusive work. I have already spoken to you about this when we were reflecting on the aim of our Congregation and the expression, “the real poor.”

It is this priority given to poor people in line with gospel teaching (Lk IV, 18) that marked a decisive progression in the story of Saint Vincent’s relationship with the poor. But as I said earlier, the poor person was still regarded as someone to be brought aid, someone who received, someone to be preached to, instructed, exhorted and catechised. The relationship was still one-sided and Saint Vincent had not yet

reached the end of his encounter with poor people. It seems that it was his experience at Chatillon, and especially the incident on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1617, which brought him to the final stage and to now take a new and decisive step in the relationship,

3. The third stage, or the third level in Saint Vincent's relationship with poor people was **MYSTICAL IN CHARACTER**, mystical in the full sense of the word.

We can see this progress in relation to the event at Chatillon because this new step was taken in the light of Saint Matthew's gospel (XXV,31) a passage that we see quoted for the first time in the document relating to the Chatillon Confraternity (23<sup>rd</sup> August 1617). Without wishing to mark out the different stages in Saint Vincent's spiritual journey, we can say that if the passage from St. Luke enlightened and revealed all the precious meaning of the experience at Gannes-Folleville and was the gospel foundation for the Mission, it was the text from Matthew (XXV, 31) which shed light on the decisive experience at Chatillon and was the gospel foundation for establishing the Charity Conferences and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. In Matthew XXV, 31 Jesus speaks of the Last Judgment. "I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was sick and you visited me... Whenever you did that to one of the least of these brothers of mine, to a poor person, you did it to me." "I was sick and you visited me"; it is easy for us to understand how that phrase haunted the thinking and the prayer of Saint Vincent throughout the day of 20<sup>th</sup> August 1617 and the days that followed, and it is not at all surprising that it should crop up again in the document of 23<sup>rd</sup> August and in the text of first regulations of the Chatillon Confraternity of Charity in November 1617 (Coste XIII, 424).

What is even more remarkable is the part that the gospel was to play in the spiritual life and faith of a Saint. It is obvious that Saint Vincent began to see more and more clearly that through the poor man at Gannes and the poor family at Chatillon, Jesus Christ, sent by the Father, was intervening directly in his life to such a degree that on the one hand he decided to radically change course, and on the other hand, he rediscovered peace and a sense of balance. The poor people at Gannes and at Chatillon were for him signs of God, signs of what was God's will for his own life and for his foundations. "I did not think of it and neither did Monsieur Portail!"

At this stage, the "Vincent/poor person" relationship was no longer a completely one-sided affair. In fact, he began to realise more and more the benefits that his contact with the poor people of Folleville and of Chatillon had brought to him. Consequently, Saint Vincent would pay more attention to this type of event where the poor were concerned; they would really spur him on to be daring in his enterprises.

Consequently, he developed a deeper understanding of the words of St Matthew's gospel, "I was hungry...I was thirsty...I was in prison...you did it to me." These words of Christ were to become the key to all Saint Vincent's encounters with the poor, the key to Vincentian relationship with poor people.

He would say to the Daughters of Charity, "So you are obliged to serve them with respect because they are your masters, and with devotion because they represent for you the person of Jesus Christ who said, 'Whatever you do to the least of my

brothers and sisters, I take it as done to myself.” So, my Sisters, Our Lord is indeed with the sick person whom you are serving.” (Coste X, 332)

“So you must treat poor people with gentleness and respect, keeping in mind that it is to Our Lord that you are giving this service, since he takes it as done to himself...”If the poor person is sick then I, too, am sick; if they are in prison, I am there with them; if the poor man is in chains then I am in chains too.” (Coste X 680).

And there are these well-known words addressed to the Missioners: “ I must not judge a poor man or woman according to their outward appearance or how intelligent they seem; very often they are so gross and earthy that they do not seem to have the appearance or the mind of rational beings. But turn the medal over and with the eyes of faith you will see that the Son of God who willed to be poor, is represented for us in these poor people: He himself appeared scarcely human during his passion, the Gentiles thought he was mad and he was a stumbling block to the Jews. And yet he evangelised the poor. O God, how good it is to look on the poor if we think of them in God and think of the esteem Jesus Christ had for them!” (Coste XI, 32).

The text that seems to echo most perfectly Saint Vincent’s spiritual experience in his relationship with poor people is to be found in Coste IX, 252:”In serving the poor you are serving Jesus Christ. O my Daughters, how true that is. You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor and that is as true as we are here. A Sister will go and visit the poor ten times a day, and ten times a day she will find God there. As St. Augustine has said, what we see with our eyes is not as certainly true because our senses sometimes deceive us, but the truths of God – never. Go and look at the poor convicts in a chain-gang, you will find God there; take care of little children, you will find God there. O my Daughters, how delightful that is! You go into their poor homes but you find God there. O my Daughters, once more how delightful! He accepts the services you render the sick and looks upon them as done to himself.....”

From now on, Saint Vincent’s relationship with poor people will not simply be a reciprocal one, it will be very obviously reversed; and Vincent will be more conscious of what the poor bring to him than of what he seems to be giving them. So there is a new pastoral and social way of thinking. The poor person has become Jesus Christ for him. The poor person then is his lord and master; also, the Missioners, the Daughters of Charity or the high-born ladies of the Charities can only approach the poor in an attitude and with the mentality and the spirituality of service. With the evolution of society, this word “service” has become an equivocal term. It is now demonised and this is apparent even in the language of spirituality. It was not like that in the XVIIth century; at that time there was no complex about recognising the profession of manservant or maidservant and this had its own regulations and duties. Also, when Saint Vincent speaks of service or of men and women who are servants, we should not be in too much of a hurry to relate these words to the servant of Yahweh or the gospel account of the Annunciation. In most cases the context shows that Saint Vincent who was by nature a pragmatist, was using these words with the full weight of their professional meaning. And when, for example, he describes how a Lady from the Confraternity, or a Daughter of Charity, should act when serving a meal to a sick person we can easily see in his instructions all the things that a master or mistress of those times would expect from their servant.



This needs to be said so that we can exorcise the idea that is sometimes evident, that Saint Vincent's relationship with poor people was highly paternalistic. It is unfortunate that the word servant has lost its full XVIIth century significance and has become a term that is equivocal, anodyne and somewhat tenuous. The servant/master relationship was certainly one of the few relationships under threat from paternalism...and for good reason! Well, it is first of all at this professional level that we must now consider Saint Vincent's relationship with poor people. If Jesus Christ really identifies himself with the poor, then the "lord/ servant relationship " becomes obligatory and this calls for a complete change of mentality and ways of acting. And one of the attitudes that Saint Vincent insisted on most frequently was that of respect...respect which at that time was not considered to be the normal attitude one would have towards poor people, beggars or prisoners!

Some contrary person might take offence at the implication of total faith in the relationship with poor people, and Christ's identifying with the poor person could be perceived as frustrating the relationship. That is to say, all one's attention and commitment should be directed to the person and it is not possible to be concerned about anyone else, even if this be Christ himself. So some people could see searching for Christ in the poor person as undesirable!

Thank God Saint Vincent did not get involved in this sort of analysis, it would have hardly left him much time for action! But if someone had put forward this objection to him, Saint Vincent would no doubt have given the same reply as he did to people who never made any commitment to action. In any case, Saint Vincent's faith, that faith based entirely on the lived experience of Christ's presence in the poor, never led him to alter in the slightest degree, his regard for poor persons or his concern for their social condition.

In accordance with the logic and progression of what we have called the mystical level of the "Vincent/poor person" relationship, it only remains for us to quickly recall the extraordinary unity that this conviction brought about in his life and his spirituality.

Saint Vincent was a man who spontaneously reflected, meditated on and integrated what he experienced. There is a striking logic and consistency about this. So what took place at Chatillon was seen in the light of Matthew's gospel (XXV, 31) marked the start of his spiritual journey and gradually became the keystone and the equilibrium of his spirituality. Everything was organised, more or less consciously round this affirmation based on evidence, "Jesus Christ is in the poor person as truly as we are standing here." And so it came about, for example, that what had previously been seen as an experience that gave rise to conflict and tension now becomes for him something extremely simple. From now on, Jesus Christ was in the poor person, Faith and Mission, Faith and Service, Faith and life in perfect continuity. When it came to choosing between service and prayer, there was no problem of competition: "My Daughters, the service of the poor must always take precedence over everything else." There can hardly be any possible exceptions, no matter how noble, to a principle stated in such categorical terms. And Saint Vincent even said, "You can even omit going to Mass." For good measure he goes on to say, "even on feastsdays if it is a case of necessity". It is very interesting to read his reasoning on this principle: "In this way you can be sure that you are being faithful to your Rules

and this is particularly true because God's obedience is well-known to be that of sacrifice. It is God, my Daughters, whom you wish to serve. Do you think that God is less reasonable than masters in this world? If the master says to his servant, "Do this, and then before the order can be carried out he asks for something else to be done, he does not think the servant is doing anything wrong if he leaves aside what he was ordered to do in the first place, on the contrary, he is very pleased that this should be so. So it is with God. He has called you to the Company....He has given you Rules. When you are practising these and he asks you to go somewhere else then go there my Daughters and be in no doubt that this is God's will.(Coste IX, 216). What is interesting and very significant in this text for us who are studying Saint Vincent's spirituality and his spiritual experience, is the ease and spontaneity with which Saint Vincent brings together and identifies in one single person, the God who speaks through the Rules, the God of Mass, and the God present in a poor person. For him it is quite simply the same Master who first of all commanded one thing and then ordered something else. It is a case of "leaving God for God." Seeing Jesus Christ in the poor, Vincent says that everything seems to bring unity and continuity in his faith and in his life: prayer, Eucharist, Mission and service. To reach this degree of unity between faith and life it was enough for him to have truly found Jesus Christ in the poor person.

Thank God we are all aware of the gospel values that the poor live by. Today Saint Vincent would like us to go further and more deeply into this, to go beyond the values themselves to the point of encountering the living person of Jesus Christ even if what has become evident in the mystique of Vincent de Paul, may be for most of us, one long struggle of faith.

To end this reflection, let us examine ourselves personally and honestly on the quality of our relationship with poor people on a social, pastoral and mystical level. Like Saint Vincent we have to foster all three aspects even if it is the third one that should nourish and animate the other two. May Saint Vincent help us to make progress in meditating, understanding and putting into practice Luke IV,18 and Matthew XXV, 31, these texts which shed true light on and are the great pivotal points of Saint Vincent's thinking and spiritual experience.

Fr. Jean Morin CM

PREPARATION FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR OF THE 350<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

**Saint Louise de Marillac**

1591 – 1660

## 1. WORDS AND ACTIONS OF SOME WITNESSES

### INTRODUCTION

*“Therefore in the Church, **everyone** whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification". (1 Thes 4:3). However, this holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful... Then too, by God's gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received. They are warned by the Apostle to live "as becomes saints" (Eph 5:3) ... all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fulness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity...*

*The Church continually keeps before it the warning of the Apostle which moved the faithful to charity, exhorting them to experience personally what Christ Jesus had known within Himself. This was the same Christ Jesus, who "emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave..."*

These excerpts from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, “Lumen Gentium”, chapter five, entitled **Universal call to Holiness**, (numbers 39-42) provide us with a glimpse of the principles established by the Council, which apply to the life and actions of the one whom we now call Saint Louise de Marillac, “sign and inspiration of charity”.

In this first part, some witnesses will give their testimonies:

- Saint Vincent,
- Mathurine Guerin and the first Sisters,
- Early historians: Gobillon and Abelly who wrote from the perspective of their day. They did not know Louise de Marillac during her lifetime, but they interviewed those who knew her well, people like her secretaries, and consulted her writings and documents relating to her.
- Sister Marie de Geoffre de Chabignac: the final section will describe the work that she carried out in the early years leading to the beatification of Louise de Marillac. Sister Marie de Geoffre de Chabignac, weakened by illness, would not live to see the results of her preparatory work, nor did she take any credit herself, saying: *“I am just an insignificant little worker who gathered the materials and applied the mortar. I am confident, however, that at the appointed hour, Providence will bring forth a worker who is capable of transforming all of this into a memorial of lasting beauty, if it is in keeping with the divine plan.”*

### SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL

On October 9<sup>th</sup> 1952, Father William Slattery, Superior General of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, wrote in his preface to the book which reproduced the conferences of Saint Vincent to the Daughters of Charity: “...*When you listen to this explanation of your holy vows and your holy Rules, it all becomes so simple, clear and understandable. His language, style, the comparisons and, examples he gives are always **crystal clear**. We could compare these conferences to a **lake** whose waters are so pure that they allow us to gaze into its depths, or to a **garden** in which the eye captures the beauty of each of its flowers illuminated by the brilliant rays of the sun...*”

Monsieur Vincent, who was ill when Saint Louise died, gathered the Sisters together on July 24<sup>th</sup> 1660 to speak about the fire that inflamed the heart of Mademoiselle Le Gras: “*your dear mother...as you saw her and had her with you.*” He questioned the Sisters on three points:

- “The reasons we have for sharing our thoughts on the virtues of our Sisters who have gone to God, and particularly your dear mother, Mademoiselle Le Gras. We’re not going to speak on the first point today because it would take too long,” Monsieur Vincent said.
- “The second point deals with the virtues you’ve noted in them.”
- “And the third, the virtue you intend to imitate.”
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The Sisters shared their thoughts in language that was simple, and filled with affection and humility, as they asked pardon for their neglect of the virtue they mentioned.

Monsieur Vincent concluded by blessing them for asking for forgiveness, and then added: “*What a portrait God is placing before your eyes, Sisters—one that you yourselves are painting! Yes, we have this picture, and you must consider it a model to inspire you to do likewise and to acquire that humility, charity, forbearance, and firmness in all her ways of governing. You should also recall how she tended to conform all her actions to those of Our Lord. She did what Saint Paul said, ‘It is no longer I who live, but Jesus who lives in me.’ **See what a portrait that is!** ... O mon Dieu, **what a beautiful picture!***” And Monsieur Vincent returned to her virtues of humility, faith, prudence, good judgment and her continual concern to conform her actions to those of our Lord. He dwelt particularly on the virtue of modesty and spoke for a long time about virtue and how to acquire it. “*If you fall into this fault in the house of Mademoiselle Le Gras your mother, say at once, ‘How can I allow myself to talk like that?’ Sisters, after the example of your good mother, take the resolution to work at becoming perfect and to detach yourselves from anything in you that is displeasing to God...*

*...What sorrow you’ll have, Sisters, when you see women who have the name of Daughters of Charity but are not so in reality!... there are others who aren’t edifying. They tear the Company to pieces, like someone plucking a chicken. **Daughters tearing their mother to pieces!**...*

*Or sus, Sisters, let us now finish. Whatever the cost, you must strive to become virtuous... A Sister who, on leaving here, returns home with her heart filled with this divine unction says to herself, ‘I no longer want to live for myself, but I want to seek God and go straight to Him in all that I do,’ ... Mademoiselle Le Gras and our good Sisters in heaven show us how true that is... Grant, my God, that they may begin to*

*love You perfectly, to do everything for You, and to make it their principal affair to please You in all things. Sisters, how beautiful it is to see a Sister like that!*"

What should we retain from this “**beautiful picture**” that Monsieur Vincent presents in honour of Louise de Marillac? Everything that Louise has received, in a shining array of virtues, prayer and love, is the treasure that can only come from union with God. Represented in an infinite variety of forms, we find her teachings, their application and resolutions clearly showing principles and spiritual guidance, steady and sure guidance with the support of M. Vincent who was filled with admiration for what she did. He assisted, approved, encouraged and evaluated with serenity and peace “after reflecting on it before God.” Free from self-interest, Louise was open to the illuminating grace of the Holy Spirit, and God frequently intervened, placing his seal on what she taught and practised.

*“So this is the picture that you must contemplate, a portrait of humility, charity, gentleness, and patience in her infirmities. See what a portrait that is!”* (Conference of July 24<sup>th</sup> 1660).

## **MATHURINE GUERIN<sup>1</sup>**

The Golden Book of Daughters of Charity 1633-1670 included among the Sisters several aspects of the life of Sister Mathurine Guerin.

“This is the first notice that should be read after the life of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise de Marillac, for Sister Mathurine is the one who gave lustre and perfection to our Company in accomplishing the designs of our holy Founders.”

Mathurine Guerin was “a cornerstone of the Company” along with Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. She received great favours from God, gifts of nature and of grace. Although her life was not without suffering, she said, “I made a resolution in my retreat to abandon myself entirely to God.”

Saint Vincent appointed her secretary to Mademoiselle Le Gras. Her fervour and fidelity to pious practices, her continual humility and exemplary conduct, made her a worthy secretary to Saint Louise. Mathurine Guerin wrote sixteen of the little notebooks written by the first Sisters. She was responsible for gathering together the conferences of Saint Vincent and having them recopied for them to be distributed to the Sisters. We are indebted to her for the 4 large volumes of the Conferences of Monsieur Vincent that Mademoiselle Le Gras had collected but had not had the time to compile. In addition, she also recorded the conferences given on the virtues of deceased Sisters and wrote the minutes of the Council meetings. Monsieur Vincent and Mademoiselle Le Gras recognised her capabilities and thought it well to put them to good use. She was missioned to La Fere as Sister Servant, and to Belle Isle en Mer. After Belle Isle, she was elected Assistant, and not long after, she became Superioress General, a role she had for 21 years. She was 37 years old when first elected to this office, and the extreme anxiety she experienced was just as keenly felt each time she was re-elected. Only her submission to God’s will allowed her to “bend down and take on” the yoke of this heavy burden. Monsieur de Chevremont said in a conference

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1. The life of Sister Mathurine Guerin was presented in the 1986 Echoes by Sister Charpy

on her virtues that she “was like a burning torch that is completely consumed in lighting the way for others.”

In this long period of service in the Generalate, Sister Mathurine left the Sisters a spiritual bouquet that is still relevant:

- *“Our words voice what is in our heart...”*
- *“If we are to be humble, we must allow ourselves to be governed*
- *“May charity always be your rule*
- *“We should pay careful attention to the voice of God speaking in the depths of our hearts*
- *“Oh God, what peace we find in following your inspirations! Happy are those who let themselves be guided by you*
- *“The Rules were made for the sole purpose of being followed, and none can be omitted without some unfortunate consequence. For when we neglect the little things, it follows that we neglect those of greater importance.”*

### **After the death of Saint Louise**

Sister Mathurine was Sister Servant at Belle Isle at this time. Sister Marguerite Chetif succeeded Saint Louise, being appointed by Monsieur Vincent on September 14<sup>th</sup> 1660. In her distress at being named, Sister Marguerite wrote to Mathurine Guerin, asking for her help. *“I ask you very humbly, my dear Sister, to be so kind as to send me in writing a collection of the principal virtues that you have noticed in our departed Mademoiselle, our very dear and honoured Mother, especially those relating to our conduct, so that I might, with the grace of God, imitate these virtues in whatever way I can. You understand what great need I have and how God has given you the grace to be so near to Mademoiselle for so long. I hope that I can learn from you what I need the most. I beg you, my dear Sister, to not refuse me this charity, of which I am in such need...”* (cf. Document no. 822).

Sister Mathurine delayed answering this request that was both humble and affectionate. Several months later, she took up her pen: *“As I have already told you, I feared that in sharing with you my recollections of our departed Mademoiselle, our dear Superioress, that this would bring harm instead of good...it was this consideration that caused my silence.”* And Sister Mathurine proceeded to give her thoughts in ten printed pages, beginning with a few consoling words: *“I remarked in this good soul so many virtues that I don’t know where to begin: her faith in the daily events of life, her hope through the grace of God and the guidance of Monsieur Vincent in the foundation of the Company for the service of the poor...”* Sr. Mathurine added that undying hope was essential in order to live this out; a mediocre level of charity would not suffice. *“Patience, support, vigilance, prudence, humility, great desire for the perfection of her subjects – all this was her daily bread.”* *“Days and years of difficulty were not lacking in her life, but she always came back to the belief that Providence guided the Company and to the patience of Monsieur Vincent who said that God purged the Company of what could bring harm to it. A pedagogy developed over the course of many years for the formation of Sisters experiencing difficulties was a proof of her charity and we see this in letters written in her own hand to individual Sisters.”*

Sister Mathurine concluded by sharing her personal reflections: *“When I had the happiness of writing her letters, I did not think about her beautiful teachings at the time. However, now I admire their diversity. In some, she instils the observance of the Rule, in others, fear; in all of them the pure love of God. She never stopped writing to Sisters and encouraged them to do the same, saying that this, as well as their simple gifts helped nurture friendships...she kept to herself what she knew of the Sisters’ faults...her concern for the Sisters’ general good in spiritual as well as temporal matters was admirable...”*

*I observed that what she tried to inculcate most was the spirit of poverty, obedience and humility...Whenever she saw everyone united, she showed great joy, saying that Our Lord was in our midst.*

*One last remark regarding the Sisters’ conduct: she said that we must never scorn the natural graces that we recognise in others, because these are powerful means of doing good. If we had to restrain and force our nature, we would not be able to accomplish what we could otherwise do by inclination.”*

To bring to a conclusion this long discourse by Sister Mathurine on the principles that Saint Louise used for guiding the Sisters and the development of the little Company, she recalled what was necessary for the Daughters of Charity: strong confidence in God, abandonment into God’s hands in order to do his will, without taking into account the difficulty of one’s office, nor its lowly or high status, renunciation of self in times of interior suffering, seeing these trials not as one’s own but as a means of honouring the suffering of Our Lord, trying to aspire to solid virtue...

## **NICOLAS GOBILLON**

**Pastor of the Church of Saint Laurent, first biographer of Saint Louise de Marillac.**

### **Who was Nicolas Gobillon ?**

Born on September 26<sup>th</sup> 1626 into a noble and ancient family in the province of Perche, he was the grandson of Nicolas Gobillon, a lawyer of Roy in Mortagne, and an aristocratic lady named Jacqueline de Surmont. The family was among the most famous in the province because of its long and noble lineage in the ranks of knights, going back 500 years. His uncle was the Lieutenant General of Mortagne. This family was well-known in military as well as in legal circles.

On August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1653, he was ordained deacon and completed his studies at the Sorbonne. In 1655, he became pastor of Saint Pierre de Bretigny, which was originally part of the diocese of Paris. He arrived in the parish of Saint Laurent soon after the death of the Foundress of the Daughters of Charity. **He would become her first biographer.** The pastor who succeeded him wrote the following short note about him:

“The famous Monsieur Gobillon, pastor of Saint Laurent, highly commended for his merits and talents, and recognised as the greatest theologian of his day because of his sublime knowledge, a wisdom figure for the faculty in the School of Theology in Paris, of which he became Dean, and who, through his profound learning, merited

the trust of all the Cardinals in the Kingdom who chose him as their councillor and chief pastor, as well as Superior of 18 ecclesiastical or religious communities. The King himself, it is said, also had great confidence in him. Louis XIV named Nicolas Gobillon as one of seven individuals, among them two vicars general, one of whom was to be chosen as Superior of Port-Royal Abbey. In 1663, his peers showed their esteem for him. The Faculty Assembly of the Sorbonne named him one of ten delegates who would be responsible for producing a document for the King and Parliament on the ‘true sentiments of the Faculty regarding royal authority.’”<sup>2</sup>

These texts help us to know Monsieur Gobillon better. His established reputation was very useful when he wrote about Louise de Marillac with the help of documentation furnished by Sister Marguerite Chetif and Sister Mathurine Guerin. Other parish texts provide details of the funeral procession of Louise de Marillac, and are an indication of the funeral customs in those days.

**“Report on the funeral procession of the deceased Louise de Marillac”**  
widow of the nobleman Antoine Le Gras, Councillor, Secretary of the late Marie de Medicis, Queen of France.

Teacher and Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity, called Servants of the sick poor of the parishes. She died in the Faubourg house opposite Saint Lazare and was laid to rest in the Church of Saint Laurent, her parish, in the chapel of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin, on Wednesday, March 17<sup>th</sup> 1660.

1. For the personal attendance of the Pastor, at the request of the family
2. For the High Mass, Prose et Libera
3. For the parish fee
4. For the assisting ministers and the pall bearers, numbering 18
5. For four altar servers

Receipt of 15 *livres* for the above costs from the Daughters of Charity, on April 8<sup>th</sup>, in the year 1660. Signed: Prevost.

Details of other church fees were not included in the preceding text: these included the cost of ringing the bell, velvet decoration, candles, presentation cross and high cross, excavation work in the chapel of the Visitation. The payment is certified in the following note:

*“I, the undersigned, clerk of the Church of Saint Laurent, attest to having received as church fees for the funeral procession for the parties named above, the sum of 21 livres and 19 sols, from the hands of the Sisters of Charity, from whom I discharge obligation for this and all other fees, this 8<sup>th</sup> day of April, 1660.”* Signed: Houel.

Monsieur Gobillon then took charge of his parish. Other documents and appendixes follow. One chapter is dedicated to the service of the poor “by the Daughters of Charity” which was probably based on the writings of Louise de Marillac or the Common Rules of 1672 signed by M. Almeras and sealed with his seal.

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<sup>2</sup> “History of the parish and church of Saint Laurent in Paris” by Louis Brochard, former pastor at Saint Laurent. Text published in 1923



## MONSIEUR GOBILLON, FIRST BIOGRAPHER OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC

### 1676

Monsieur Gobillon, though not present at Saint Laurent during Saint Louise's lifetime, knew the Daughters of Charity, as well as their devoted service inspired by their Foundress, as he called her. He was amazed by it all: the Sisters, their Foundress, the poor people, the schools. He made inquiries. Sister Marguerite Chetif, and later, Mathurine Guerin, helped him with her writings and conferences.

After several years, the book was ready and was prefaced by a letter to the Queen, a foreword written by the author, and approbation by the bishops and professors. The very detailed table of contents is an invitation not only to read the book but to study and meditate on it. The book is not without its defects and modern research methods have shown the need to make significant adjustments.

### The Letter to the Queen

The writer's purpose is clear from the first lines: *«I could not write the life of a famous Foundress of our day without at the same time speaking of the origin of the Community of servants that she has established... This Company is devoted to the service of poor persons to assist those in all forms of misery and need...»*

Several pages describe and praise the initiatives of the king and queen relating to all forms of poverty. It is not about Saint Vincent, but rather the idea that if poor persons of any kind are deprived of kindness and assistance from their families, the king generously supplies for what is lacking, by providing them with charitable young women to serve them in their illnesses. These women, on account of their commitment which is more honourable and holy than any kind of natural relationship, are dedicated to assisting them in every need of soul and body...

*“Although small in and of itself, the Company is significant and great because of the quality of its members, important for the extent of its works...it is for this reason, Madame, that this Company wanted to make known to the public the history of its Foundress and to proclaim to all the Church the objectives of its vocation and the dispositions of its zeal. It has thought it well to address Your Majesty to implore your help and the protection of your royal piety in the exercise of its works...”* The text concludes with respectful salutations to the Queen.

This work of Monsieur Gobillon is preceded by a brief foreword that is both humble and eloquent.

*“The details of a life as holy as hers were not recorded with the care and precision they merited, and I have been able to glean only a general idea of her virtues from the recollections that have been passed on to me. I was given access to material about the institution of her Company and the various establishments that she created. I read some of her letters as well as excerpts from some of her Meditations and conferences that she left behind. I consulted individuals who were involved in her activities and who were able to give testimony to her actions and thus provide for me*

*the basis for my account. This would have been more detailed if I had been able to study all the material that showed the person she was...*”

Monsieur Gobillon then adds the following description of his research: *“the vast array of testimonies that I found, seemed to me to be so solid, so advanced and so touching that I deemed them worthy to be compiled so as to provide instruction for her daughters. Nothing is more capable of inspiring their love and fidelity for their vocation than the animated words of their Mother, so filled with her Spirit...”*

### **Supplementary Note**

Monsieur Gobillon was certainly the first biographer of Mademoiselle Le Gras, but a lesser known jewel was added to his crown at the time of the beatification of Vincent de Paul.

Sister Marie de Geoffre discovered some extracts of the process of beatification and canonisation of the venerable servant of God, Vincent de Paul. The following was included in the explanatory notes accompanying the testimony of Monsieur Gobillon, the 139<sup>th</sup> witness; priest, doctor in theology at the Sorbonne, Vicar General of Cardinal de Noailles, archbishop of Paris, pastor of Saint Laurent, aged 79 years:

*“Louise de Marillac (Mademoiselle Le Gras) was co-foundress of the Company of the Daughters of Charity... the fact that Louise de Marillac, the widow Le Gras, was Foundress of the Company of the Daughters of Charity with Saint Vincent de Paul, is so well established by tradition, even by the depositions in the process of Saint Vincent (although these are attributed solely to the person of Saint Vincent), that it is almost superfluous to indicate any proof of this. Such evidence is found in diverse excerpts from the Acts of the Company, in the letters from Saint Vincent, in those from Mademoiselle Le Gras, in the testimony of those who came after her, and especially in the book for the process of canonisation of the saint presented by M. Gobillon, doctor at the Sorbonne, pastor of the parish of Saint Laurent in Paris, 139<sup>th</sup> witness in the process, whose book is entitled: ‘Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras, Foundress and first Superior of the Daughters of Charity, servants of the sick poor’ (Edition 1676). Therefore it seems to us that all the testimonies for the process relating to the foundation of the Company can equally apply to Mademoiselle Le Gras as to Saint Vincent. In addition, the conclusion drawn that the excellence of the vocation and works of the Daughters of Charity supports the holiness of their Founder can also serve to attest to the holiness of their Foundress.”*

### **1769**

When Monsieur Gobillon’s book was no longer in print, a new work came into circulation, entitled: **“The Life of the Venerable Louise de Marillac” by Monsieur Gobillon, pastor of Saint Laurent, reviewed, corrected and enlarged by Monsieur Collet, Priest of the Congregation of the Mission, doctor of theology.**

In his foreword, the author reprinted whole pages of M. Gobillon’s work while adding his own additional information: *“This book contains what M. Gobillon said, he would have been just as happy as I am with these new discoveries. People’s recollections of events soon fade with the departure of those who were witnesses to*

*them. However, the Daughters of Charity of the Faubourg Saint Denis have provided me with several documents which can help us to understand more and more the virtue of their holy Mother and nurture the piety of those who are not familiar with these events.”*

So, with some additional material, and slightly different phraseology, the essence of what we read remains the work of M. Gobillon.

## 1886

A hundred years after M. Collet’s publication, **Monsieur Antoine Fiat, then Superior General, published a new work in four small volumes** “*which is recommended for your pious reflection,*” he said. The work that was offered to us was not a modern text, written in an elegant style. Its principal merit lay in the fact that it was such an early work, and in its incontestable truthfulness. It was the life of our venerable Mother, as written in 1676 by M. Gobillon, pastor of Saint Laurent, the parish of Saint Louise. This book was given preference over all the others because it made, from the perspective of the beatification process which was in progress at the time, some quite exceptional statements.

The Motherhouse Archives housed these treasures and the entire Company would have the pleasure of benefiting from them. They included:

1. The remarks made by the first Daughters of Charity on the virtues of Louise de Marillac which were in addition to the conferences given by the holy Founder on the same subject.
2. The history of the exhumation and transfer of the body of this humble servant of God.
3. The description of extraordinary graces obtained through her intercession.

The second volume contained the Writings of our venerable Mother under the titles of Meditations, Thoughts, Advice and Maxims. In the third volume a selection of letters from the venerable Foundress was included. The fourth volume was similar in content.

Father Fiat concluded his presentation by stating the specific purpose of the book: “*This is a sort of manual in which each Daughter of Charity will be able to study individually the true spirit of her holy vocation.*”

These three significant publications were written at three different times. They testify to the holy life of Louise de Marillac in her conformity to the will of God under the guidance of the humble Monsieur Vincent. **However, more remains to be said!**

## SISTER MARIE DE GEOFFRE DE CHABRIGNAC

Notes: Sister Marie de Geoffre de Chabrignac, died on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1893 at the main house in Paris, at 59 years of age and 35 years of vocation.

Even the opening lines of her death notice speak about Louise de Marillac: “*For all those who knew Sister Geoffre, to mention her name is to evoke **thoughts of our pious Mother**, to bring back to life this great woman, to bring her out from the shadow of humility that she prized so much . It is to anticipate the day when the voice*

*of the Church, filled with light, will finally reveal Louise de Marillac in all her beauty.”*

From the earliest years of her vocation, Sr. Geoffre’s devotion to the venerated Foundress continued to increase. She no longer would say: *“Why hasn’t our Mother been canonised?”* but rather: *“**Our Mother must be canonised.** God wants our Mother to be canonised.”*

In 1875, Mother Louise Lequette sent a Sister who had been expelled from Mexico during turbulent times, to work with Sr. Geoffre because she was skilled in working with documents. For a long time Sister Geoffre had wanted to delve into the mysteries hidden in the sealed boxes of writings that no one had ever investigated. The Community is indebted to her for having uncovered the precious writings of Louise de Marillac during the ten years that she dedicated to this work. Until that time, all that was known were the short excerpts contained in Gobillon’s text. In her death notice, we read the impressive details of her finds, in the form of two volumes: one comprises the foundress’s thoughts, advice and regulations and the other contains 727 letters enriched by numerous annotations that show concordances which allow us to reconstruct the history of the birth of the Company and its works. She was also able to make a deposition for the informative process on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1887: *“I affirm under oath taken prior to being questioned, that no means were omitted for the text to remain in absolute conformity to the original. The documents have been reread numerous times...I testify to the integrity of the text, in the most positive and clearest sense, so that this testimony may be of service at the time of a canonical examination of the writings, if I am no longer present to renew my testimony.”*

The hour of glorification for Louise de Marillac had not yet sounded. At a Council meeting in 1882, the Community made the decision to request the beatification of their venerated Foundress. It was on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1882 that the Council came together for an extraordinary meeting. The Superior General, Father Fiat, stated the purpose of the meeting, which was to examine if they had sufficient grounds for initiating the cause for the beatification of Louise de Marillac, adding that the diocesan authority had already demonstrated support for the cause.

On August 30<sup>th</sup> of the same year, a circular letter from the Superior General announced this good news to the entire Community and asked the Sister Servants a series of questions. Some questions were intended to establish the **ongoing reputation for holiness of the servant of God** in each house in the Company. The purpose of other questions was to gather information in writing or to encourage people to make known **graces received through her intercession**. Responses flooded in from France and elsewhere. Sister Marie de Geoffre sorted the information, drawing out from it what she considered useful for the collection. Once more she delved into the material in the Archives and in the oldest houses in Paris and the surrounding areas. She spent long hours in the National Archives, the Mazarine Library, at Saint Genevieve, etc. She submitted to the Church tribunal a list of 116 works in which she had found testimonies to the holiness of our “Mother” and her participation in the works of Saint Vincent.

On April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1886, the informative process opened and this would continue until December 18<sup>th</sup> 1890. During this time, Sister Geoffre continued her research,

reviewing the editing of the signed writings word for word, examining the conferences of Saint Vincent recorded by Louise de Marillac, classifying and arranging them in a collection.

During this time, Sisters from numerous Provinces called one after another to make depositions for the process. Her own deposition was given over the course of 18 tribunal meetings at Saint Lazare, in the relic room, in the presence of three judges, the promoter and the ecclesial lawyer delegated by the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris. Sister Geoffre never lived to see the fulfilment of her great hope: “Our Mother will be canonised.” Beatified on May 9<sup>th</sup> 1920 by Pope Benedict XV, Louise de Marillac was canonised on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1934 by Pope Pius XI. On February 10<sup>th</sup> 1960, Pope John XXIII declared her patroness of all Christian social workers.

One day, moved to the depths of her being by the words of one of the successors of Saint Vincent who had just concluded his conference for the renewal of vows, Sister Geoffre said she wished she could write these words in letters of gold on the hearts of all Daughters of Charity:

*“My ardent desire is that Louise de Marillac have her due place in our homes, that all her daughters have the highest esteem for her and the most faithful trust in her, and that the entire community, justly proud of their very worthy Foundress, gather round her banner and walk resolutely in her footsteps...Gaze upon what was shown to you on the mountain and follow that example.”*

Today, we are able to admire and study all these writings about Saint Louise de Marillac in the Archives of the Company. We can also delve into her writings and teachings that are available to each Daughter of Charity in the works that have been translated into various languages.

Sister Claire HERRMANN  
Archives Service

## PREPARATION FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR OF THE 350<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

### **The Founders: Two different but parallel lives with a common destiny**

Throughout human history, the Son of God has continually sought out persons who might accept the mission of bringing freedom to the poor and destitute. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, God looked upon two human beings, a man and a woman. She was from the north of France, he was from the southwest. God knew that one day they would meet in Paris. This meeting was crucial for the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, one of the pillars of the mission of salvation for poor

persons, on a human as well as spiritual level.<sup>1</sup> Who were this woman and this man? She is Louise de Marillac and he is Vincent de Paul. Their lives were very different, but they journeyed on parallel pathways towards the same destiny, guided by a divine force that Vincent de Paul called Providence.

## SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL

Vincent de Paul was born in the village of Pouy, near Dax, in the Landes region of Gascony. According to historians, the peasant class in southwest France was not in the same social or economic situation as peasants in the rest of France were. The regions of the Basque Country, Bearn, Guyenne and Gascony were small states with a Parliament, as well as administrative and fiscal autonomy. This created a system of peasant landowners with very little land-leasing to tenant farmers. The de Paul family was not poor, even though they risked falling into poverty during times of war or unsuccessful harvests. On the mother's side of the family, it seems that the Moras family belonged to the bourgeoisie, managing land that extended from Peyrous<sup>2</sup> to Orthevielle, 20 km south of Dax. They had jurisdiction over the inhabitants and land in the village: in matters of justice, order, taxation of kilns, mills, presses, etc. from which they collected taxes. They were also exempt from numerous taxes. It also seems that several of the mother's brothers were lawyers and government officials and that one member of the Moras family, perhaps the grandparents of Vincent de Paul, owned a house in the village of Pouy.

The father's side of the family owned large-scale farms with a significant amount of land, woods, and flocks in Pouy and in other areas near Dax, for example in the village of Saint-Paul. Since this was a bourgeois family of government officials and large-scale farming, we can imagine that they were influential in the society of that region. It can be said, then, that Vincent de Paul belonged to a family that was able, because of its condition, and in keeping with the customs and social mentality of that period, to aspire to climbing the social and ecclesial ladder without acting contrary to the Gospel. This is also evident in the families of Saint-Cyran, Berulle, Francis de Sales, Arnauld, Marillac, Attichy, etc. This is the same expectation that Saint Vincent and Saint Louise had for Louise's son, Michel Le Gras. This custom could only be practised in families who could make arrangements, through their influential connections, for the conferral of ecclesial benefices that the king gave to the nobility, the high-bourgeoisie or the high-clergy. Since this was considered the normal practice at that time, we might also add that according to custom, the poor younger members of these families were destined to work in public administration, enter the convent or embrace the priestly state. None of these aspirations is in conflict with the Gospel, because at that time separation between the world and the transcendent was inconceivable. French society was part of the sacred realm, which penetrated everything. There was no separation between social, political and religious domains. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, having a vocation or not was generally dependent on a family benefice or the needs of the Church. The only requirements for the priesthood according to Saint Thomas and the Council of Trent were an

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Vincent constantly reiterated the idea that God was the one who founded the Company: Coste IX, 107, 166-167, 192, 195, 357, 359, 472, 536-537; X, 587...

<sup>2</sup> See Charles BLANC, "La parenté de Monsieur Vincent" (M. Vincent's Relatives) in the *Bulletin de la Société de Borda*, 1960, pp. 116-128

untarnished moral character and the knowledge needed to carry out this ministry<sup>3</sup>. The notion of personal vocation was something first introduced into France in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Berulle and propagated by Olier, Bourdoise, the Oratorians, Sulpicians and the priests of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet.

On the initiative of M. de Comet, judge and member of the Moras family, the de Paul family chose the clerical state for Vincent, with his consent and in an attempt to improve the social situation of the family. Why? Perhaps because they judged him capable of meeting the educational requirements for priesthood and obtaining a significant position in the Church. At the age of 15, Vincent went to study at the school in Dax. He was able to complete three years of study in one year, and in two years was prepared to study theology. Moreover, he was considered capable of holding the post of tutor to M. de Comet's children. All this leads us to believe that when he was still a child, even though he tended the flocks, he must have had private lessons from a teacher, either at home or, as is more probable, when he spent time in his maternal grandparents' home.

Perhaps this accounts for his piety. And even if at a later time his temperament becomes more morose and brusque, he had a sensitive and affectionate nature. For example, he had a childlike devotion to the Blessed Virgin; he gave alms in the form of handfuls of flour or 30 sols to poor people; he cried when, at the age of 20 and newly ordained, he went to Rome and visited the tomb of the apostles; when he visited his family, he shed tears at the idea of not being able to help them financially. Several years later, he would write: "*Do you think I do not love my relatives? I indeed have the same sentiments of affection for them that anyone would have. My natural instinct is to help them...*"<sup>4</sup> Vincent was a conscientious young man; he planned to carry out his priestly obligations as well as seeking the means to assure the material well-being of his family. At this time, there was no conflict between living an honest priestly life and desiring to help one's family. In our own day there is no conflict with Gospel teaching, either, in the idea of good families wanting their children to be well-educated, obtain degrees and find gainful employment in society and in the Church.

It was the same for Vincent de Paul. In 1638, when he was already a "saint", he wrote to Louise on the subject of the future of her son Michel: "*I spoke to M. Pavillon about your son. I think it would be well for him to finish his theology, be ordained, and practise for some time the exercises of piety suitable for ecclesiastics. Once he has done all that, I shall make no objection to the above-mentioned Monsieur Pavillon's receiving him. Without this, the young man would be useless to the said Monsieur Pavillon, and an unbearable burden to himself when he found himself in the*

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<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theologica*, Supl. 31, 1-2 and q. 36; Council of Trente, XXIIIth Session, Decrees on the Reformation Chap. XIV; c. 12-13 of ref.

<sup>4</sup> Abelly recounts that, around 1650, the Lord of Fresne gave him 1000 francs to assist his family, who had lost everything to the soldiers. When the saint accepted the sum, at his friend's insistence, he wrote to him (the sentence cited in the text) and added: "*but I must act according to the movements of grace, and not those of nature. I should think of those poor persons who are even worse off, rather than of my friends and relatives.*" (Book III, Chap. XIX, p. 294). Likewise, the story of a certain priest touched Saint Vincent very much. This priest, formerly a member of the Congregation of the Mission, had saved Saint Vincent's life. Many times he had asked to be readmitted, but always in vain. The idea occurred to him to remind the Saint of the service he had once rendered him. On recalling it, Saint Vincent yielded and sent him a letter of which Collet has preserved only the following words: "Come, Monsieur, and you will be received with open arms." (V, 543).

mountains, at the farthest end of the kingdom, doing nothing, unqualified for any employment.

*In the name of God, Mademoiselle, take my advice in this matter. I know what is involved. I hope that, if your son does what I have just said, he will never be in need of good employment. If God allows me to live, I promise you that I shall take care of him as if he were my own flesh and blood.*"(Coste I, 427-428).

It seems that Vincent considered this human drive for prosperity as something that God had implanted in human nature when he created the universe. God would have endowed humans with self love, responsibility and drive for personal, family and social happiness, as if holiness consisted solely in living according to one's human nature as it had been programmed by God <sup>5</sup> and that living in this way was the way to accomplish God's will.

This mentality could explain the fact that, when Vincent returned to his place of origin in 1623, he felt a strong temptation to redress a possible injustice. Perhaps his brothers and sisters reproached him: the family had spent money on his education, they even sold a pair of oxen so that he in turn could help them to have a better life. That was one way of investing money in those days. So, as well as the affection he felt for his family perhaps he also felt guilty of doing them an injustice. However, he also believed that: *"an ecclesiastic who possesses anything owes it to God and the poor"* (Coste XII p.546, 1963 ed.). In order to ease his conscience and to act with justice, he bequeathed to his brothers and sisters all the inheritance he had received from his parents and an extra sum of 900 livres (Coste XIII a, p. 98...).

At the age of 19, Vincent was ordained a priest. He said that this was quite a common practice in his time (Coste XI p. 107); no one was scandalised by it. The decrees of the Council of Trent had not yet come into force in France. The time of the major reformers had not yet arrived.<sup>6</sup> After his ordination, he wanted to become the pastor of Tihl, a parish close to his birthplace. He applied for this appointment but without success. Although responsibility for souls was a benefice with appreciable remuneration, this does not necessarily mean that he would have lived comfortably on this income<sup>7</sup>. It would be completely unwarranted to say that comfort was his *only* goal. Several years later, when he was named pastor at Clichy and at Chatillon, he was happy.

Providence was at work: if he had taken the position in Tihl, he would not have been able to found the Company of the Daughters of Charity, for an Association or a Confraternity needed to be Parisian and not provincial in order for it to take root

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<sup>5</sup> Coste IX, p. 427...; X p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> P. COSTE, *Le grand saint du grand siècle. Monsieur Vincent*, (The Great Saint of the Great Century) vol. I, Desclée de Brouwer and Co. Paris, 1931, p. 38-39.

<sup>7</sup> Saint Vincent would say to the missionaries: *"In the beginning of the Church ...there were very few priests, only those who were needed, as many as there were benefices. And, when a priest happened to die, the person chosen for the benefice took Orders, with the result that very often men were appointed before they became priests. In the end, however, it was judged advisable and expedient—even necessary—to have more priests. That's why, even though a man might not have a benefice, he was admitted to Orders with a patrimonial title, and in this way, the number of priests increased. Now, this title varies according to the place, or at least whether the Bishops have required more in one place than in another. In Paris, 50 ecus are required; elsewhere it's 100, and in other places 80 suffice. There are some that are satisfied with 50 livres, more or less."* (Coste XI p. 211)



and flourish. Nor would Vincent have met Louise de Marillac, and it has been proved that she was as indispensable as he in this foundation, by organising and directing it. Moreover, Vincent had the qualities of a peasant that enabled him to found a Company made up of members from the peasant class, dedicated to the service of poor persons. He was persevering, clever, showed creativity in overcoming difficulties and seeking solutions. He was from a generous family, had talents for helping poor people and personality traits needed for priesthood. Later, he would come to realise that all of this helped to prepare him to found a Company which was different from other religious foundations at that time.

### **In Paris**

Towards the end of 1608, Vincent arrived in Paris. It seems that after finishing his studies in Toulouse, he spent time in Rome and according to his own account of events, he was held captive in Tunisia for two years. Although some biographers do not believe this, I accept it because an adventure as improbable as this, of which he himself gave an account to a judge and lawyer in Dax, could only be true. Moreover, the lawyer would have been able to verify this information. Vincent was 27 when he wrote about it and knew what he was doing. He had arrived at a considerable degree of maturity and depth of character. He was seen as a good priest who wanted to live his priestly life to the best of his ability. I think that this painful process made him more attached to the priestly life he continued to live and that the episode helped him to understand the sufferings of the unfortunate.

Around 1602, circles of spirituality in Paris began to take on greater significance<sup>8</sup>. Among the most famous of these circles was the one whose members used to meet together at the home of Barbe Jeanne Avrillot, wife of Pierre Acarie. When she was left a widow, Madame Acarie became a Carmelite and took the name of Marie of the Incarnation (Blessed). Her circle was frequented by her cousin Pierre de Bérulle, André Duval, Ange de Joyeuse, Benoît de Canfield, Brétigny, Gallemant, Michel de Marillac, la Marquise de Maignelay (who was part of the de Gondi family) and many others. They all followed the inspirations of the Carthusian Dom Baucousin and the Rhine-Flemish spirituality, through the *Evangelic Pearl, a Brief Treatise* by Isabelle Bellinzaga (Gagliardi), the *Rule of Perfection* of Benedict of Canfield and the writings of Saint Catherine de Genes. Most of them also read the works of Saint Teresa of Avila and some read those of Saint John of the Cross.

Soon after his arrival in Paris, Vincent de Paul began to frequent this spiritual milieu. It happened rather quickly either because he was seeking holiness, or because these persons invited him to their gatherings. Through contemplative prayer and detachment, all were seeking holiness, or as Berulle called it – *divinisation*.

These spiritual figures in the Acarie circle, had a great deal of influence among the nobility. All the indications show that towards the end of 1609 or the beginning of 1610, Vincent de Paul was regarded as a priest in search of God. Based on later information, we know that he devoted himself to prayer under the direction of Berulle. In 1610, he was named chaplain to Queen Marguerite de Valois (Margot),

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<sup>8</sup> Louis COGNET, *Histoire de la Spiritualité chrétienne. T. 3 : La Spiritualité moderne*, (History of Christian Spirituality, vol. 3: Modern Spirituality) Aubier, Paris 1966, p. 233-273.

whom Henry IV had divorced. In 1611, Vincent made a retreat with the Oratorians and Berulle judged him worthy to replace the pastor in Clichy, Fr. Bourgoing, who had become an Oratorian. It was owing to Berulle's influence that in the following year Vincent was appointed tutor to the children of the powerful de Gondi family.

### **The Mystical Night of Love or Holiness<sup>9</sup>**

The persons who frequented the circle of Madame Acarie practised meditation, and Vincent de Paul did this assiduously, making great progress. Towards 1614, while he was tutor for the de Gondi family, he entered into a mystical night that his biographers refer to as the *temptation against the faith*, although it seems to be along the lines of the Dark Night which Saint John of the Cross (10) considers a gateway into the level of contemplation called *prayer of quiet*.

In this dark Night, Vincent de Paul made a heroic offering: giving his life for another, asking God to transfer to him a painful experience that a friend was having (a theologian he had met at the palace of Queen Marguerite de Valois). Vincent understood that God accepted his offer and he began to experience the weight of the doubts his friend had had. He would only be released from this by another act of love: *consecrating his life, for the love of Jesus Christ, to the service of poor persons<sup>10</sup>*.

It was not this offering of self that made him a "saint", but rather it was because he was already a saint that he made this offering. In his faith journey, by devoting himself to prayer in order to carry out God's will and free himself from every attachment, Vincent entered into the mystical night of the senses, a stage common to all Christians who follow Jesus. This offering represents a sort of plateau for Vincent in his efforts to live out the theological virtues he received at baptism. Vincent was striving for interior detachment even to the point of sacrificing his life for this suffering theologian. Through contemplation, Vincent received the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit which purified him inwardly. Through this purification, called the mystical night, he experienced a "second conversion" as theologians of his time such as Louis Lallemand call it. Vincent showed his holiness by giving himself to God to serve poor persons whom he had already begun to visit during these obscure years, at the Hospital of Charity founded by the Brothers of Saint John of God in Paris. At that moment, God freed Vincent from these trials (as God does with those who reach this stage of the spiritual journey.) Vincent explains this in two ways to the Daughters of Charity (Coste IX p. 330 and 333). We can say that he was able to receive the strength of God's Spirit bringing him out of this mystical night because of his personal qualities and the graces received at baptism. Despite doubts, he sought holiness in the service of poor persons. He was holy, he loved those who were poor and he was ready for the mission that God would confide to him. All that he needed then was to meet Louise de Marillac.

### **SAINT LOUISE**

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<sup>9</sup> A more detailed description of the Dark Night is found in the article by Benito Martinez : "La Nuit obscure de Saint Vincent de Paul", in the *Annales de la C.M. et des F.d.I.C.* N°116 (July-Aug 2008) p. 350-355 (Fr. Lautissier said that this article has been translated into French).

<sup>10</sup> Coste XI p. 26-27

Louise de Marillac was the other person that God needed to save poor persons according to his plan. Barely one month before Vincent de Paul's arrival in Paris in 1607, Louise, at the age of 16, met a Capuchin on rue Saint Honore. For three years, she had been living in one of the many boarding houses that existed in Paris for middle class young women. They were accustomed to doing their own domestic chores to help meet the cost of their board. Louise was seeking the answer to a question that was haunting her: Why did she have such a life of suffering? Meditating on this three years before her death, she would say: (12) "*God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and He has hardly ever left me, at any age, without some occasion of suffering.*" (Sr. Charpy p. 707).

Born in 1591, she was the illegitimate daughter of some member of the de Marillac family; to this day we do not know which one. She was provided for by the head of the family, Louis de Marillac, who took her, not long after her birth, to the best convent in Paris (where children of the nobility were educated). She received an excellent classical education, which would serve her well as Foundress and Superioress General. She would know how to draw up the Regulations and reports, write correspondence, impress the women of high society, and appear before bishops and civil administrators.

When Louis de Marillac died, Louise was excluded from the de Marillac family by its members and by civil laws, because of the circumstances of her birth. She was placed in a boarding house, where she discovered what it was like to be a servant and learned to manage household affairs and take responsibility for running a home. Later, she would be able to teach these skills to her daughters.

Although she wanted to become a Capuchin, the de Marillac family arranged for her to marry Antoine Le Gras, of the middle bourgeois class (as a way of improving the political position of the Marillac-Attichy family).

Her Capuchin director recommended her to do three things: pray, have trust in God and collaborate with God's will. It is through this *trusting collaboration* that Louise would find the answers to her questions about the mysterious suffering in her life. Louise devoted herself to prayer but after the manner of those whose spirituality is based on an abstract mysticism, the same spirituality that Berulle instilled in Vincent de Paul.

### **Mystical Night**<sup>11</sup>

When Antoine Le Gras became ill, God presented himself to Louise, without her realising it, as harsh and awesome, as a means of purifying the torments of her interior life. This is the passive dark night that Vincent de Paul had experienced not long before. In the manner of Saint John of the Cross, God purified Louise until June 1623, then in a more gentle way until December 1625, when her husband died. During her husband's illness, Louise's troubled mind developed a guilt complex which came from the fact that she had married despite her desire to enter religious life.

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<sup>11</sup> A more detailed discussion of the Mystical Night of Saint Louise can be found in the biography written by Benito MARTINEZ, *Un paradis pour les pauvres à tout prix*, (Paradise at All Costs for the Poor) CEME Salamanque 1995 p. 30-32.

It was through these events that God purified her and revealed to her the mission that would be confided to her. Was this a sort of continuation of the call she heard when she was 16 years old? This Night ended on the day of Pentecost, 1623. On June 4<sup>th</sup> the purification by the Spirit was complete and God let Louise understand that she would be given a new spiritual director. She also understood that she would be with other young women in the service of poor persons. Having become “holy”, she was now ready for the foundation of the Company.

Louise de Marillac did not fully understand the mystical meaning of this “passive night” of her spiritual journey during this period of passive purification, nor in the years that followed. She only understood that God was beginning to reveal her vocation to her. She must have understood that she was experiencing a spiritual reality among other realities, something experienced by those who are seeking God.

### **Eve of Pentecost 1642: collapse of the floor**

Another enlightening event was the miracle of the floor that collapsed in the empty room. On the eve of Pentecost 1642, a meeting had been scheduled to take place with Monsieur Vincent, the Ladies of Charity and Louise. The meeting had to be cancelled, and the floor collapsed in the very room where it was to have been held. For Louise, the Company was saved by God (A 75). At that time she began to write a sort of journal account, describing what the Spirit of God had revealed to her in the mystical night of 1623 (A 3).

At the age of 54, reflecting on her past life allowed her to see how God had arranged for her to meet Saint Vincent and found with him the Company of the Daughters of Charity, without her completely understanding what it was all about. She needed to be a Marillac, but not a member of the aristocracy, for if she had been of the nobility, she would not have been able in that time, to be a Daughter of Charity. She now understood the importance of the human formation she had received at Poissy and her experience of being a servant in the boarding house. She also understood that she could not have been a *religious*, that she had to marry and that God had chosen her because she was a widow who had a son. In that epoch single women had no standing in society, and married women were entirely dependent on their husbands. Only widows of means, especially those who had a son, could be considered equal to men with reference to rights and obligations.

At that moment, Louise understood that her life, which she had considered a heavy cross, provided her with the freedom necessary for being a Foundress. God had chosen her because of this life, with her intellectual and emotional qualities, as well as her human formation as a member of the bourgeoisie. Even before she met Vincent de Paul, she had collaborated unknowingly with God, recognising God’s presence in the events of her life. At the age of 54, she understood that God had given her the charism to be a Foundress, precisely because of her state in life, and this led to the foundation of the Daughters of Charity. God arranged for her to meet the great spiritual director Vincent de Paul, even though, at first, she did not like him very much. The meeting between the woman from the north of France and the man from the southwest had taken place. It took place sometime between Christmas 1624 and the beginning of 1625.

Until she met Saint Vincent, Louise had not had the opportunity to devote herself completely to those who were poor. Like all devout people, she gave alms. Her concern was to seek union with God, her own sanctification as well as that of her husband and son. This was the reason she devoted herself to prayer. After her “mystical night,” her prayer would become contemplative and would remain that way for the rest of her life. Giving herself to God in prayer would be the basis of her gift of self to God in the person of the poor. Nevertheless, the time came when Louise de Marillac’s actions and her person both became identified with the poor, thanks to the influence of Saint Vincent (Coste I p. 64-65). Her gift of self to God would remain constant, but beginning in the month of May 1629 until her death, this gift of self to God would be lived out in the service of poor persons through her service to the Company that she founded with Saint Vincent and of which she was a member.

However, there is a certain difference between Saint Louise’s giving herself to poor persons and the way that Saint Vincent did this. He knew poor persons from the days of his childhood, and this gift of self to those who were poor came from the depths of his being. For Louise de Marillac, who on the other hand was absorbed with a fear of judgment from God and a great desire to sanctify herself, this gift of self to poor persons came to her from her director, Vincent de Paul. She identified herself with those who were poor in such a way that we can say that her being comprised: the outer layer (skin) which was poor persons, while the interior of her being (flesh) remained that interior life linked directly to God. On the contrary, for Saint Vincent, the outer layer (skin) was his interior life, while the interior of his being (flesh) was poor persons. Both of them, though, were equally faithful to God’s plan for them: to serve and evangelise the poor.

In conclusion, I would dare to say that everything that Saint Louise is in the history of charity for poor persons and for the Company, she owes to Saint Vincent. It also needs to be said, however, that the role Saint Louise had in the works of Vincent de Paul was so significant that, we can believe that if she had never been there, many of Saint Vincent’s works would never have been developed or would not have endured after the Founders died.

Father Benito Martinez, CM

*Sisters, know that when you leave prayer or Holy Mass for the service of the poor, you are not losing anything since in serving the poor you are going to God and you must see God in them.*

*Conference on the Rules, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1634*