

May-June Echoes 2009

Introduction

Opening of the Assembly

Opening address given to the General Assembly 2009

Father Gregory Gay

The Company today

Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General

Elections

Election of the Superioress General

Pentecost Monday, 1st June, 2009

Election of the Superioress General; Homily by Father Gregory Gay.

Pentecost Monday, 1st June 2009

Election of the General Councillors and the Assistant General

Circular of Sister Evelyne Franc, 9th and 11th June, 2009

In communion with the Church

Message from the Holy Father to Sister Evelyne Franc

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of State for the Vatican

Visit by Cardinal Franc Rode CM, Prefect of the CIVCSVA (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life).

Homily given during the Eucharistic celebration on 25th May, 2009

Visit by Monsignor Gabor Pinter, representing Monsignor Baldelli, Apostolic Nuncio in France

Homily during the Eucharist of 28th May, 2009

Visit by Cardinal Andre Vingt Trois, Archbishop of Paris

Homily during the Eucharist of 9th June, 2009

Interventions

The biblical foundations of prophecy and hope

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap

Closing of the Assembly

Address given by Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General

Motherhouse, 13th June, 2009

Closing Eucharistic celebration

Homily by Father Gregory Gay, Superior General, 13th June, 2009

The other conferences will appear in the next Echo

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2009

The General Assembly 2009

Introduction

“Prophecy and hope, now and everywhere” was the theme for the 8th General Assembly that took place at the Motherhouse from Monday, May 18th until Saturday, June 13th 2009.

On May 8th 2009, 184 Sisters arrived from all over the world (77 Visitatrices, 1 Regional Superior and 92 Delegates representing their Provinces). They began with an eight day retreat that prepared them to be led by the Holy Spirit during this General Assembly. The retreat, animated by Father Javier Alvarez, Director General, had for its theme: “*You must be born anew*” (John 3:7). Father Alvarez reflected on our name, “Daughter of Charity” and the need to rekindle our first vocational fervour and allow ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He reminded us of how important it is to be open to experiencing Christ as the disciples did on the road to Emmaus, when their lives were transformed by meeting the Risen One. Fr. Alvarez then invited us to follow the example of the Son of God who became man in order to be one with us and to live in true union of heart with persons who are poor.

On Monday, May 18th, the General Assembly opened with Mass presided over by Father Gregory Gay, Superior General. The members of the Assembly had the joy of receiving an apostolic blessing from Pope Benedict XVI through a message sent by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican Secretary of State. It is interesting to note that of the 184 members present, 104 of them were participating in a General Assembly for the first time. 36 Sisters served as interpreters and translators to provide for communication among the different languages.

On May 19th, Sister Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, gave an overview of the major events that marked the life of the Company during the last six years. She also shared several calls for conversion in order to promote fidelity to our charism and the apostolic vitality of the Company.

After a day of conferences and the presentation of the financial report of the Company, the Sisters were invited to proceed to the Work Document that was developed from the Syntheses of Responses from the Provincial Assemblies. Reflection and study centred on four principle themes that stood out as concerns common to all the Provinces:

- Cultivate our life of faith: a life centred on Christ, nourished by the Word of God, open to the movements of the Spirit.

- Enhance “living together in great union and cordiality” as a prophetic witness of love and a way of hope.

- Serve by “coming and going” with creativity and audacity, to manifest God’s love to persons living in poverty.

- Deepen our sense of belonging to the Company and recognise our responsibility, individually and collectively, for the vitality and future of the charism.

The members of the Assembly met in 16 groups of 7 languages, then in plenary sessions to share and discuss the four themes. A sense of deep unity was evident in these times of meeting and reflecting. At the beginning of this third millennium, our desire to live our vocation with greater consistency was repeatedly emphasised, so that we might be ever more prophets of love and signs of hope for those who live in poverty. The Final Document will demonstrate this impetus for living out these ideals in concrete ways.

This issue of the Echoes of the Company will describe the experience of this Assembly. The presentations and testimonies not included in this issue will appear in the next Echo.

OPENING OF THE ASSEMBLY

Opening address to the General Assembly 2009

Father Gregory Gay, Superior General
Motherhouse, 18th May 2009

Sisters, I don’t need to tell you how important this Assembly is, not just for the Little Company but for the whole Church, and especially for the poor who are at the heart of your service in the Church. You have been preparing for this Assembly for nearly two years, individually and as a community through the Domestic and Provincial Assemblies. During my travels across the world while you were holding your Domestic and Provincial Assemblies I read the many letters that found their way to my desk and I was conscious of the wide level of participation by the Sisters and the enthusiasm and creativity that marked both the Domestic and Provincial Assemblies. So we can say that right from the beginning, it was a process involving genuine participation in which all the Sisters in the Company were invited to take part in a free and open way. You will have thought about what prevented you from living your vocation at a deep level and you have tried to find ways of overcoming these

obstacles so that you can give yourselves entirely to God for the service of those who are poor.

One very useful thing to take into consideration for the smooth running of the General Assembly would be for you to be very attentive during each session and to understand thoroughly the subjects discussed. Another important aspect, as we well know, is prayer. We have to keep our hearts constantly open to the light of the Holy Spirit, allowing God to work in and through us. God has showered his graces on you. In this meeting room there is an incredible wealth of talent and creativity. You all have your own ideas: you all have your own vision of how things should be and it is important that you express your vision and your ideas as simply and clearly as possible so that others can understand you better. But we must also listen to others with respect, openness and the desire to learn. We are a very multicultural group here. You come from different countries, cultures and backgrounds. No single one of you can have a complete understanding of this reality. Things that are good and that make sense in one place could prove useless or of no practical value somewhere else. We have to be open to other ways of viewing things and be flexible enough to change our own ways of thinking. This requires of each person present here a real love for the Company and for everything concerning it.

The Assembly calls for much reflection and discernment. After thinking about your own ideas and after listening to and reflecting on what others have said, you are called to take your decisions in accordance with your own spiritual insight and conscience, trying always to avoid, “simply following the crowd.” We need grace to be able to take decisions and to do all in our power to avoid abstaining. Simplicity demands that you express yourself in a clear and direct manner but you must show respect for others when you voice your opinions. At all times, if there is anything that you don’t understand, I suggest you ask for help. Ask questions until you are clear about the matter.

All the information that you have at your disposal today is the result of much work and preparation by many people. This material includes all the contributions from all over the world and the heart of the world. You are asked to treat it with respect and work on it because what has come from local level and moved to the universal level, as I said to you earlier, comes back to the local level.

As well as dealing with the matters put before you, you also have to choose those who will be governing the Company over the next six years, that is to say, the Superioress General and the General Councillors. You know the role of a leader: it is to animate, encourage and to awaken in us the desire to do our utmost to achieve our goals. The Sisters you elect must have these qualities and must be able to guide others. It is not enough to be able simply to do administrative work, to be organised and put plans into effect. A good leader will be able to accompany you and guide you on the path that the Lord is pointing out to you and which you must follow. You must choose the leadership that you would like to follow so that you, in your turn, can guide your Provinces because, as we read in the Constitutions, it is at local community level that the Company finds its fullest expression. During an Assembly we see that what started off at ground level finds its way to the General Assembly and then comes back to ground level so that the charism of the Company can find its fullest expression there.

May I just share with you two or three other thoughts about the Assembly that have been going through my mind for several months. I have already mentioned some attitudes it is important to have but right from the start of the process, I really think that the most important thing is that all the Sisters who have freely chosen to take part in the Assembly should do so in a spirit of freedom. This is the real way of expressing collegiality which continues to be evident in the General Assembly and its various activities.

There is a passage in the Bible which I have used before in giving different talks to the Daughters of Charity. It is one of my favourite texts and I think that it is appropriate here. It relates the incident of Peter walking on the water as he responds to Jesus' invitation to join him. Peter wants to move out of his own private world, which is the boat he is in, and walk towards Jesus. As long as his thoughts are fixed on Jesus everything goes very well. But once he becomes conscious of where he is, in the midst of the stormy waters, he loses his nerve and begins to sink. However, Jesus is there to come to his aid and stretch out a hand to him.

I think it is important that all of you during this Assembly should have the same attitude that Peter had, that is to say, that you fix your mind on the most important thing, on Jesus, as we understand him in our Vincentian tradition. You are invited to concentrate on your identity. This is your duty at present and in the days and weeks to come, being guided always by the Spirit of the Lord Jesus which we hear in the cries of the poor as well as in the signs of the times in which we live. We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted and to sink beneath the troubled waters in which we live. Jesus will give us the grace to continue to walk towards him, even in difficult situations. If you think that in some places there are certain situations where the Company seems to be sinking, the hand of Jesus is there to lift you up.

The theme chosen by the Company to keep our minds continually fixed on Jesus, the theme of this General Assembly that you have been working on these last two years, is "prophecy and hope, now and everywhere." Your individual actions and those of the Company as a whole, give a collective witness. You witness to the ability to work together for the common good, and following Constitution 61, you desire to practise unity in diversity. As Daughters of Charity you give witness to an alternative way of living by the vows that you renew each year and by practising the virtues proper to the Daughters of Charity: simplicity, humility and charity. Your prophetic witness is a source of hope to all, particularly to those who live in poverty. You are the hand of the Lord Jesus that can raise them up from the raging waters, by journeying with them towards the fullness of life that can only be found in Jesus, the Risen Lord. The hope that you are called to bear witness to is not an abstract concept but a living person, Jesus Christ. It is Jesus that you show to the world, to the Church and to those in need. It is the flame of hope that burns and shines in you and lights up the way for others.

It is this hope that you desire to keep enkindled, not just here during these four weeks when we are gathered here at the Assembly, but a hope that you can deepen in your life, both as an individual and as a community during the Assembly. Your theme, "prophecy and hope, now and everywhere" will have a new significance, take on different nuances, find new dimensions and methods with regard to the work you

are doing together in line with the work that was carried out beforehand. It is the Assembly's hope that this theme will revitalise the Company and that in so doing the poor will be better served.

In many discussion circles throughout the world today, a world that has become deeply secularised, we hear that the Church and religious life have little to say to people. People criticise us for keeping at some distance from the world in which we live. But we know that in the places where we carry out our apostolic ministry this is not the case. We are called to give a prophetic and collective witness in the name of the Church and we are particularly called to accompany those who are poor.

Sisters, may these people continue to be the focus of our attention and as we turn to the poor in today's world they will help us to discover the living Jesus who is always there in their situation. May Jesus, who is present in the circumstances of the needy whom we meet today be the Jesus who inspired you from the beginning to answer his call. May the passion you have in your hearts continue to mould you and to motivate you to live more fully the charism in the way it was set out by our dear Founders.

May Saint Vincent and Saint Louise de Marillac whose jubilee year is fast approaching, intercede for us as we start the work of the General Assembly 2009.

Father Gregory Gay
Superior General

The Company today

Talk given by Sister Evelyne Franc
Motherhouse, 19th May 2009

INTRODUCTION

Father Gregory, Father Javier, my dear Sisters,

May I begin this talk by thanking Fr Gregory, our Superior General, for officially opening our Assembly yesterday. I can assure him that we shall not forget the advice he gave us. I am also grateful to Fr Javier, our Director General, for the meditations he presented to us this past week, during the retreat. Who could have imagined a better introduction for our General Assembly?

Before I move into the central point of my subject, *the Company today*, I think it would be good to turn to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. In 1644, recalling her pilgrimage to Chartres, St Louise wrote the following: On Monday, "*feast of the*

Dedication of the Church of Chartres, I offered to God the designs of His Providence on the Company of the Daughters of Charity . I offered the said Company entirely to Him, asking Him to destroy it rather than let it be established contrary to His holy will. I asked for it, through the prayers of the Holy Virgin, Mother and Guardian of the said Company, the purity of which it stands in need." (Spiritual Writings, L. 111, p. 122)

Our presence here today, 365 years after this event, is proof that Saint Louise's prayer was effective; above all, it is a sign of God's mercy, of Mary's protection of the Company, and makes us thank God for the fidelity of all those Sisters who have gone before us. May it please God to grant, 365 years from now, that those who follow us will also celebrate God's goodness and mercy towards the Company, as well as our fidelity...

I would like to quote From St Vincent's teaching, an extract from the conference he gave to the Daughters of Charity on 25th December 1648, on the love our vocation.

"You say that you're devoting your life to the service of your neighbour for the love of God. Is there any act of love to surpass that? No, for it's an acknowledged fact that the greatest proof of love is to give one's life for what is loved. You are giving your entire life to the practice of charity and, therefore, you're giving it for God. It follows that there's no ministry on earth concerned with the service of God that's greater than yours." (Coste IX, 360-361). In these few sentences, St Vincent gives a good summary of what lies at the heart of our vocation, and in this I see a call to give thanks and to live out the gift of ourselves in an even more radical way *for the practice of charity.*

In this introduction, I shall touch briefly on three points: preparation, importance and composition of this Assembly.

PREPARATION FOR THIS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

This eighth General Assembly, like preceding Assemblies, is marked by the seal of prayer to the Holy Spirit. At this point, I wish to mention the preparation of our hearts and spirits beginning with the letter that Father Gregory sent us in April 2007 and continuing right up to today.

We are well aware of how each Sister has prayed about the preparatory documents and worked on them individually and then with her local community during the Domestic Assembly. It is also good to highlight the fact that the Provincial Assemblies were moments of grace, genuine *kairos* experiences marked by an atmosphere of dialogue, respect, openness and hope. Almost all your letters last year bore testimony to this. Without any doubt, it was the work of the Spirit, of your openness to the light of the Spirit, and the answer to prayers.

During this General Assembly, we, too, shall be literally carried along by the prayer of the whole Company, from the Seminary Sisters to the elderly and sick Sisters who have offered their sufferings for the Company, and continue to do so. I

am sure that the faces of certain Sisters are present to you at this time, and that many promises of prayer come to mind.

The other aspect of preparation was confided to a Commission which has worked with our Facilitator closely linked with the General Council. For the past year, the General Councillors, the Director General and I devoted one whole day to the preparation of this Assembly each time we had a special Council. An offshoot of this was the work of the Sisters of the Secretariat General, those of the International Translation Centre and of the General Treasurer's department. So it was very much a work of collaboration!

Finally, and still within this framework of preparation, I would like to draw your attention to the importance of all the renovations and repairs that have taken place in the Motherhouse during the past year, to improve the facilities for holding our General Assembly here, and also to improve the facilities for receiving and welcoming pilgrims to the Chapel. The Sisters of the Motherhouse are quite accustomed to living among renovations and repair works ... and the six local communities in this large house gave proof once again of their availability and patience during this time. In a special way, they accompany us by their prayers and their service to us as our Assembly progresses.

IMPORTANCE OF THIS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

This has been emphasised many times since yesterday, but allow me to come back to this point. We know from experience the importance of daily meditation at the beginning of each day; our meditation on the Lord's Day gives us the opportunity to look back over the week and to prepare for the week just beginning; our meditation during our monthly retreat, our annual retreat, during Provincial days and the Provincial Assembly These are all opportunities for seeing how things are and for making a new start. The same is true of a General Assembly which must define the direction to be taken during the next six years. This was the case in 1985 with the document "At the Crossroads", in 1991 with the document "At Jacob's Well", in 1997 with "A New Fire", and in 2003 with the "Action Lines". In recalling this, I pay tribute to all the members of preceding Assemblies: to Mother Rogé who is undoubtedly close to us, to Mother Anne Duzan who assured me that she is heart and soul with us, to Mother Juana Elizondo who is here with us, and also to Fr Richard McCullen and Fr Robert Maloney, not forgetting the late Fr Lloret, and also Fr Quintano.

Constitutions 84 and 87 provide details about Assemblies. C 84a states that the role of Assemblies in the Company is to: *"evaluate and promote fidelity to its specific charism and its apostolic vitality"*. In C 87a, we find: *"The General Assembly represents immediately the entire Company"*. All of us who are gathered here, therefore, have the privilege and responsibility to represent the whole Company, with whatever results flow from it, that is, we have to make an effort to put aside any personal agenda we may have, so that we can take into account only the good of the Company. Saint Vincent expressed this idea during the Council meeting of 19th June 1647, when he pointed out that, in discussing the matter in hand, it was necessary to put the glory of God in first place, then the good of the Company and finally the good of the persons to be considered. With his customary astuteness, he adds: *"it's natural*

to think of ourselves, Sisters, but we have to turn immediately back to God." (Coste XIII b, p. 272). It is up to us, therefore, to be careful about this!

COMPOSITION OF THIS ASSEMBLY

Let us take a few moments to study the composition of this eighth General Assembly:

In accordance with C.87, we had to increase the number of delegates so that the number of delegates would be equal to the number of *ex officio* members. The General Council, therefore, asked the Provinces of Central Africa and Central America to elect two delegates. The Council's choice was guided by the following criteria: to give an extra delegate to the largest Province of Latin America, a Province which consists of several countries, and the smallest Province of Africa which also comprises several countries.

Yesterday, you would have noticed during the roll-call of members of the Assembly read out by the Secretary General, Sister Ana Maria Olmeda, that some delegates had been appointed Visitatrices and, as a result, the Sisters elected as substitutes became delegates. This was the case for the Province of the Congo, and in those of Belgium, North Africa and Slovenia. Finally, two Sisters who had been elected delegates, informed me that, for health reasons, they wished to relinquish their right to participate in the General Assembly. These Sisters, from the Chinese Province and the Province of New York, have also been replaced by the Sisters elected as substitutes.

So our Assembly is composed of 184 members: 92 delegates and 92 *ex officio* members. The *ex officio* members include the 13 members of the General Curia and Mother Elizondo, the 76 Visitatrices, the Regional Superior, and a Sister Servant from the Quasi-Province (C. 87c).

I would add that our average age is 57.27, and that 109 of the 184 members of our Assembly are taking part in a General Assembly for the first time.

Now I shall come back to C.84, "*evaluate and promote fidelity to its specific charism and its apostolic vitality*". This will give you the plan that I am going to follow. In the first part, I shall present a review of the past six years, and put before you some trends drawn from the reflection and experience of the General Council on the challenges facing the Company at the present time. The real work of this Assembly will then begin in your groups, but I hope that the points I am going to outline regarding the life of these past six years, and some ideas on possible ways forward, furrows or pathways for the future, might be of some help for you all.

Part One: EVALUATE

This evaluation comes within the scope of the mission that you have entrusted to me, but it is also a joy for me to recapture with you the great events which, by God's Providence, have marked the life of the Company these past few years. It is likewise part of my role to present what the Sisters of the General Council and I, together with

the Treasurer General and the Secretary General, have tried to accomplish; *"in an attitude of service, she sees that unity is maintained in fidelity to the spirit of the Company and in obedience to the Superior General and to the Church"* as C.66a expresses it.

I have greatly appreciated the atmosphere of truth in charity, and of unity in liberty that has marked the work of the General Council. In a community of faith for mission, in collaboration and subsidiarity, we have lived out the difficult mission that was ours. We have tried to balance journeys and visits to the Provinces with our work here at the Motherhouse.

Now I am going to refer again to certain events that have marked these six years, without attempting to include every detail. This is not new information because much of this has appeared in what we can call family letters. I have chosen to group them under different headings: *service of those who are poor, special Council sessions, formation and solidarity*. After that, I shall give you a summary of statistics.

SERVICE OF THOSE WHO ARE POOR (New foundations, Project DREAM, the United Nations, International Project Services).

New foundations

It seems appropriate to begin this overview of the past six years with the service of those who live in poverty, for this is the very reason for our existence, the practice of charity, as St Vincent used to say. Thanks to the availability of Sisters and the generosity of the English-language Provinces (United States, Britain, Ireland and Australia), the Company was able to open a mission in the Cook Islands in January 2005.

In August 2005, two Sisters from the Province of Cracow went to Magadan (in far eastern Russia) where they joined a Sister from the Province of Los Altos Hills who had begun this mission in this region branded and scarred by the Gulags of the Stalin era.

In June 2006, three Sisters from the Provinces of Congo-Congo and Madagascar opened a mission in Tanzania, in a remote area in the north-west of the country.

You must surely have heard that the Provinces of Nigeria and North Africa will very soon open a new mission in the diocese of Nouna, in Burkina Faso.

Project Dream

In June 2005, the Company signed an Agreement with the Sant'Egidio Community, which is recognised canonically as a public Association of lay people which at the present time numbers more than 50,000 persons who are engaged in evangelisation and works of charity in Italy and in more than 70 countries. This community has developed a strategy to combat AIDS, a programme entitled DREAM (Drug Resources Enhancement against Aids and Malnutrition). Project DREAM consists in caring for pregnant women who are HIV positive, to ensure that their babies will be born without this virus. The Project guarantees free access to therapy and entails a global approach which makes it possible to fight against the effects of

AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and malnutrition. Father Maloney is the coordinator of Project DREAM for the Daughters of Charity, and, at the present time, this project is functioning in the Provinces of Mozambique, Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya (Province of Ireland), and in the Province of the Congo. It is an excellent project for AIDS sufferers in Africa. It allows the Sisters to be trained, as well as the technical and care assistant personnel who work with them. It remains a big challenge on account of the large numbers of sick people who are not yet able to be treated and also because of the heavy financial costs that it involves.

UN (United Nations)

Since 22nd January 2007, the Company has enjoyed consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the UN. Our Company is recognised in this context as a Non-Governmental Organisation which tackles causes of injustice, advocates the integral promotion of the human person and fosters the restoration of peace. Following the appointment of Sister Germaine Price as our permanent representative at the Headquarters of the United Nations in New York, this year we have asked Sister Patricia Connolly (St Louis Province) to collaborate with her in New York, and we have asked Sister Monique Javouhey (France South) to represent us in Geneva. I would add that the Company is also recognised at the DPI (Department of Public Information) at the United Nations, and it also collaborates in all the major campaigns concerning education, health and peace.

IPS (International Project Services)

In May 2004, the General Council decided to set up an Office for international projects, at the service of the Provinces. This Office presents to various Foundations your projects on behalf of our destitute brothers and sisters. Up to the present time, it has funded more than 300 projects (amounting to 6 million US dollars).

SPECIAL COUNCIL SESSIONS

In revising our Constitutions and Statutes, which were approved by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on 25th March 2004 and came into effect on 29th November 2004, the Assembly of 2003 bequeathed a precious gift to the Company. This gives me the opportunity to thank Mother Elizondo and the five members of the previous General Council who are here among us (Sr Barrett, Sr Giffard, Sr Kisu, Sr Leitenbauer and Sr Neo).

Before dwelling a little on the Constitutions, I must recall that one of the first tasks of the General Council was to develop the Action Lines, a mission that had been confided to it at the end of the Assembly of 2003; they were published in January 2004 and I think they have served the Company well. We all took part in their evaluation during our preparation for this 2009 Assembly.

We then had to proceed to the implementation of the changes introduced into the Constitutions. The study guides created by Father Alvarez and Father Quintano were a great help in the work of formation that you carried out in your Provinces, and I think I can say that they enabled the Sisters throughout the Company to become familiar with these Constitutions of 2004 and to come to know them in depth.

At the General Council, we have received, studied and sometimes suggested modifications before approving the Provincial Norms that you sent us to define the method of designating Visitatrices and Provincial Councillors.

In the same way, we studied the Provincial applications of Statute 5 (annual retreats), S .20 (ways of praying for deceased Sisters) and S. 23b (frequency and form of family visits) that you sent us as an appendix to your Provincial Plans, or as Provincial Norms.

This study, undertaken with a view to the approbation of the Norms, was very instructive, and we noted your inventiveness, your cultural diversity and our unity within the framework of the Constitutions.

Another task facing the General Council was to study and approve the Guide for the Provincial Treasurers, prepared by Sister Rita Ferri, Treasurer General, and the Guide for Provincial Secretaries, prepared by Sister Ana Maria Olmeda, Secretary General. Both gathered a team of Sisters to help them in their work. The purpose of these two Guides, which are both clear and precise, is to help you in the administration of your Provinces.

In the near future, you will receive the Guide for Initial Formation, which has been revised to bring it in line with the Constitutions of 2004.

The General Council also did much work on the Guide for the Visitatrice and her Council as well as that for the Sister Servant. These Guides are well advanced, but they still need some finishing touches before they can be sent to you. Likewise, the Instruction on the Vows is in the process of revision.

The "Particular Statutes for the Motherhouse in Paris and Casa Maria Immacolata in Rome " (the Quasi-Province) have been completely revised to bring them into line with the Constitutions of 2004. These Statutes were promulgated "*ad experimentum*" for three years by Father Maloney in June 2005. They were evaluated by the Assembly of the Quasi-Province and revised once more by the General Council in May 2009.

I think it is important to mention the courage of several Provinces which have discerned the signs of the times and, in dialogue with the Sisters, have decided to undertake closer links with other Provinces. An example of this is the Provinces of the United States. The General Council has approved their project, and accompanies it with interest. Doubtless, other Provinces will follow.

FORMATION

In addition to the usual five Vincentian Sessions each year – which are always in demand – other Sessions have been organised at the Motherhouse, longer sessions which foster a deeper study of the charism, the documents of the Founders, and Vincentian spirituality. Sessions of this kind were held for groups of English-speaking Sisters from Asia, French-speaking and English-speaking Sisters from Africa, Spanish-speaking Sisters from Latin America, and Portuguese-speaking Sisters from

Brazil and Portugal. For English-speaking Sisters from the United States, Britain, Ireland and Australia, a nine-month Vincentian Session has been set up, providing the opportunity for greater immersion in the spirituality of our Founders and a study of the relevance of the charism for the present day.

In September 2005, a Session took place in the Mother-House bringing together all the Sisters serving migrant and displaced people.

In 2006 and 2008, Father Javier organised two sessions for recently-appointed Provincial Directors. Finally, we have to mention that in May 2005 a session was held for recently-appointed Visitatrices, and the Inter-Assembly Visitatrices' Meeting took place in May 2006.

The Motherhouse has also held international retreats, several sessions organised by individual Provinces, for example, the Netherlands (Holland), Italy, Spain, France, not forgetting the International Assembly of Marian Vincentian Youth.

The Mission Centre continues to exist thanks to the availability of the Sisters who ask to be sent to the Missions and whom you allow to go. Since the last General Assembly, 25 Sisters have been sent on mission. The Centre functions in a flexible way, at the service of the Company, to respond to various needs: preparation for sending Sisters to the mission *Ad Gentes*, and preparation for sending Sisters to a specific mission.

SOLIDARITY

Solidarity among the Provinces is a distinctive feature of the Company, but the way the world is changing has made this solidarity even more necessary. We have all been affected by the natural disasters that have struck one Province or another, beginning with the earthquake in Bam in Iran, right up to the one in Abruzzi, Italy, at the beginning of April, not forgetting, of course, the terrible tsunami at the end of 2004, or the earthquake in Pisco in which Sister Antonieta Perla and Sister Elizabeth Oré were killed during the celebration of Mass on 15th August 2007. We could also recall hurricanes Mitch and Katrina, the landslides in the Philippines, as well as floods and volcanic eruptions. We must also mention the wars, famines, persecution and other situation of extreme distress in which we have all been in solidarity with our Sisters in Lebanon, Eritrea, Congo, Colombia, Venezuela, India and so many other places.

Prayer, sharing of human and material resources, and messages of encouragement have all been a concrete expression of the solidarity that exists among us, and these have opened our hearts and given us the joy of being able to bear together the burden of suffering in the world.

STATISTICS

After my presentation you will receive a paper giving you detailed statistics, continent by continent, but for the time being, I shall give you some general numbers concerning the whole Company. In 2003, there were 22,137 Sisters in the Company; now, in 2009, there are 19,436, that is, 2,701 Sisters fewer. This difference is due to

the following reasons: during this period (2003 – 2009), there were 770 entries and 2904 deaths, but unfortunately we have to add that 567 Sisters left the Company, of whom 128 were Seminary Sisters and 174 were Sisters who had not made vows for the first time. The percentage of departures remains the same, 0.48%, in fact it is slightly lower, but the departure of so many Sisters during the stage of initial formation raises questions. I will mention two, but we have to analyse the situation further. What about the stages before the Seminary – postulancy, pre-postulancy are they well organised? And what about the formation of the formators (Formators in the strict sense of the word, and Sister Servants) ...is there good provision for this?

Many Sisters from the Motherhouse have returned to our heavenly Father during these six years. Allow me to make particular mention of Mother Chiron's peaceful departure on 13th August 2003. I had the privilege of watching with her to the end, and saw her just slipping away peacefully, happy to meet her Lord and the Blessed Virgin.

As I said, this outline of the past six years does not claim to be exhaustive. (I could have spoken of the changes that have taken place in the formation of the Sisters in continental China), but I cannot finish without mentioning the graces received by the Company with the beatification of Sr Rosalie Rendu (November 2003) Sr Lindalva Justo de Oliveira (December 2007) Sr Giuseppina Nicoli (February 2008) and Sr Marta Wiecka (May 2008). I also have the joy of announcing that next October, the cause of a group of Spanish martyrs, Sr Josefa Martinez Perez and her twelve companions, martyred in 1936, will be examined by the Commission of Theologians in Rome.

All these, and many others with them, were able to respond to the challenges of their time and to live the charism of the Company in its fulness. I have no doubt that they will help us in our search for fidelity to this charism.

2nd part:

▪ PROMOTE FIDELITY TO OUR SPECIAL CHARISM AND APOSTOLIC VITALITY

We have been looking at how the Spirit has been at work in the Company during these past six years, and in this second part, we will ask ourselves how this Assembly can encourage the Company to go beyond what exists already.

I will refer to several points that have been significant for the General Council, and I have decided to present these as **calls for conversion**.

DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS PRESENT WORLD BUT BE TRANSFORMED...(cf. Rom 12:2).

The logo that accompanies the theme of our Assembly, *Prophecy and hope now and everywhere* has the seal of the Company superimposed on the globe... to symbolise the Love of Christ present in the world and the service that the Daughters

of Charity carry out in the name of Christ in the midst of the world, according to the charism of our Founders.

In 1966 and in 1968, Mother Guillemin said this to the Company:

“If we are not wholeheartedly Daughters of Charity, with all that the name implies of a spirit of prayer, mutual charity, renunciation in our lives, and a sense of responsibility for others and for their needs, then we have no longer anything to say to those who, not finding in themselves God’s response to their problems, look for this response from us” (January 1st 1966).

“Strangely enough, however, placing technological means and social organisations at the service of humanity, while meeting most of their needs, does not fail to oppress them. It accentuates a feeling of depersonalisation, of loneliness, and conceals the sight of God. In the midst of all this, our way of life, no longer habitually motivated by our work itself which lay people can do as well as we, our reason for existence should be to embody charity» (February 2nd 1968).

These powerful lines have lost none of their force after more than forty years; in fact, they are all the more striking now, for society on every continent has become secularised at an extraordinarily rapid rate. Today, more than ever, we run the risk of having nothing more to say to the world, and at times, we have difficulty embodying charity because we have lost our mobility and may tend to be inflexible or blind from an apostolic perspective... This happens when we have difficulty being available and flexible in adapting and changing our manner of serving; we are blind when we undertake new forms of service without first examining where the priorities lie...

I would like to refer to what Pope Benedict XVI said to the General Superiors who met in Rome in 2006: *“Secularised culture has penetrated the mind and heart of not a few consecrated persons, who understand it as a way to enter modernity and a modality of approach to the contemporary world.”* Later, in the same discourse, the Pope added: *“consecrated men and women are called to be credible and luminous signs of the Gospel and its paradoxes in the world without conforming to the mentality of this world, but to continually transform and renew one’s own duty, to be able to discern God’s will, what is good, acceptable and perfect to him. (cf. Rom 12: 2) ”*

LIKEWISE THE SPIRIT HELPS US IN OUR WEAKNESS (cf. Rom 8:26).

Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem* presents the Holy Spirit as the One who has spiritually accompanied the Church, the people of God, down through the centuries: *“The words “he will teach” and “bring to remembrance” mean not only that he, in his own particular way, will continue to inspire the spreading of the Gospel of salvation but also that he will help people to understand the correct meaning of the content of Christ’s message; they mean that he will ensure continuity and identity of understanding in the midst of changing conditions and circumstances. The Holy Spirit, then, will ensure that in the Church there will always continue the same truth which the Apostles heard from their Master”* (N° 4).

Similarly, we read in article 60 of this same encyclical: *“When, under the influence of the Paraclete, people discover this divine dimension of their being and*

life, both as individuals and as a community, they are able to free themselves from the various determinisms which derive mainly from the materialistic bases of thought, practice and related modes of action. In our age these factors have succeeded in penetrating into our inmost being, into that sanctuary of the conscience where the Holy Spirit continuously radiates the light and strength of new life in the 'freedom of the children of God'."

We know that the Holy Spirit was present with our Founders. For Saint Vincent, only the intervention of the Holy Spirit could assure adaptations needed to times, places, diverse needs, creativity in the face of every form of poverty, ongoing renewal to combat the temptation to seek quiet refuge, and in the end, to be in communion with persons living in poverty.

Saint Vincent had the custom of confiding his daughters to the Spirit, and so he said to the Sisters being sent to Cahors in 1658: "*so then, off you go, Sisters, confident that the Spirit of our Lord will be with you*" (Coste X, 467).

On May 26th 1659, Saint Louise wrote to Sister Jeanne Delacroix in Châteaudun: "*Pray for the Company so that, in His goodness, God may send His Holy Spirit upon all in general and upon each individual sister in order that we may all be very faithful to Him*" (L. 621).

Our Constitutions repeat this time and time again:

"The evangelical virtues of humility, simplicity, and charity are the path along which the Daughters of Charity allow themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit." (C. 13).

The Daughters of Charity "*endeavour to respond to the inspirations of the Spirit, convinced that they will be the instruments of God's work insofar as they are faithful. Saint Louise de Marillac expressed the desire that the Company be dependent on the Holy Spirit so that it may carry out the Father's plan and bear witness to the Son, risen from the dead*" (C. 17 c).

Conversion requires a complete change, a transformation that comes from within the person: "*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*" (Ez.36:26). A person who has been converted is reborn and sees everything in the light of the compassionate love of God.

The Spirit is present with us during this Assembly, right here in our midst, and comes to make all things new. This is the Spirit's time, the time to listen, to allow ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit just as the apostles were...

It is our responsibility to benefit from this occasion to use all the valuable insights that come from the Company and have been brought together in the synthesis, and perhaps even more, all that will emerge from your group sharing and your reflections on the synthesis, etc.

GOD DID NOT GIVE US A SPIRIT OF TIMIDITY (cf. 2 Tim 1:7).

The statistics that I have presented here could worry us, but my concern is not at this level. Rather, I am convinced that we must ask ourselves if we are effectively living out our mission in the Church, or if we have allowed the salt of our charism to lose its savour in us, our communities, and our service. This question applies to all of us. As I said earlier, no continent has been spared the effects of secularisation, nor has any Province, whether vocations there are numerous or few. Everywhere there is the risk of getting lost in society's trends, of diminishing the radicality of our option to serve our lords and masters who are poor, and of not being close enough to the world of marginalised persons.

WHERE THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS, THERE IS FREEDOM (cf. 2 Cor 3:17).

We open our lives to the Spirit, individually and in community, in order to rediscover the prophetic sign of poverty lived out in our life style choices, our manner of serving, and to rediscover an authentic availability of heart which prompts a Sister to prefer service of Jesus Christ to all other options.

To open our hearts to the Spirit, in order to be converted...How can we translate our love for poor persons in more concrete gestures as well as our determination to never reach the point of being unaffected by misery and inequality? The Spirit is always present, to inspire each one of us, to be among us in our dialogues, to help us to rediscover our proper place in present day society.

The Constitutions, which we have recently revised, and which *must make us free to love*, offer us a rule of life that is sufficiently clear and flexible to allow us to use all our imagination in favour of persons living in poverty. If we read them again, with the guidance of the Spirit, we will discover how the prophetic signs and witness of hope that the world needs are clearly emphasised in them and what the Spirit expects very especially of each of us. Here are a few examples:

➤ **Proclaiming the good news of salvation**(C. 1 a; C. 24 b)

Let us look at the way the Constitutions expresses this idea: *“The Company participates in the Church’s universal mission of salvation, according to the charism of its Founders”* (C.1 a) and *“Seeking to make the Lord known to those who are poor, [the Daughters of Charity] proclaim the Gospel to them, explicitly wherever possible, but always through the witness of their lives.”* (C. 24b) I wonder if we continue to put into practice corporal and spiritual service in integrated ways as Saint Vincent and Saint Louise advised us to do. Perhaps we need to overcome a certain sense of human respect in order to speak about God, perhaps the love of Christ is not burning strongly enough within our hearts for it to shine out and be communicated to others.

Defending and promoting the culture of life

The Daughters of Charity: *“openly affirm respect for and the defence of human life in all its stages, and the right to peace for all peoples and nations. They denounce situations that exploit and exclude people.”* (S. 8c) Does respect for life, a gift from God, inspire in us endless tenderness and gentleness in the accompaniment we give to persons at the end of their lives and our assistance to their families?

➤ **Pleading the cause of those who are excluded and having a passion for justice**

“They commit themselves to work for social transformation to change the unjust structures that cause poverty.” (C.24 e) We still have much ground to cover in this area; according to the Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church n° 207, charity is “a force capable of inspiring new ways of approaching the problems of today's world, of profoundly renewing structures, social organisations and legal systems from within.”

➤ **Witnessing to charity**

“In a spirit of friendship and welcome, the sisters may share their life of prayer and reflection with other persons.” (S. 22) This is a wonderful opportunity to break down the walls that protect our community comfort, to make the charism of charity present to those around us.

➤ **Collaborating**

“In loyal collaboration, the Sisters work jointly with others in a spirit of sharing, living the values that the Company professes. Cooperation with private or public agencies enables them to offer better service and more extensive Gospel witness...Fidelity to their origins inspires them to work in collaboration with the diverse branches of the Vincentian Family and to encourage young people and adults to commit themselves to the service of those who are most deprived.” (S. 9 a, c)

There are some very striking expressions here. Have you noticed how Statute 9 a interprets cooperation with private or public agencies? This *enables them to offer better service and more extensive Gospel witness*. Some of you may add that this cooperation at times also gives rise to headaches and complications...I do not deny that, but do you not agree that the solution lies in learning true collaboration that respects our charism? It does not mean using all our energy to remain in charge of our works. We need to ask if our services, though they are certainly useful, are truly evangelising and prophetic. In any case, we cannot delegate the practice of charity.

We could give very many examples of this. I have chosen those that deal with our service, but the witness of our community life and our prayer life are also signs of the presence of the Spirit for which our contemporary society thirsts. Are our community life and our prayer life in need of conversion? Are they solidly anchored in the Love of Christ? Do we need to plough deeper furrows in this regard?

Let us fine tune our ability to discern and seek God's will with our Sisters in a community of faith. The practice of charity begins with prayer, then reflection on our service, in order to rediscover and put into action the liberating energy of love and charity, based on the Gospel and in line with Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. Let us also renew our ability to contemplate Christ, *“in the heart and life of those who are poor, where His grace is ever at work to sanctify and save them.”* (C.10a). He will teach us to be visible signs of Gospel life for humanity that thirsts for God and is sensitive to gestures and acts of kindness, love and selfless service, a humanity that often rejects God but that seeks justice and community.

The present economic crisis and the misery that it brings about on every continent challenge us, unsettle us and call us to reconsider our choices and our usual ways of acting and thinking. We witness the bankruptcy of a system based on the law of profit, artificially boosted consumption, without respect for creation. It is also the crisis of a system that manufactures rejects and waste. The cry of Saint Vincent is still relevant *“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.”* (Collet, 1, 479)

YOU WILL RECEIVE POWER WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS COME UPON YOU (cf. Acts 1:8).

Let us ask the Spirit for:

water to clear our vision, purify our hearts burdened with useless worry, so that we can be filled with God.

oil to restore movement to our stiffened joints and heal our aches and pains, our lack of availability and courage to serve persons living in poverty,

fire to burn down the barriers that we have erected in our local communities that serve to preserve our independence and keep us from becoming too involved in community life.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:25)

This involves a renewal of our missionary ardour... passion for God and for persons who are poor. Our entire life is mission and is for the mission; regardless of our age, duty or ministry, we all have the responsibility to contribute with all our strength to the mission of the Company (cf. C.35 a). Since the last General Assembly, 52 Sisters have been lent by their Province to serve in the Motherhouse, 23 of them coming for the Translation Centre, the General Secretariat or the General Treasurer’s office. So the Motherhouse has Sisters from 28 nationalities. In addition, over 25 Sisters have been sent to the Mission Ad Gentes from the International Missionary Centre and others have been sent from one Province to another to serve for a certain length of time...That is a good number, and I thank you with all my heart, but...it is also quite a small number! I know at least six Visitatrices in this room who are desperately seeking Sisters to help in their Provinces. They need Sisters in order to not be forced to close services that are very necessary for our abandoned brothers and sisters, to avoid having to leave ministries in countries where the Christian presence is already greatly reduced and sometimes at risk. We pray that the missionary flame will continue to burn brightly in the Company!

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer (cf. Rom 12:12)

The joyful Gospel witness of our local communities is a visible sign of the presence of Jesus Christ loved and served in persons who are poor and is a powerful sign of the beauty and relevance of our vocation today. (cf. C. 59) Pope John Paul II expressed the same idea in *Vita Consecrata*: *“In our world, where it often seems that the signs of God’s presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic witness*

on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary...Fraternal life is itself prophetic...” (V.C. n° 85).

Let us take the risk of inviting others to make a commitment. May our vocation ministry be solidly inserted in the broader framework of youth ministry. At times, the soil in which the good grain of the Word is sown is littered with new obstacles, but the potential of the seed to take root is still not diminished. We need to plough new furrows without growing weary!

CONCLUSION

The charity of Jesus crucified urges us (cf. 2 Cor.5:14).

Do you recall the words that Jean Anouilh placed on the lips of Chancellor Segulier in the film *Monsieur Vincent*? *“Charity is something that you have invented. It used to be just a virtue and it was better that way...But you had grandiose ideas, you have moved heaven and earth...Before you came along, Monsieur, there were poor people, but they didn’t keep honest men from being able to sleep at night. Now, they are everywhere. My word, one would say that you have invented them!”*

It would be a good thing if the same reproach could be made about us, that the Company today cannot dissociate itself from persons living in poverty, that we cause the charism of charity to shine out now and everywhere!

As Jesus said to us, those who are poor will always be with you. Can we be on fire with the apostolic zeal of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise towards those living in poverty? Can we love them, remain close to them, serve them with tenderness and devotion, denouncing, in season and out of season, the injustice that they suffer?

I am certain that the Holy Spirit who is with us during our Assembly will accomplish more than we can dare imagine. I turn to the Blessed Virgin, as Saint Louise did at the time of her pilgrimage to Chartres, with the words that I called to mind at the beginning of my presentation:

“Looking upon the Blessed Virgin as the fulfilment of the promises of God to mankind, and seeing the fulfilment of the vow of the Blessed Virgin in the accomplishment of the mystery of the Incarnation, I asked Him for the grace of fidelity for the Company through the merits of the blood of the Son of God and of Mary. I prayed also that He might be the strong and loving bond that unites the hearts of all the sisters in imitation of the union of the three Divine Persons.” (SW, p. 122)

Sister Evelyne Franc,
Daughter of Charity

ELECTIONS

ELECTION OF THE SUPERIORESS GENERAL

Pentecost Monday, 1st June 2009

During a day of retreat to prepare for this event that is so significant for the entire Company, the members of the Assembly prayed fervently for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They were united with Mary, recalling her presence with the disciples in the Upper Room.

June 1st, Pentecost Monday, began with a concelebration of the Eucharist at which Father Gregory Gay presided. Reflecting on the Gospel reading for that day in his homily, our Superior General reminded the Assembly of the mission of the Superioress General in relation to the Company, the Church and the world today. (cf. p. 182)

The Assembly then proceeded with the election of the Superioress General:

SISTER EVELYNE FRANCO

was re-elected for a further period of six years.

PHOTO OF SR. EVELYNE

Relying on the grace of God, the assistance of Fathers Gregory Gay and Javier Alvarez and the collaboration of all the Sisters, Sister Evelyne expressed her availability to the Company.

The Motherhouse bell chimed, announcing the news as the Sisters gathered in the garden outside the conference room to express to Sister Evelyne their affection, gratitude and the assurance of their prayerful support. By telephone, fax and email, the news spread quickly to all the Provinces throughout the world.

Election of the Superioress General

Homily given by Father Gregory Gay

Pentecost Monday, 1st June 2009

The Word of God which the universal church reflects on today is very appropriate for the election of the Superioress General which will take place after Mass. Let me explain.

The first reading is from the book that tells the story of Tobit, a man of God dedicated to prayer and as we heard proclaimed, a man dedicated to the poor. He told his son to go out and try to find a poor man and bring him back so that he could share this meal with him. The concept of sharing a meal is a richly symbolic expression in the Bible. When one shares the table with the poor, one is committed to sharing his very self.

Further on in the reading, we see how Tobit had empathy for the plight of the poor. His son had told him about the people who had been murdered. Tobit wept, then with his own hands dug a grave and buried the dead person. He did so despite the risks involved because the civil authorities had prohibited Tobit's people from performing the very worthy act of burying the dead.

In Mark's gospel we hear the parable of the vineyard and the continual risks that the servants of the owner of the vineyard had faced and how even the vineyard owner's son had been put to death by the tenant farmers. What can these readings say to you today as you prepare your minds and hearts to listen intensely to the Holy Spirit with purity of intention as you elect a Superioress General?

The Superioress General to be elected, like Tobit, is called to be a person of God dedicated to prayer, trusting in Providence, opening her heart to ask for wisdom, understanding and compassion. She, together with those of the Company, are to seek out the poor and bring them to their table. In other words she calls the company to solidarity with those on the fringe, those who are marginalised so they may sit at the table and share the abundance of life that God gives to all his children.

As Tobit had empathy for the plight of the poor who had been murdered, so too, the Superioress General should have empathy for the plight of those who live in poverty. She, with the rest of the Company, should be willing to take risks, despite what others think, despite the resistance that the world shows to those who stand alongside the poor.

As in the gospel, the Superioress General is called to be yet another servant in the vineyard of God our heavenly Father, a servant who is willing to take risks for the sake of the kingdom of God. She is called to be that servant that imitates the servant of servants, Jesus Christ. In doing so, she is putting her utmost confidence in the stone that the builders rejected and that has become the cornerstone. Jesus is the servant of servants. He spoke to those who listened in a prophetic way. He used language that they could understand, speaking in parables, but always speaking the truth.

We pray that the Holy Spirit may help you to choose a Superioress General who will be like Jesus, a prophetic servant, speaking in a simple yet decisive way, always guided by the truth, intent on seeking the truth and proclaiming the truth by living the truth.

We ask the Lord Jesus in this Eucharist that we share as we gather around the table of the Lord, holding in our hearts those who are poor, for the simplicity necessary to vote for the woman who will lead you in prayer, solidarity with the poor,

empathy for their plight, willingness to take risks and be a prophetic servant and a living witness to the truth.

Father Gregory GAY
Superior General

Election of the General Councillors and the Assistant General

Circular from Sister Evelyne Franc
to all Daughters of Charity throughout the world,
Paris, June 9th and 11th, 2009

We are happy to announce to you that on Monday, June 8th, 2009, the members of the General Assembly elected the General Councillors:

Sister Kathleen APPLER	nationality: American
Sister Christa BAUER - re-elected	nationality: Austrian
Sister Zofia DANISCAKOVA - re-elected	nationality: Slovakian
Sister Madeline HARA	nationality: Japanese
Sister Neghesti MICHAEL	nationality: Eritrean
Sister Rosa Maria MIRO MIRO - re-elected	nationality: Spanish
Sister Rosa Maria NAPOLITANO	nationality: Italian
Sister Françoise PETIT	nationality: French
Sister Marlene Terezinha ROSA	re-elected; nationality: Brazilian
Sister Iliana SUAREZ PEREZ	nationality: Cuban

On June 11th, 2009, the members of the General Assembly elected

Sister Rosa Maria MIRO MIRO

Assistant General of the Company.

PHOTO OF SR ROSA MARIA

IN COMMUNION WITH THE CHURCH

To Reverend Mother Evelyne Franc

Superioress General of the Company of the
Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul

Secretariat of State
Department for General Affairs
N. 116.7

The Vatican, 16th May, 2009

On the occasion of the General Assembly
of the Company of the Daughters of Charity
of Saint Vincent de Paul

Pope Benedict XVI sends his warmest greetings to all the participants, and assures them of his fervent prayer for the smooth progress of their work.

At this time when the Company is preparing to celebrate the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the deaths of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, the theme chosen for your Assembly, 'Prophecy and Hope, Now and Everywhere' is a pressing invitation for each Daughter of Charity to be ready to listen to the Holy Spirit and to open wide their hearts. May the prophetic breath which has been entrusted to you by your Founders, urge you to be audacious and creative in continuing the material and spiritual service of the most deprived people in your society! In the difficult economic and social context of today's world, something which affects the poorest countries in dramatic ways, the Pope encourages you to be particularly attentive, in your communities, to living a life built on charity, humility and simplicity, those virtues that your Founders bequeathed to you and which are still very relevant today, as a means of showing in concrete terms the love of the Lord for people in distress. In this way, may your whole existence be a life-giving source of hope and peace for a world that has such great need of these!

Entrusting you all to the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Company, and to the intercession of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, the Holy Father imparts an affectionate Apostolic Blessing to Mother Evelyne Franc, Superioress General, to all the members of the General Assembly, and also to all Daughters of Charity, as well as to those persons throughout the world whom the Sisters serve with such generosity.

Cardinal Tarcisio BERTONE
Secretary of State for His Holiness

**Visit of Cardinal Franc Rode, CM
Prefect of the Congregation for
Institutes of Consecrated Life and
Societies of Apostolic Life**

Homily given by Cardinal Franc Rode
Motherhouse, 25th May 2009

On Monday, 25th May 2009, the Eucharist was celebrated by Cardinal Franc Rode, CM, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. In his homily, he urged the Sisters to see with new eyes the new forms of poverty in our present -day world and to face up to the challenges of our modern times.

My very dear Daughters of Charity,

It is a special joy for me to be able to celebrate this Eucharist with you in a family atmosphere, on the occasion of your General Assembly, where you are engaged in “‘evaluating and promoting fidelity to the specific charism and the apostolic vitality’ of your Company.” This Assembly also aims at defining the priorities of the mission that God has entrusted to you for the good of the Church and the world, so that you will be like a leaven of "Prophecy and Hope, now and everywhere," "giving you the means of growing in holiness which will make you living stones in the Temple that the Lord is raising up in the midst of the world".

I thank each participant and especially Sister Evelyne Franc, your Superioress General. In the name of the Church and the whole Company, I thank her for her service of authority during the past six years. She has been, as Saint Vincent would say, "the soul that animates the members of the entire Company."

You are holding your General Assembly during the time of Pentecost, which Saint Louise de Marillac called "the day", that special day when she discovered her vocation and her mission. It is the most favourable time for the Holy Spirit, who is the "ardent fire of divine love ... the Light eternal..." to be the real inspiration of your choices for the next few years, and for God to transform your commitment into " amazing gratuitousness, of giving without any return."

As daughters of Saint Louise, you are called to commit yourself to fostering a true Pentecost during these days that are so important for the Company. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were united with Mary, Peter and the Apostles. It was there that the courageous witness of faith in Jesus Christ burst out with amazing force, giving them the courage to announce to all the people that Jesus had died and had risen again. The language of the Spirit goes beyond the boundaries of language, race, age and social class, to form one single family. In this time of globalisation, we need the unity of Pentecost to help us to close ranks and to strengthen our fidelity to prayer, austerity, poverty and the service of the Church. "We should be one body in many persons, united for one sole purpose, for the love of God."

Using the words of Saint Louise we ask the Lord to prepare our hearts to receive the Holy Spirit, so that "burning with the fire of his holy love, you may be consumed in the perfection of this love which will enable you to love the most holy will of God..." There are various types of spirituality. The spirituality of the Daughters of Charity is an incarnated spirituality, one of service, "Given to God for the service of the poor" as your Constitutions affirm with the words of Saint Vincent. Not using the realm of the spirit as a place of refuge, but embracing a spirituality

which finds its origins in the Spirit and is grounded in the reality of day-to-day life, with its difficulties, tensions, its driving forces and harsh realities.

A true and honest reflection on prophecy and hope must start from a faith perspective, and for you, as Daughters of Charity, servants of those who are poor, it must start from the example of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac. Rapid changes in our world today and their repercussions on the concept of humanity and its religious dimensions, call for a new awareness in our communities. Many men and women fail to find happiness in today's world and this makes it all the more necessary for Daughters of Charity to address the challenges facing the world today. For example, the challenge of a secularised world that tends to consider faith a private matter, and the temptation to confine Christianity within the framework of a culture of secularism, "a concept of the world according to which the latter is self-explanatory, without any need for recourse to God." We are also challenged by our encounters with people of other religions; with the difficulty of communicating with those who seem indifferent towards anything at a deep level and who are caught up in purely earthly matters. There seems to be among many a "discontent with life". There is also the challenge of the immense poverty that can bring discouragement and depression; the tragedy of migrants and refugees; people who have "lost their way" in a fragmented world. There is the challenge of life itself, which is the origin and the summary of all other problems. The intensity and broad sweep of anxieties and expectations, searching and ideals, disappointments and bitter events, all these weigh heavily on human existence in some form or other, and expose men and women in today's world to insecurity, relativism and fragility.

These new and complex questions require conversion in the sense of being open, inviting you to develop a new profile of Daughters of Charity for our times. Faith alone is not enough, it needs daring, prophetic audacity, readiness to abandon itself to the breath of the Spirit and to be committed to following new paths. And I am sure that these new paths will be those that Saint Vincent traced out for you at the beginnings of your Company, adapted to current realities.

These demands lay bare our weaknesses: our lack of faith, difficulty in making our local communities places of welcome, spiritual isolation, all of which prevent us from understanding the plight of loneliness, error and sin.

Difficulties in understanding the changes in the world today and conflicts with it can cause much discouragement in religious persons, along with a sense of ineffectiveness and uselessness. These difficulties may include fatigue, which can result from generosity that is anxious and fearful, turning in on oneself or one's community and focusing on individual projects and initiatives, excessive self-seeking to the detriment of a sense of belonging, or taking refuge and becoming cut off from others through an irresponsible and unlimited use of modern technology.

In difficult times such as those of our own day, we must go more deeply into what is essential. This is the time to pray more earnestly, that the Holy Spirit may descend on us today so that we too will be able to speak the language of men and women today, that we may be prophets, as we heard in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. These are the times when the words of Christ should resound with

greater force in our hearts. This alone will give us strength and bring credibility to our existence: “Have confidence, I have overcome the world.”

“Christ is the Rule of the Daughters of Charity...Adorer of the Father, Servant of His Loving Plan, Evangeliser of those who are poor.” Christ in his paschal mystery is “the essential”, a mystery into which we must fully enter in order to love with hearts that are freely and totally given. In this way, we can renew our desire to love people who are poor “our Lords and Masters.” With our eyes fixed on Christ, we learn to see humanity as he sees it. In living like him, poor, chaste and obedient, we continue our journey each day, comforted by his mercy, and we help spread through the world a sense of hope that comes from the certainty of being loved and having the promise of eternal happiness.

“The main purpose for which God has called the Daughters of Charity and brought them together is to honour our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity, serving Him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor.” United with him, witnessing to the truth in which you believe, the Daughters of Charity will be capable of communicating this to everyone, explaining your faith through your love for the poor. To live as a Daughter of Charity is to live as a child of God: the same all-embracing love which excludes no one and which shows preference for even the poorest of the poor. It is love that is transmitted through words of trust, gestures of mercy, an attitude that is attentive and gives without expecting any return, that shares others’ concerns and their search for meaning and spiritual freedom. This is the love that prefigures eternal life after death.

This is the kind of love that is prophetic and hope-filled. The loving gaze of a prophet is capable of seeing what others do not see. A heart that is free can give itself each day in order to reach the goal of “an evangelical spirit of humility, simplicity and charity.” In the Eucharistic prayer for various needs and occasions, we ask the Lord to “open our eyes to all forms of distress.” This prayer implies that the principal problem is not that there are now new forms of poverty, but rather a lack of “new eyes” to see them. Many forms of poverty develop precisely from this lack of new, prophetic eyes that know how to see. Unfortunately, our eyes are too often myopic, clouded by selfishness.

Our prophecy must be that of holiness, the path that has been taken by so many Daughters of Charity, the path of those who live the mystery of God, with their eyes fixed on God. To know and love God does not mean simply to admire God’s omnipotence, wisdom or justice, but to feel called by Christ to share in his love. “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.”

“Saints” are people who open themselves fully to this love and are able to bring it to others. To reinvigorate Vincentian holiness means first of all cultivating friendship with God. This is why time spent each day with Christ is in fact the alpha and omega of charity.

A Company that is able to live out “prophecy and hope now and everywhere” has the key to entering into communication with women and men of our day. It is about communicating love, with its various facets: welcoming, listening, compassion,

mercy, consolation. Those who experience that they are loved are freed from isolation; they rediscover a sense of self-confidence and meaning in their lives. They are able to believe that there is life after death, if today they are able to find signs of this life in the lives of the servants of poor persons they meet along the way.

Saint Vincent, Saint Louise de Marillac, Marguerite Naseau, Barbara Angiboust, Catherine Labouré, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Rosalie Rendu, the Sisters who were martyred in France, Spain, China and elsewhere, Giuseppina Nicoli, Lindalva de Oliveira, Martha Anna Wiecka, these “good and true” Daughters of Charity who are already in heaven are interceding for you and for the entire Company during this grace-filled time. May the Daughters of Charity renew each day “the offering they make to God of all that they are and of their service in the person of the poor.”
Caritas Christi urget nos, now and everywhere!

Cardinal Franc Rode, CM
*Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and
Societies of Apostolic Life*

IN COMMUNION WITH THE CHURCH

**Visit from Monsignor Gabor Pinter
representing Monsignor Baldelli,
Apostolic Nuncio in France**

Homily by Monsignor Gabor Pinter
Motherhouse, May 28th, 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“That they may all be one” is the urgent prayer that Jesus addressed to his Father at the end of chapter 17 of the Gospel of Saint John proposed for our meditation today. The message of this passage is addressed directly to this Assembly of Daughters of Charity. I could not have chosen a better text for today myself.

This desire of Jesus, which is about unity among his disciples, is linked to his example of unity in God through the use of the word “as” which in Greek can signify a comparison or the idea of begetting: “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me.” In this case the second use of this term applies. Jesus wants to show us that unity does not originate from human effort but that its source and basis is in the very unity of God. Unity is only possible among people if it is related to the unity of the “we” of God. Unity does not mean uniformity since the Father and the Son are both two and one. God does not desire uniformity among people, and naturally, God does not ask for uniformity among the Daughters of

Charity either. God wants all to live in communion. Uniformity is synonymous with death. Communion is life. Love, which originates in the very love of Christ, is also love from the Father which gives rise to the love that connects the Father and the Son, that is, the Holy Spirit. The prayer that Jesus addresses to his Father for unity among his disciples is a prayer for the Holy Spirit.

In this time of preparation for the feast of Pentecost and during the General Assembly of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, we understand the importance of this Gospel passage for today. “That they may become completely one”! To what kind of unity are we referring? When we speak of unity, which does not mean uniformity, it means that we must accept diversity and differences. Unity despite our differences, or rather, unity enriched by our differences. In one of his books, John Sullivan wrote the following parable: “Truth is like a huge stained glass window which has fallen and broken into a thousand pieces of glass in various colours. Watch how the people hurry forward to pick up a piece of glass and wave it in front of the rest saying: ‘I am in possession of the truth.’ In reality, what they should do is to gather all the pieces, join them together with the bond of friendship, and then the window will come alive with light.” This is the authentic unity that Jesus wants. Not that all walk in exactly the same way but that we all journey with one another in spite of our differences.”

A Christian community, like a religious congregation, must accept confrontation, dialogue and discussion within its ranks. This is the picture of true unity. In order to reach the essential element of a discourse, we focus on its conclusion. Another passage of today’s Gospel ends with these words: “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” In making known to his disciples the name of his Father, Jesus demonstrates that Father is the name that expresses the being of God in its deepest sense. A father cannot exist without a child and the two cannot endure without a loving relationship to unite them. In the case of God, this relationship is purely and simply the Holy Spirit. Even though this concept is not explicit here, it is clearly the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Love, that the Son, on the eve of his Passion, asked the Father to send to all his disciples, and to all those who, down through the ages, would follow in his footsteps, to be brought together in active communion.

In chapter 11 of his Gospel, Saint John has already said that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. In other words, the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross is the source of the unity of the children of God. For Saint John, moreover, it is from his place on the Cross that Jesus already breathes the Spirit on the Church and gives it the gift of unity. Nevertheless, the harsh reality is very evident. Our internal and external divisions overwhelm and discourage us. They are in open contradiction to Christ’s desire to gather into one the scattered children of God. Among Christians, that is, among disciples, these divisions even give great scandal to the world. How can we remain divided when by baptism, we have been plunged into the death and resurrection of the Lord? It is the same death through which he destroyed the barriers of hatred and discord. Here it is important to keep in mind that our communion is first of all a gift that we receive from God. However, God never acts without our cooperation. God gives a gift but never without a response on our part. In this prayer addressed to his

Father, on the eve of his Passion, Jesus reveals to us the most eloquent way to overcome the barriers of division: the total gift of ourselves in the name of the Gospel.

“O Holy Spirit, lead us into the communion of the Father and the Son, make us part of the glory of divine life, transform us and enlighten us. In this way, we will be able to bring to the world this witness of peace and unity that is such a great need.”
Amen.

Monsignor Gabor Pinter
Representing the Apostolic Nuncio in France

Visit from Cardinal André Vingt Trois Archbishop of Paris

Motherhouse, June 9th 2009

Sister Marie-Bernard Giffard, General Councillor, welcomed the Cardinal and introduced him to the 185 members of the Assembly from over 90 countries and explained the purpose of their presence here at rue du Bac, near the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. She then added: “We are all aware that you are the Archbishop of Paris and the President of the Bishops’ Conference in France. Allow me, though, to say a bit more about you since a broader understanding of a person always brings about greater union. Rather than mentioning the various other missions that you have, and these are many, I would like to focus my attention on some of your favourite topics which you address with much enthusiasm in your homilies, letters and conferences and I will mention some of them: defence and promotion of the culture of life, and the ethical problems related to it, defence of the family as a place for transmitting faith (you are also member of the Pontifical Council for the Family) and active and visible charity needed for our time (something you have promoted through the Festival of Charity here in Paris). We thank you for reminding us of these values in season and out of season: your message can unsettle people as it calls us to advance in courageous witness. In the setting of this 8th General Assembly... we have also addressed some of these same topics: the culture of life, the family, evangelisation, defence and respect for those who are poor, pleading their cause, etc. We do this in fidelity to the charism handed down to us by our Founders.”

The Cardinal expressed his joy, too, in meeting the members of the Assembly. He recalled all the Sisters who have given Paris a beautiful witness of proximity to persons living in poverty, with special mention of Sister Catherine Laboure and Sister Rosalie Rendu. He also called to mind all those who serve the poorest persons in his diocese of Paris and invited us to give thanks to the Lord for all that He has done through the Company, asking God to continue to work through the life of each of us in our various countries.

In his homily in the Eucharist concelebrated with Father Gregory Gay and Father Javier Alvarez, Cardinal Vingt Trois said:

“We have the grace of hearing and meditating this week on the Sermon on the Mount. We have listened to the Beatitudes and now we enter further into the development of this sermon with words from Christ which are both prophecy and hope. I say this because at the time when he told the disciples gathered around him: “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world”, they were still not yet salt of the earth or light of the world. They were still in the learning process. Beginner disciples, they would learn to become disciples by listening to Christ and following Him, so that little by little they would become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Similarly, as we hear these words of Jesus addressed to us, after being addressed to his disciples, we should not look on them as a judgment and a condemnation of our weaknesses, our lukewarmness, our staleness, our shadowy side. Regardless of how very uninspiring we may be, or what shadows there are in our life, Christ says to us: “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” This prophecy is hope-filled because it indicates the pathway on which Christ invites us to follow Him. At the same time, Christ indicated the mission that he would confide to his apostles, to not simply be attentive listeners to Him, but to become a sign in the midst of humanity, among all the nations. He invited them not only to be with Him, but to become his witnesses. We learn, all throughout our life spent following Christ, to become salt for the earth and light for the world, and at times, even without imagining it, we discover that we are salt for the earth and light for the world because what has transformed us, what has made us salt for the earth and light for the world is the life of Christ at work in us through his Spirit. And it is the Spirit that helps us, transforms us and allows us to give flavour to human life and to be a light for the human race. At the school of Christ we are invited to grow in order to become fully what God intends us to be. You know better than I do how Saint Vincent de Paul identified who our true teachers are, those who show us the path to follow, those with whom we discover what it means to be a disciple, to be salt for the earth and light for the world. We are talking about poor people who open our lives, our hearts and our hands, who impel us to welcome God’s love that surpasses our efforts. They impel us to let ourselves be carried along by the love of God, to place ourselves at their service, and in doing so, to become true light for the world. An attitude of total availability is what enables us to learn from those who are poor. As the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, “the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you...was not ‘Yes and No’; but in him it is always ‘Yes.’” Christ has always been in complete accord with the will of the Father (my food is to do the will of my Father.) He has always remained the Son, the obedient Servant of the Father. To enter into the yes of Christ means following Him, uniting our lives to His in our service of poor persons. As Saint Paul also said, it is through Christ that we say “Amen”, our yes for the glory of God.

At times, obedience can be portrayed as something to which we are called as a sort of discipline: something we had to accept and practise more through mortification than because of its meaningfulness. This is not the kind of pathway that Christ invites us to follow. He invites us to offer the gift of our entire self in the yes of love that is not a something that goes against what we are, but rather helps us to reach the fulfilment of what we are. “As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been

‘Yes and No’.” We are not yes and no. Through Christ, we say: yes for the glory of God, a yes which is the basis of our joy and happiness.

Let us give thanks to God for helping us discover the pathway by which we can respond to His call. Let us give thanks to God for the hope that He places in our hearts in calling us to become salt for the earth and light for the world. Let us give thanks to the Lord for putting on our lips the amen of faith and the yes of love. Amen.

After the Eucharist, a brief time for sharing allowed the Sisters to ask Archbishop Vingt Trois several questions. Here is his response to the question about his work in the Pontifical Council for the Family.

“Throughout the world, there are different forms, customs and cultures connected with the family. The experience of family in Africa, or in Asia, or in South America, or in North America or in Europe is not an identical one. However, there is something that is common among all the various forms of experiencing family, something that we have known by experience here in Europe and which could be pointed out to other cultures: when the family disintegrates, when the bonds within a family are broken, society itself breaks down. This means that the differences between the ways in which we live family positively are not so very important. What is important, though, is to see that when we give up family unity, regardless of the way it happens, the result is always the same: it is society that comes undone. This disintegration of society does not manifest itself in the same way that it does in other countries, but the result is the same. That is, when there is no longer family solidarity, when there is no longer family union, there is no longer a passing on of traditions from one generation to the next; there is no longer emotional stability or education. And then we have young people of various ages who regress into a pre-cultural stage of development, before culture existed. They regress to a mob mentality and not a social one. For these reasons, this is a very serious issue, and our responsibility as Christians in this society is to give young people some sign that it is possible to live family life, that fidelity is possible, that solidarity between generations is possible, and that family life is a great gift and a source of strength. In this way, at least those who want to take a closer look, can understand that there is an alternative way of living. This is a very important matter.

The second significant point (speaking as a European or French person) is that we have inherited from preceding centuries a sort of framework for family life that is based on three primary elements:

- the first was the economic element: an agriculturally based society, with a rural or village structure;
- the second was that the union between a man and a woman was regarded as permanent;
- and the third was Christian faith.

None of these three elements is in force now. We no longer live in an agricultural society, people do not live primarily in villages any more; the union between a man and a woman is no longer seen as permanent, and Christian faith has become a minor issue, at least in people’s minds and hearts.

It is no surprise, then, that families break apart. Social changes from rural life to urban life, the transformation of relationships between a man and woman involving a series of relationships, and the loss of any reference to God, have made this result inevitable. What is extraordinary, though, is that there are still families that remain intact. So instead of lamenting those that are breaking down, we need to admire the people who are persevering, and encourage them and offer them our support.

On the eve of Pentecost, I confirmed about 300 adults at Notre Dame Cathedral. I had the opportunity to read the letters these people wrote to me. More than half of these adults were aged between 25 and 35 and they prepared for confirmation at the time of their marriage. Their reflections about their lives at a moment such as this were quite beautiful. I believe that their faith is sincere and that they truly want their family life to succeed. I find it quite extraordinary that in our present context, there are so many young people (the 30 to 35 years age group) who make the decision to marry and commit themselves to one another, and do it in the current situation that is ours, knowing that it will not be easy. We need to pray for them and encourage them.

I also see this at the important time of baptism (it's a similar situation, there are almost 350 baptisms). When I see a woman who is pregnant or who is carrying a baby in her arms, I say to her: "Is this your first baby?" I see her face light up because no one has ever dared to talk to her about her baby. I often say to the women who have emigrated from Africa: "Are you with the baby's father?" If she answers "No," I say "will you go back to him?" "I hope so," is often her reply. I think it amazes her that I pay attention to the fact that she is pregnant or that she is carrying a baby in her arms and say to her: "Is this your baby? He's beautiful!" This is a way in which we can encourage, support and give value to family life; instead of just lamenting the fact that it is difficult to sustain.

Thank you very much for welcoming me here. I offer you my best wishes for the conclusion of your General Assembly and a safe return to your various countries. You will certainly have much to share when your return. I'm not sure how you will go about doing that, but I know you will succeed in sharing this experience and bringing a bit of the beauty of Paris with you as well, for Paris is a beautiful city and a beautiful Church.

Cardinal Andre VINGT TROIS
Archbishop of Paris

Members of the General Assembly 2009

Double page of photos

FATHER RANIERO CANTALAMESSA, OFM CAP

Biblical Foundations of Prophecy and Hope

Motherhouse. May 20th 2009

Interventions

Notes taken during the conference given by Fr Raniero Cantalamessa

By way of introduction, I am going to read a passage from Pope Paul VI, in which we will find the origin of certain words and expressions I will be using: *“We have often wondered what is the first and last need for our blessed and beloved Church, and we need to ask that question in prayer and almost in trembling because this is its mystery and its life. You know the answer, the Holy Spirit, animator and sanctifier of the Church, its divine breath, the wind in its sails, its principle unifier, its interior source of light and strength, its support, its consolation, its source of all charisms, songs, peace and joy, all the guarantees and preludes of happiness and eternal life. The Church needs a perpetual Pentecost. The Church needs fire in its heart, words on its lips and prophecy in its regard. The Church needs to acquire once more a sense of enthusiasm, taste and certitude regarding the truth it holds.”*

Now let's listen to the same text with a slight variation: “We have often asked ourselves what is the first and last need of our blessed and beloved Company of the Daughters of Charity. The Company needs a perpetual Pentecost. It needs fire in its heart, words on its lips and prophecy in its outlook. It needs to acquire once more enthusiasm about its origins, a taste for and certainty about, its relevance for the Church.”

It is a matter of returning to the source of hope and prophecy which is the Holy Spirit. As I was coming here, an image came to mind: that of someone who goes to a restaurant, and when he is handed the menu, he studies it, even looks carefully at the meaning of each word and the way that the menu is presented, and then he leaves without ordering or eating anything. And you, do you want the menu or do you want the meal? Because if you want the menu, I will give you a conference on the Holy Spirit: origin, relationship and fruits. But if you need to be nourished and you want to enjoy the meal, this means that you must be disposed to experience a new Pentecost. This is even more fitting since we are so close to the feast of Pentecost, this liturgical season that is a privileged time for such an experience. This is what you need at the time of your General Assembly. To have a General Assembly, to elect Superiors, to discern the direction of the Company, these are all occasions that call for special help from the Holy Spirit so that everything will be done in union with the Spirit of God.

Another text I want to put before you was written by an Orthodox bishop on the occasion of a large ecumenical gathering: “Without the Holy Spirit, Christ remains at a distance, God is something of the past, the Gospel goes unheeded, the Church is simply an organisation, authority is domination, the mission is propaganda, worship is recalling a memory, and Christian action is moral slavery. With the Holy Spirit, however, the cosmos aspires to bring about the Reign of God, the Risen Christ is present, the Gospel is a force for life, the Church is the communion of the Trinity, authority is service that frees, the mission is Pentecost, the liturgy is a memorial and anticipation, and human action becomes God-like.”

The best way of recreating this experience today is to reread together the account of Pentecost (Acts 2). In fact, this part of Scripture has something special that resembles what happens in the Eucharist. At Mass, the Church actually repeats the story of the institution of the Eucharist. It's a true story: "He took the bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples." It is what really happened. We all know that when this story is told once more by an ordained priest in the presence of an assembly of believers, a miracle occurs. What happened that first night is recreated. In other words, the bread becomes the Body of Christ. Something similar to that, not exactly the same thing because it isn't a sacrament, takes place once more when we listen to the story of Pentecost.

Let us reread this account of Pentecost. The first part presents in a special way the theme of prophecy, and the second part the idea of hope.

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit..."

When God does something very important, there are signs: preparatory signs that serve to catch people's attention.-

The sign of a sound like a violent wind is not really the wind. The Hebrew or Greek languages, like that of the Church, use the same word for wind and for the Holy Spirit. This is why wind is associated with the Spirit all throughout Scripture. Christ himself compared the Spirit to wind. The apostles begin to enter into this very special atmosphere preceding this theophany, this experience of God, in the silence that is the natural response of created beings, an expectation of something supernatural.

After that comes a sign for the eyes: they see tongues of fire. This is another very eloquent sign. For John the Baptist, fire was associated with the Holy Spirit: "Here is the one who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

After these preparatory signs, the reality, the substance of Pentecost, is written in less than one line. In salvation history, the most significant events are described in the simplest of words: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit".

It is important to pause here a moment to allow these words to have their full impact. From this moment onward, the apostles are changed and become new people. To really understand the phrase: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit", we need to ask ourselves: what is the Holy Spirit? The best we can do is to say that the Holy Spirit is love personified, the love between the Father and the Son, this flame that we can also call the life of the Trinity, the gentleness of the Trinity...love, however, is what best describes what we mean by the Holy Spirit. It is the love of God. Therefore, to say that they were "all filled with the Holy Spirit" means that they were all filled with the love of God. They had an indescribable experience of being loved by God. It was as if the ocean of the life of the Trinity broke through all barriers and swept over the apostles, baptising them, bringing about what Christ had said to them several days

earlier: “in a few days, you will be baptised by the Holy Spirit”. From the beginnings of the Church, baptism was carried out by immersion and not just with a few drops of water sprinkled on the head.

The reality of the Holy Spirit is what we call infused charity: it is a concrete experience that transformed the apostles into new people, changing them when they were timid, fearful and quarrelling with one another. This is what Saint Paul says in his letter to the Romans, Chapter 5 verse 5. He speaks of Pentecost as God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. This is a description of Pentecost given in the form of a declaration rather than a narrative. Pentecost is the love of God poured into our hearts: the love of God in the sense of the love that God has for us and not our love for God, because that is something that comes later! We see then that Pentecost is not something added on, as it was often referred to in our theological studies prior to the Vatican Council. In the past, we thought of the Holy Spirit as a supplementary force given to the Church to make it capable of carrying the message of the Good News to the ends of the earth, an additional force to accomplish this task. No, it's much more than that; it's the very principle of salvation: the Holy Spirit is salvation. On the Cross, Christ brought to completion the new and the eternal Covenant and all was accomplished. This redemption, however, brought to completion by Christ, was limited in space and time. It is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ that makes Redemption universal and therefore available to every period of time, every place and every person. The three columns that form the foundation of the Christian mystery are the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery and Pentecost. Each column is of equal importance.

This interpretation of Pentecost as the love of God shared with all people is confirmed by the experience of Christians today. Each time that people (and there are millions of them in the Catholic Church and in the other Churches) have a Pentecost experience, they testify that the most vivid memory that they have of that moment is that they experienced the love of God, God's tenderness for them. Therefore, Pentecost is the accomplishment of the divine plan that has come into the world precisely so that God can share his love, blessings and life with everyone. Sin had blocked this plan, and Christ, having destroyed death, has allowed the Spirit of God to be spread over the earth. Everything that follows: our ability to love God and our neighbour is like an echo of this love that we receive. As human creatures, we are much more inclined to be active than passive. As a result, we give much more importance to our love for God (it is enough to note how much has been written throughout the history of the Church on our love for God with an emphasis on our duty to love God). It is necessary to return to the source, to the basis, to what is most important: that God loves us; the rest comes afterwards. “This is love, not that we loved God but that God first loved us”.

Let us now look at another aspect of this Pentecost event that is of particular interest to us on this occasion of your General Assembly. Let us return to the text of the Acts of the Apostles: “When the day of Pentecost had come...” This signifies that the feast of Pentecost was already in existence. As Christians, we associate the feast of Pentecost with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles, but it is interesting to note that the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Church took place precisely on the day of the Jewish feast of Pentecost. It is worth understanding what this Jewish feast was about. Similarly, we cannot understand the significance of Easter to Christianity if we

do not see it with Passover in the background, Easter as a fulfilment of the Passover event. Similarly, we cannot understand Passover unless we see it as the accomplishment of what Pentecost was anticipating for the Jewish people. In the earliest times of history, this Jewish feast was linked to the natural cycle of the seasons; it was the occasion for offering the first fruits of the harvest to God. But as time passed, this feast acquired a new connotation, no longer linked to the natural cycles but to history. It commemorated the event at Sinai, the gift of the Law and the establishment of the Covenant with God that Israel made as a Chosen People and a holy nation. This was, therefore, a fundamental event for the Chosen People. In his way of describing Pentecost, Luke no doubt wanted to establish the connection between what was happening then and what had taken place on Sinai. He used the same signs of wind and fire, and the liturgy has always seen in the story of Pentecost an allusion to Sinai. In fact, the liturgy for the eve of Pentecost includes the reading from chapter 19 of the book of Exodus. We might ask what the connection is between Exodus 19 and Pentecost. Saint Augustine asked: "Is there a link between Exodus 19 and Pentecost?" and here is his classic response: "The Holy Spirit came upon the apostles on the very day on which the gift of the Law and the Covenant was commemorated, in order to signify that the Holy Spirit is the New Law and the soul of the New Covenant." He added: "Study the analogy as well as the difference. Fifty days after the sacrifice of the lamb in Egypt, the hand of God, the Holy Spirit, wrote the Law on stone tablets. Fifty days after the sacrifice of the true Lamb of God, Christ, the hand of God, the Holy Spirit, once again writes the Law, but instead of writing it on stone tablets, it is written on human hearts. So the Holy Spirit is the Interior Law, the Law of the Spirit."

What conclusions can we draw from this? Christianity has a new, inner Law: the Holy Spirit acts through love. This is revolutionary, but unfortunately, this revolution has not yet been given full priority.

What then is the difference between the former Law, the ten Commandments, the laws of the Gospel and of the Church, monastic rules, your Constitutions, all manner of conventional laws that have been developed... and the interior Law that acts out of love that has been received?

- Saint Paul insisted that conventional law states what needs to be done but does not confer the power to carry it out. The law sheds light on sin and the transgression of sin, but it cannot prevent sin, it cannot provide life because life comes about in people's hearts. In contrast to this, interior Law is life-giving.

- Another difference is this: conventional law impels people to act from the threat of punishment or sanction. For example, if you do not observe one or other part of the Constitutions, you will be reprimanded. Interior Law, however, creates a desire to act because we feel moved to do so and not because of force. Christianity, as well as the religious life, is intended to be lived spontaneously because we feel drawn to it, that is, out of love and not from a sense of fear. Christianity is the religion of grace. This is the main difference between Christianity and all other religions which begin from the perspective of telling people what they must do. Christianity, on the other hand, begins by telling people what God has done for them.

So you see what consequences and interior changes this obliges us to consider. We may dare to ask: “Why are there Gospel laws, canon law, religious rules?” It is precisely in this sense that these laws now become precious because they are at the service of Love, at the service of the Interior Law. Out of love, I have decided to do God’s will, because I love God and I know that God loves me and I want to do his will. However, I don’t know what God’s will is for me in my religious state, in my own personal situation. So we welcome the law of the Gospel, that of the Church, the law of our Congregation that tells us what God’s will is. We are not like the existentialists. Sartre said: *“There is no longer anything in heaven, nothing good or evil, nor any person that can give me orders. I am a man, and every man must invent his own path.”* This response rejects all law, both conventional and interior. Christianity does not promote this. There are certain people who have the right to give me laws. I obey, though, out of love and not from a spirit of slavery. Saint Thomas of Aquinas, taking a bold idea from St. Augustine, said: “Even the precepts of the Gospel would be letters that would kill, were it not for the grace of the Holy Spirit that makes it possible to carry out these precepts.” This is the reason why Christ said it was necessary for him to die and rise from the dead in order to give us the Spirit. This is why he said: “It is necessary that I go; otherwise the Spirit will not come to you. All that I have said to you would go unheeded.”

This is the relationship that exists between us and our laws, rules and Constitutions. It is a new perspective that rejects nothing but gives each its place.

Let us continue to read together the second part of the account of this Pentecost event. Keep in mind that what is most important is that we be disposed to receive and be filled with the Holy Spirit, to experience a true Pentecost, not simply to celebrate Pentecost but to experience it. To do that, it is enough to empty ourselves of self to make room. Christ has promised that God gives the Spirit to everyone who asks for it.

“They began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? (and here follows the list of all the cultures present) ...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’” (Acts 2:5-13)

There is an implicit lesson here in the way that the author brings together two stories: what is taking place at that moment and what happened in Babel (Gen. 11). The liturgy of Pentecost emphasises this by reading the text of Gen. 11. The Church Fathers also pointed out the contrast between what happened at Pentecost and what had taken place in Babel.

In Babel, all the people spoke the same language, and then all of a sudden they no longer understood one another and confusion reigned. Here, the people spoke different languages, and suddenly, they understood one another perfectly. Why? Saint Ireneus said that at Pentecost, the languages came in tune with one another and created a harmonious symphony.

In fact, the contrast is even more profound than that. “The people of Babel said to one another, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’” Where is the sin here? It’s important to realise that these people did not want to build a tower to defy God. They were very pious, religious people. They wanted to construct one of those terraced pyramid temples with bricks laid one on top the other (many ruins of these still exist in Mesopotamia). It was a temple for their divinity and not a skyscraper. Where is the sin in this? They wanted to build a temple called a “ziggurat”. They wanted to create a temple for divinity, but instead of it being for the glory of the divine, it was for their own glory. In effect, they said: “let us make a name for ourselves.” They were motivated by a desire for power. They were thinking like all the people of ancient times, that in offering sacrifices on levels higher and higher than the others, they would be able to exact favours and victories from the divinities. Their reputation and their power were the inspiration behind this work. They were using God and so God confused them.

At Pentecost, we see people in the process of building a tower; the Church is a tower that touches heaven. But these people weren’t trying to make a name for themselves. Before Pentecost, the apostles were motivated by a desire for affirmation; they continually argued about who was the greatest among them. At Pentecost, however, their self-love and their desire for self-affirmation and for making a name for themselves burned away in an instant with the coming of the Spirit, the love of God. Forgetting themselves and emptied of themselves, they begin to proclaim the wonders of God. This is why everyone heard them. This is the great transformation that has an ongoing implication for our lives, our service, our preaching...When we want to make a name for ourselves, affirm ourselves in our community...there is confusion because each one wants to be the centre of attention. If however, we seek together the glory of God, there is only one centre of interest, and then we can all be united.

Pentecost is a challenge. It should produce an effect in us. This does not mean that first of all we must renounce ourselves completely, along with our desire to be affirmed, before we can receive the Holy Spirit. That was the thinking in the past: “We have to be humble; we have to be purified in order to receive grace.” No, that’s not it. The apostles were not fervent, and nevertheless they received the Holy Spirit. They became fervent afterwards. First we must receive the grace. There is a cyclic movement between our effort and the gift of grace. But the gift of grace comes first. We need to pray to receive the Holy Spirit in order for the Spirit to enkindle all our desires.

Saint Augustine wrote “The City of God”. He said that there are two cities under construction in the world: the city of Satan built on self-love to the point of rejecting God, and the City of God built out of the love of God that can bring people to the point of sacrificing self. These two cities are two work sites open to the world, and each person must chose which site to work in. Even the most spiritual concepts, such as the new evangelisation, the service of people living in poverty, my preaching, can be Babel or Pentecost. It’s Babel if I’m seeking my own glory and Pentecost if I’m seeking the glory of God.

“All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’”

What is the reaction of the people? Most of them are convinced, are amazed. They realise that they are in the presence of God, that something supernatural has happened. Others are closed in on themselves. Their objections show that it is they themselves who are drunk.

1ST THEME: PROPHECY

Let us continue our reading of the Pentecost event.

“But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

“And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy”.

According to Saint Peter, the first charismatic manifestation is prophecy. Throughout the Bible, the Holy Spirit is manifested in two ways:

- Interior sanctification of the person: the Spirit dwells within and changes the person from within, giving the person a new heart, the heart of a son or daughter.
- Charismatic action through special gifts given to people, not for their own personal sanctification but for the Church and the world.

This distinction that we can discern in the Old Testament becomes crystal clear in the New Testament. Prophecy would become charismatic manifestation, that is, gifts received for others. The difference between this and the Old Testament is that it is not only a few persons who now receive the gift of prophecy under special circumstances, but that all receive the Holy Spirit: young people, the elderly, men and women, all become prophets. The Acts of the Apostles places particular emphasis on one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit: the gift of prophecy.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PROPHET?

Evolution of the gift of prophecy.

In the Old Testament, a prophet is essentially someone who announced the message of salvation: this salvation could be imminent (for example, the return from exile), but underlying this was always definitive salvation. In those days, prophets were people who helped Israel maintain their hope for salvation.

In the New Testament, all people have become prophets. The difference is that the essence of being a prophet is no longer to proclaim a future salvation, but to unveil a hidden presence. John the Baptist marks this turning point. His coming was

proclaimed as a prophet: “you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High” and Christ said of him: “he is more than a prophet”. And what did he do? Did he announce salvation at the end of time? No, he pointed his finger at a person and said: “There is the Lamb of God.” The one you were waiting for is there: “among you is one that you do not recognise”.

Prophecy has become the gift by which the disciples are able to reveal the hidden presence of Christ. But where is prophecy in this? The prophets had to break through the wall of the temple to see what would happen one day, but John the Baptist had to pass through a wall even thicker than the Temple, the wall of appearances. Now, the prophet is called to bring forth in all its splendour the hidden presence of Christ in the Church and the world, for this is where, in a way that is more real than we can imagine, He is the Risen One, He is present in our world. To be a prophet means to help people open their eyes and see Christ.

In the course of time, there has been an evolution in the way we understand the vocation of a prophet. First it was institutionalised, in other words, reduced to the hierarchy of the Magisterium which received the gift of authentically interpreting the Word of God. This was how it was before Vatican II.

After that, the vocation of prophet was secularised: when it is said that Marx, Freud and Nietzsche were prophets this is a secularisation of the term. To be a prophet means proposing new perspectives on things. The Second Vatican Council helped us return to the concept of the mission of a prophet under the action of the Holy Spirit. It helped us to rediscover prophecy as a gift and an expression of the Holy Spirit. The manifestation of this gift is wide-ranging. In the account of Pentecost, Saint Peter says that young and old, men and woman, all can be prophets in various ways. We often attach the vocation of prophet to the Word. The prophet is someone who proclaims Christ in a charismatic way. It is possible to be a prophet, though, by what one is and not just by what one says. This is the reason why I read the text of Pope Paul VI that speaks of prophecy from this perspective. We can be a prophet by our way of approaching people. We can make the presence of Christ visible through a smile, a gesture, a look.

We can be prophetic by the way that everyone sees us: our consecrated life, and in particular, our celibacy and virginity. This is a form of prophecy. There is a prophetic dimension to our celibate, consecrated life. I would like to draw attention to this form of prophecy, one which the world greatly needs. Before Christ, this form of life did not exist. Marriage was the only structure that existed. Christ was the one who instituted this new state of life (Mt. 19): “there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”

It is easy to define the kingdom of heaven by two adverbs: “already here” and “not yet”. And we pray “may your kingdom come”. Since the kingdom of God is “already here”, and established by Christ, it is possible that people who have received a particular vocation choose to live now as we will all live in the last stage of this kingdom of God: the eschatological stage, in which people live without marrying, because God is all in all. Since the kingdom is already present on earth, it is possible that those who have been called to it can choose to live in this final stage of salvation. This is its prophetic dimension. We proclaim simply by our existence that marriage is

good, for it has been made holy by Christ. Marriage is a choice and not an obligation. It is a vocation. We proclaim that marriage is good, but it cannot become an absolute in life or an idol. As consecrated persons, we proclaim the existence of another life with God.

We now come to the point where Saint Peter explains that they were not drunk with wine, but that the prophecy of Joel had been fulfilled: the gift of the Holy Spirit, in messianic times, is given to all peoples. In reading this part of the account of Pentecost, though, we have the impression that Saint Peter is eager to resolve these secondary issues because he has something more important to communicate: in fact, in verse 22, there is a sort of new introduction to his discourse:

"You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man..."

What Peter is trying to do is to help the people realise to whom he is referring. It is as if he is saying: remember this man who passed in the midst of you doing good to all. Peter takes the time to recall this because the majority of these people have forgotten Christ. They considered his case closed since he was condemned by the authorities. Others had come from elsewhere to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost and knew nothing about Christ. So Peter had to remind them of the person to whom he was referring. When he was sure that everyone understood him, he sent out two thunderbolts: with the first, he strikes dead, and with the second, he resurrects.

"This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law."

The first thunderbolt is: "you crucified him" and the second is: "but do not despair, God has raised him from the dead". And this is followed by a long quotation from a psalm that shows that Christ could not know corruption and remain always in the tomb. To conclude, he gives a solemn declaration, in the manner of a dogmatic definition. This is the first dogmatic definition from a pope:

"Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty" (these are words spoken with authority) "that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

So the first dogmatic definition regarding Christ is not that of Nicaea, but that spoken on the day of Pentecost. It rests on the Lordship of Jesus. God has established Jesus as Lord and Christ.

There is much that can be said about this part of Peter's discourse. This is the first kerygmatic preaching of the Church in absolute terms, the first proclamation. This announcement marks the birth of the Church.

The story continues by saying that the people were cut to the heart. Pierced! It was a miracle. Because they might have contradicted Peter: "But you are mistaken. We were not standing before Pilate demanding crucifixion. We have just come here for Pentecost." On the contrary, no one objected because the Holy Spirit was in the

process of doing precisely what Christ had promised: “when the Advocate comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin”. They were proved wrong about sin. If the Messiah had to die to take away the sins and crimes of his people, these people reasoned quite simply: if I have committed some sin, I have crucified Christ. This is why they felt themselves cut to the heart. They asked Peter: “what should we do?” Peter said to them, “be baptised every one of you... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” And here is the description of the first ideal community: “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” This community was prophetic in the way it lived. They ate together with joy and simplicity and the community grew in number. However, nothing is said about them going out to preach to others. It was only by their manner of living that people were attracted to them. That is the manifestation of a prophetic life. This is why I said to you that we are all prophets, by our words, our lives, our smiles, our charisms and by our celibacy and virginity.

What is the content of this prophecy? What do we proclaim by our lives or by our words?

In this kerygmatic part of Peter's discourse, we are present at the birth of Christian prophecy which means proclaiming Christ who died and rose for our salvation. This is the official inauguration of Christian prophecy.

The first effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit is the need to proclaim the message of Christ. Peter feels urged to solemnly proclaim Christ. This is the official inauguration of Christian prophecy. If we want to be prophets, we know that this involves revealing the hidden presence of Christ in the world, in its suffering and in its joys, but also present in those who are sick or distraught. Christ is present there. Prophecy means helping people to become aware that they are not alone but that Christ is with them. Often human efforts cannot accomplish very much in certain situations. For example, among people who have AIDS, it is difficult to proclaim hope. We can say, however: even if you must pass through the valley of tears, Christ is with you; he is there and will lead you to resurrection. We see that the foundation of Christian hope and Christian prophecy is Christ.

I need to say something to you that is connected with special occasions such as your General Assembly. Just about a month ago, we, the Franciscans, took part in a “Chapter of Mats”. This is part of the history of our Franciscan family. Saint Francis of Assisi gathered all his brothers around him in Portiuncula in Assisi. All the dispersed brothers came together in an atmosphere of great enthusiasm, telling of God's wonders. And since they gathered in the shade of mats, they called this the “Chapter of Mats”. This year marks the 8th centenary of the approbation of the Franciscan rule. So we held a second “Chapter of Mats” in Assisi that brought together all the members of the First Order: Capuchins, Friars Minor, Conventuals, and the Leonine Union... from all over the world. They numbered about 2000 in all. All the superiors were present with their councillors. I was asked to give a presentation, and at one point I said to them: “When Saint Francis looked back, he saw Christ; when we look back, we see Saint Francis of Assisi. The difference between him and us is simply that, and it is enormous. We should ask ourselves this question: In what, then, does the Franciscan charism consist? Are we in danger of

discarding it or denying it? No! The Franciscan charism is not about fixing our gaze on Saint Francis, but looking at Christ through Saint Francis' eyes.”

And you can see how this applies to you. In the same way, your charism is not a matter of looking at Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac; it's looking at Christ through the eyes and the hearts of your Founders. It's always Christ that we must see. Why do we need to insist on this? There is reason for it. In the past, when all society was Christian, the differences among religious orders and religious families were important, because everyone else was Christian. The distinctions became so important that the founders became the purpose, the focus of attention. Retreats were given on each particular charism; young people who came to us would first hear explanations about our charism. **This is over** now because society has changed. Now the major difference isn't among the different religious orders; it is between people who believe in Christ and those who don't, and the latter are the majority. Society has become post-Christian. We need to put Christ back in the centre. What we believe to be firmly established is not in fact the case. No, we need to put Christ back in the centre, like the obelisk at the centre of Saint Peter's Square in Rome. From all sides, people are attracted towards the centre. Christ must be like the obelisk placed at the centre of the Church, in each religious order. Otherwise, people are not attracted by Saint Francis of Assisi despite all his popularity, and I can say the same about Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac. People who do not yet know Christ can be attracted by Him and by none other. And so in the case of our novices, we need to begin by introducing them to Christ. Then the Founders and their writings...Otherwise, lay people who study the Bible will have a better and more solid formation than we have.

We are now celebrating the Pauline Year. This is a wonderful opportunity for us because Saint Paul is the most striking example of a person who made Christ the centre of his life. He became absolutely fascinated by Christ. He said himself in his Letter to the Philippians (chapter 3): *“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”* (Phil. 3:4-6) This is a description of what he was like before. And we must not make the mistake of thinking that Paul had to be converted because he was a Pharisee. No, quite the contrary; all these titles were titles of holiness. We could even begin a process of canonisation based on these titles. It's as if I were to say: ‘I was baptised a week after I was born, I belong to the highest structure of salvation: the Catholic Church, I belong to the most austere religious order in the Church (because the Pharisees were the most austere religious order), I am blameless with regard to the law, with holiness that can come from observance of the Rules. At this level, though, we come to the end of the sentence and the page is split in two, as was the life of Paul.

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (singular pronoun) For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by

becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Phil. 3:7-11)

I recall rereading this text after having a spiritual experience. I was struck at that point by the personal pronouns used: knowledge of Him. I had studied and written Christology books as a professor, but at that moment I became conscious that these personal pronouns contained more truth about Christ than all the books ever written. For when Saint Paul said “Him”, he understood a living person, in the present, someone he could even point out: Him. I realised that Christ is not an abstraction, an ensemble of dogmas. Rather Christ is a living person, risen from the dead. A real person who is more real than each one of us. What is interesting about this text is the centrality of Christ. Saint Paul was not converted by an idea, but by a person. He said: “I have been conquered.” As you know, young men use this term in reference to conquering a young woman. For Saint Paul, however, what is important is not to make a conquest in love, but to be conquered by Christ. I insist on that point because renewal in religious life happens through the rediscovery of the real and living person of Christ. Everything comes from that. Certainly this includes our condition of celibate virginity. This is not to deny the importance of marriage; rather it’s a union, a sort of marriage with Christ. This is the wedding.

In the account of Pentecost, we can see also that the mission of the Holy Spirit is precisely to make us fall in love with Christ. We see that with Saint Peter; now he loves Christ, he is full of enthusiasm for Christ. There is no danger of overshadowing Christ in insisting on the Holy Spirit. Quite the contrary, it is only by insisting on life in the Spirit that we can truly know Christ.

2ND THEME: HOPE

Hope, together with faith and charity, comes from the Holy Spirit. It’s the Holy Spirit who infuses the theological virtues in us. Their source is always Christ. Saint Paul said this clearly in the Letter to the Romans: (Rom. 15:13):

“May the God of hope (an interesting definition of our Christian God) fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

In order to abound in hope and to return home empowered by the breath of hope, allow yourselves to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, as the apostles were at Pentecost. In fact, before Pentecost, they were fearful, timid, constantly quarrelling among themselves. After the death of Christ, they were in the process of dispersing, returning to their homes... The coming of the Holy Spirit re-energised them and gave them the ability to build the Church. This is the way in which a religious family can be reborn when hope surges through it. The poet Peguy has written what I consider to be a lovely poem on hope: *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, the second virtue. Hope is considered the poor relative among the theological virtues. This poem is very beautiful both theologically and poetically: *“The faith that I love best, says God, is hope.”* (Pope Benedict XVI came to the same conclusion: *Spe Salvi*. He said that hope is the most excellent form of faith.) Peguy continues, letting God speak:

“Faith doesn’t surprise me. That creatures believe in me is not too surprising. I am so resplendent in my creation that it takes more effort to not believe than to believe. That these people have a bit of Charity among them, says God, that doesn’t surprise me.” These poor creatures are so miserable, how could they not have some pity for one another... “But hope”, says God, “that is indeed something that surprises me. That they hope in me in spite of all the times they’ve been disappointed, when they’ve hoped and nothing has come of it. And I’m surprised by it myself. That means that my grace must indeed be an incredible force. The three theological virtues are three sisters: two grown-ups and a little girl. They walk along the street hand-in-hand; the two big ones on either side, the little girl in the middle. Everyone who sees them is convinced that the two big ones -- faith and love -- drag along the little girl hope in the middle. But they are mistaken: it is the little girl hope who drags the other two along; if she separates herself from the others, everything stops.”

In the Bible, there are moments marked by upsurges of hope. This is what we need in the Church and in religious orders: a surge of hope. In Chapter 37 of the book of Ezekiel, the prophet describes the vision of the dry bones. This was a symbol that the people were not dead but had lost all hope. The exiles said among themselves: “we are lost, we have no more hope of returning to our homeland, we are finished.” That’s when the prophet is called by God to prophesy: “Prophesy, mortal, to these bones, and say to them: ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these dry bones.’” In the vision, the dry bones come back to life with nerves and flesh and they all rise: it’s an entire army that comes back to life.

Many situations in the Church today resemble this valley of dry bones; especially that of traditional religious orders. Without some surge of hope, it will be difficult for them to come back to life, because young people are going to places where there is hope in the air. If joy abounds in a parish community, young people will go there because hope is transmitted through joy. But if there is resignation instead of hope, there will not be any new vocations. Religious congregations need a resurgence of hope.

Another outburst of hope in the Bible can be found in the third Lamentation, attributed to Jeremiah. The prophet sees Jerusalem in ruins. It is a catastrophic vision. The tone of this lamentation is sombre and discouraged. In the midst of this lamentation, however, the prophet bursts out in words of hope: *“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.”* (Lam. 3:22-24)

The prophet makes the conscious decision to hope once again. The atmosphere and tone of his lamentation changes. It becomes a prayer full of hope for the rebuilding of Israel. This is what we need. Hope is something very profound. It is a gift from God. It is therefore the fruit of Pentecost. It is not the fruit of our will: “we want to hope!” The world cries out in these words but these cries are just vague desires.

Authentic hope is born of a new Pentecost, from being fed once again by the Spirit. Saint Paul said to us: *“We abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”* We trust; we cannot force the Holy Spirit or buy the Spirit; otherwise magicians

would have already done that. We cannot buy the Holy Spirit, but what we can do is to ask for the Spirit, with full assurance that if we ask the Father for the Spirit, we will receive it. *“How much more will our Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”* Christ has died and has risen and he always appears as we see him in the Upper Room on the night of Passover. He looks around him to see if there are hearts ready to receive his breath of life. He breathes on them and says: *“Receive the Holy Spirit.”* The Risen Christ is always here living among us in the Church, and what he seeks are faces ready and eager, full of trust, without fear, open to receiving the Holy Spirit. This is what I wish for you as I leave you.

Father Raniero CANTALAMESSA, ofmcap

CLOSING OF THE ASSEMBLY

Address given by Sister Evelyne Franc

Motherhouse, 13th June 2009

Dear Sisters,

We give you thanks, O Lord, for so many wonders. You give us life, you give us your Spirit! These are the words in my heart and in my prayer as we come to the end of this Assembly, words that I would like to develop briefly with you today.

I am sure that you are experiencing mixed emotions now, joy at the thought of returning soon to your Provinces, your Sisters in community, all those whom you serve and those with whom you journey at this time. You must also feel that sense of sadness that comes with the end of a special experience, this grace that the Lord has granted us all through our participation in this eighth General Assembly of the Company.

I would like to describe these six weeks that we have spent together here at the Motherhouse as “listening to the Spirit”. We have had this experience of listening at the cradle, the heart of the Company, under the protection of Mary in whose hands we have placed our Provinces.

We said that the Holy Spirit would be with us in our work if we allowed ourselves to be guided by the Spirit. This was not a foregone conclusion: listening to the Spirit on our own is a difficult task in itself. We all recognised this when we named all the obstacles that come from the world around us, this world whose beauty is often badly disfigured, and when we also admitted that our hearts can be deaf to the Spirit.

Furthermore, when a hundred and eighty-five persons together are trying to listen to the Spirit so as to delineate the features of the Company of the future, the process becomes even more complicated. There was a great risk that the Sisters might claim that each one had received the truth individually; that they would turn this way and that, like a weather vane tossed about by a changeable wind. They might also have flared up quickly, crackling like dry twigs and dying down soon afterwards, lost in fine words. They might also have separated, dividing into various thin trickles of water quickly absorbed into the dry earth, instead of merging into one river flowing with a strong current.

I think we have avoided all these dangers and have given the Spirit of God complete freedom to act. We have been able to accept one another's ideas and to discern respectfully what the Spirit inspired in each Sister. In sharing and in prayer, we have perceived what the Spirit wished for the Company beyond our individual desires or those of our Province. Blessed be God, as Saint Vincent would say! And, let us call to mind our Constitutions: *"The evangelical virtues of humility, simplicity, and charity are the path along which the Daughters of Charity allow themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit"* (C. 13). The Daughters of Charity *"endeavour to respond to the inspirations of the Spirit, convinced that they will be the instruments of God's work insofar as they are faithful. Saint Louise de Marillac expressed the desire that the Company be dependent on the Holy Spirit so that it might carry out the Father's plan and bear witness to the Son, risen from the dead"* (C. 17c) Yes, Lord, we give you thanks for so many wonders. It is You who give us life, you who give us your Spirit!

It is my wish that the theme of our Assembly may continue to resound throughout the Company during the coming six years, and that you will share with your Sisters the strong message that sums up these six weeks. This text is the result of our listening and our exchanges; it conveys our profound attachment to the Servant-Christ, our desire to follow Him according to the charism of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. It expresses our love for the men and women of our time, especially those who are in greatest need, the most vulnerable; it also expresses our commitment to meet them where they are, to be a witness for them of God's loving care. Can I tell you about another wish of mine? I hope that the mission *ad gentes* will not be forgotten. I launched an appeal at the beginning of the Assembly that Sisters would continue to place themselves in a state of joyful and total availability to the Company to be sent to the Provinces that are in urgent need of reinforcement.

You have already reflected on how you will share this document with your Sisters, but the most essential thing is to communicate to each one this experience of listening to the Spirit. I am not talking about something fleeting and short-lived, but a true Vincentian attitude, a real dialogue, that should underpin our entire life of relationships, prayer, community life, service and collaboration and should transform it.

With each speaker during this Assembly, the Spirit gave us a gift; each of us has received her own special one, and I would like to mention my own:

With Father Cantalamessa, we rediscovered the Pentecost event; with Father Renouard, the hunger for spiritual bread felt by the women and men of the 21st century; with Cardinal Rode, the call to holiness; with Marina Costa, the deep

meaning of accompaniment of the AIC volunteers; with Mario Giro, geological patience and work for peace; with Brother Courau and Father Blanchard, the true meaning of dialogue and the effort to re-centre our faith, and, with Sister Regina Bechtle, the ability to integrate the "both – and". May the Spirit make these treasures fruitful in us and teach us how to share them.

Yes, Lord, we give you thanks for so many wonders. You give us life, you give us your Spirit!

We give you thanks, Lord, for so many persons who have made this Assembly a time of grace:

First of all, in your name, I would like to thank Father Gregory for having devoted so many weeks to us. We know what a full schedule he has and how many journeys he has to make, so we owe him our deepest gratitude for his presence, his conferences and his homilies. We also thank Father Javier for his inspiring meditations during the pre-Assembly retreat, for his advice and his unfailing readiness to listen to us.

I would like to thank all the Sisters who contributed to the smooth running of this Assembly: the Motherhouse Sisters who devoted themselves untiringly to facilitating our work, from the dining rooms to the bedrooms, and in all the corners of this large house. There were others who helped more directly in the Assembly, such as the interpreters and translators; the whole team of Sisters from the Secretariat, some of whom provided a service in the control room and were present in the hall, as well as all the other Sisters who were at our service, not forgetting two Sisters to whom we owe so much, Sister Ana Maria Olmeda, Secretary General, and Sister Rita Ferri, Treasurer General.

I also want to thank you all, members of the Assembly, for participating with such enthusiasm in the Assembly sessions, as well as at times of prayer and relaxation. My thanks also go to those of you who had the responsibility of working in Commissions; you have really given the best of yourselves in the Commissions for Liturgy, Communication, Postulates and Propositions, Theme Groups, and Entertainment. I cannot mention you all by name, but allow me to name our four moderators, Sister Carmen, Sister Patrizia, Sister Maria Teresa and Sister Anna, without forgetting Sister Pia and Sister Jeanne-Marie, our two faithful Secretaries of the Assembly.

What can I say to the members of the Coordination Commission? I offer them a huge thank you for the intensive work they did before and throughout this Assembly. Yes, Sister Margaret, Sister Rosa Maria, Sister Anne-Marie, Sister Damiana and Sister Theresa, we have been impressed by your attention to detail in organising and by your cheerful way of putting it into practice.

Need I add what a support and joy Mother Elizondo's participation in the work of the Assembly has been for us all?

In the presence of the Assembly and in the name of the Company, I would like to thank in a special way the six General Councillors who will be returning to their Provinces: Sister Margaret Barrett, Sister Mariarosa Camminati, Sister Marie Bernard

Giffard, Sister Wivine Kisu, Sister Julma Neo and Sister Blanca Libia Tamayo. I thank them for their excellent collaboration and I thank the Lord for allowing us to live together as a community of faith and work! My thanks also go to those who are continuing their mission at General level: Sister Rosa Maria Miro, Sister Christa Bauer, Sister Zofia Daniscakova and Sister Marlene Rosa. Finally, I thank those who have agreed to leave familiar shores for the open sea: Sister Kathleen Appler, Sister Madeline Hara, Sister Neghesti Michaël, Sister Rosa Maria Napolitano, Sister Françoise Petit and Sister Iliana Suarez.

On behalf of the new General Council, I thank you all for having given us a clear sign of your trust for the next six years. Count on our devotedness and on our desire to accomplish the mission entrusted to us with courage, simplicity and transparent communication.

I would like to end these few words of gratitude with Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, hoping that the year 2010 will be lived in a spirit of thanksgiving and with a thirst to share the treasure of Vincentian spirituality and mystique. Father Gregory has already officially launched the preparation for the 350th anniversary at Vincentian Family level, but it is up to each Province and each local community to celebrate our Founders and make them known, with all the richness of Mission and Charity that they embodied and that we, like them, are able to embody in our times.

For so many wonders, we give you thanks, O Lord. You give us life, you give us the Spirit! With Mary, we offer you our song of praise: "My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour, who has looked on his servants in their lowliness"!

Sister Evelyne FRANC
Daughter of Charity

CLOSING OF THE ASSEMBLY

Closing Eucharist

Readings: 2 Co 5, 14-21; Mt 5, 33-37

Homily given by Father Gregory Gay, Superior General

13th June 2009

By way of introduction I'd like first of all to apologise to the translators for the delay in getting this text into their hands. All the other homilies and interventions that I have given during the course of the Assembly were written before I came to the Assembly. It is a difficult task; although the Word of God is always present, it is easier for me to be able to reflect on the word of God in the context of what we are celebrating. I have chosen to wait as long as I could before writing this homily in order to absorb some of the spirit that certainly has been present in every moment and in all the aspects of this General Assembly.

The second point, by way of introduction is this: people who have known me over these past five years know that I always insist on preaching on the Word of God of the day. Today the Mass was originally to be the votive Mass of St. Vincent. Through the prayers of the Mass we are asking his intercession and that of Saint Louise but the texts are not the normal texts of the feast of St. Vincent. Rather, I chose once again to go with the texts of the day in order that we might be in harmony with the universal church of which the Daughters of Charity are very much a significant part. And as we see, God is good, always.

Our first reading contains the actual motto of the Daughters of Charity. The very first line of the text that the universal church is reflecting on today is that which impels you to be who you are and to do what you do: the love of Christ crucified. The Gospel, too, that the universal church has offered for our reflection is quite appropriate for prophets in our world: today let your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no”. I hope to develop both these concepts from our first and second reading during this homily.

In the first reading of St. Paul to the Corinthians, Paul spells out clearly what has been called for from the beginning of this Assembly and particularly focused on in the first theme that you discussed. Paul says that we no longer live for ourselves but for Christ. We are a new creation in Christ. We are called to make all things new, to cultivate a life of faith centred on Christ and nurtured by God’s word and sacraments. We understand Word and Sacrament not only in their strict sense, that is the Bible and the Sacraments of God’s love for us that we know to number seven, but also the Word of God that we find daily in our dialogue with our brothers and sisters who are poor, with our community, with those with whom we share ministry and our Vincentian tradition. Sacraments reveal to us God’s love, Christ’s presence. For you, certainly those who are poor are sacraments. Think too, that the Sister with whom you share community is perhaps one of the poorest of the poor.

As St. Paul says, we have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. We are ambassadors for Christ. As ambassadors of Christ, we are called to be his prophets. Each and every one of you has your own gifts and you respect the gifts of each other, striving to live that union in community which welcomes diversity. One of the three prophetic signs manifested by community as you shared in these days is reconciliation. You are called as community, to be agents of harmony so that others can see and look at you and say as they said of the first Christians, “See how they love one another”.

The same theme of prophecy is continued in the gospel: let your “yes” mean “yes” and your “no” mean “no.” This short phrase of Matthew’s gospel embodies the virtue that St. Vincent loved most, simplicity: being transparent in what you say and in what you do. If I might be allowed to quote a phrase from my president’s speech in Cairo the other day when speaking about the need to eradicate mistrust and build up trust between nations, he said, “In order to move forward in this process, we must say openly the things that we hold in our hearts and that too often are said only behind closed doors”. There must be sustained efforts to listen to each other, to learn from each other and to respect each another. Such actions, my Sisters, are what you are called to give witness to in your community life. What greater prophetic stance can

you give in order to seek harmony and peace, not only among yourselves but also with those with whom you share your life.

The words that you have shared these days, and that have had the greatest impact on you are the Word of God. Above all, this is the word that is to guide you. “Word” in the broadest sense of the term which I spoke about earlier. Allow the Word to challenge you, allow the Word to question you. The Word at times will make you feel uncomfortable for it is like a “two-edged sword”. Yet in all this, it is God’s Word that has filled you with energy and passion.

We were all struck by the text from St. John’s gospel where Jesus said to Peter, especially the third time, “Peter, do you love me?” We can feel Peter’s frustration; we can feel his recognition of his own limitation. We can feel his love for the Lord Jesus when he responds, “Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.” That is, saying things as they are, letting his “yes” be a “yes.” This shows the power of simplicity at its best.

My sisters and brother, it is the love of God that motivates us, love that we have talked about as relationship. The best example of this is the Trinity. Our God is a relational God, and we are openly invited to be part of that deep communion.

Certain other words have struck me as being packed with energy are for example, “connectedness”. It is not enough, as you heard, to be everywhere in the world. What is important is that you be connected one, reflecting the connectedness we see in nature. “Partnership”. Partnership is important for us who live the Vincentian tradition. It is interesting that in his speech in Cairo, President Obama twice mentioned the word partnership. He said “We need to confront our problems through partnership.” And again, “All these things that we do must be done in partnership, [] being ready to join with others, citizens, governments, community organisations, religious leaders, businesses around the world.” I challenge you to be prophetic by partnering with other provinces, with the C.M, with the A.I.C, with the SSVP, with the AMM, and with others who have been touched by the charism of our founders. Partner with young people, our young people: the Vincentian Marian Youth Movement

As I travel throughout the world I see the Vincentian family as alive and well. It is people with a common love, a common passion, wishing to support one another, each with their own gifts and from their own particular identity but all inspired by St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac.

As a Vincentian family in these last two years, we have been asked to reflect on how we might deepen our expression of charity, how we might extend ourselves to those who live in poverty in a way that does not keep them dependent, but rather helps them to stand on their own two feet and live with dignity, the dignity they deserve as God’s children.

We call this, systemic change, yet another word that at times we find unclear, difficult to understand, challenging, and perhaps unimportant. Systemic change includes the works and projects you do in different facets both locally and globally to promote the dignity of those who live in poverty in and through your various

ministries of education, health, social services and evangelisation. It calls you to a charity that goes further, challenging systems that keep people locked into poverty.

Together with the people and working from within their specific situations, you can change those systems, you already do it on a regular basis in many places. Systemic change can happen even where there is strong political opposition or government influence, and it happens right under the noses of the oppressors. Systemic change enables you to be prophetic.

A real motivating force in these days, have been the simple testimonies that we have heard from different places around the world. I asked myself, what is it that moved us in each of these testimonies, because without doubt there was a lot of energy and a lot of passion expressed not only by the presenters, but also by those taking part in the dialogue. I asked myself, what is it that brings this about? Certainly the words spoken, but they were expressed so simply. Perhaps the power points and pictures aroused passion. But beyond that, I truly believe that what moved us in these testimonies was the Spirit of God speaking to our hearts from the reality of the people in those marginal situations of suffering.

It is God's Spirit in the cries of those who live in poverty, that speaks to us. That is where you hear God's voice and where you enter into authentic dialogue. Listening and responding. And you do so in a concrete way, in and through your being servants of the people, being close to them, walking with them.

Through what you have shared these days, be prophetic in and through each of the different pillars that you have focused on in your reflections: by your unflinching faith witness, by your living in trusting communion with one another, in your loving service of those who live in poverty as well as in your deep sense of belonging to the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Share what you have experienced with the sisters of the Province, those of your local community, with your co-workers, with other members of the Vincentian family and above all with those you love and serve, the poor. Do so with powerful words and rich symbols. Do so from the depths of your hearts. Let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no". For what lies in the depths of your hearts is the love of Christ crucified. May charity impel you to move forward as prophets of hope, now and everywhere.

Father Gregory GAY
Superior General

PROPHECY

AND
HOPE

NOW
AND
EVERYWHERE

General Assembly 2009